

Examining social media marketing performance: A focus on travel agencies and tour operators in South Africa

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate South African travel agencies and tour operators' social media marketing performance using the Digital Marketing Framework (DMF). Data used in the analysis was collected from 150 small travel agencies and tour operators using a structured questionnaire. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics and factor scores. The results revealed that travel agencies and tour operators are performing well in the first stage of the framework, which is to attract customers to their social media site. The performance of the travel agencies and tour operators in the second stage (engage customers), third stage (retain customers) and fifth stage (relate back to customers) was relatively poor. The performance of the companies in the fourth stage (learn about customers) was very poor as very few companies performed the marketing activities associated with these stages. Lack of time to sustain social media marketing activities and a lack of skills in using social media for marketing were identified as the major challenges faced by travel agencies and tour operators. This study contributes to a better understanding of the performance of small tourism businesses and their challenges in using social media marketing. Managers can use the findings in this study to develop their social media marketing strategies and/or assess their company performance.

Keywords: social media marketing, travel agency, tour operators, social media sites

Introduction

The advent of internet technologies has brought about changes in the behaviour of consumers online and revolutionized the tourism industry (Buhalis & Law, 2008). In the past, websites were designed only for businesses to publish content and for visitors to view that content (Chan & Guillet, 2011). However, in this Web 2.0 era, websites are now dynamic and interactive, especially social media sites, and users actively participate in the generation and enrichment of content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:60). Due to these changes in user behaviour, companies across the globe are now compelled to use this new tool, social media, to facilitate a two-way communication with their customers (Lim, 2010). "Today, it is no longer enough to solely rely on traditional media for marketing, nor is it acceptable for the companies to simply move the offline sales materials to online" (Chan & Guillet, 2011:345). Companies need to explore how social media websites can be used for marketing and include them in their marketing mix.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) have defined social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". Generally social media activities are centred on the gathering and sharing of information online through messages pictures, videos and audio (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The growth of social media sites has been exponential over the past decade (Chaffey, 2016). From January 2015 to January 2016 social

media experienced a 10% increase in the number of users and has reached 2.3 billion active users globally (Chaffey, 2016). In South Africa, social media has experienced a tremendous growth as well. According to the Social Media Landscape 2016 report (World Wide Worx, 2016), the number of Facebook users increased by 8%, Twitter by 12%, YouTube by 15% and Instagram by 133% from 2015. Although the growth statistics are so impressive, the extent to which small tourism businesses are using social media websites to develop relationships has not been established.

Social media websites, if effectively utilised, have the potential to strengthen brand loyalty and give small tourism businesses a competitive edge (Tussyadiah & Zach, 2013). Since the introduction of social media, some tourism businesses have quickly adopted it for different purposes, such as for marketing their services, developing relationships with customers and service recovery (Hays, Page & Buhalis, 2013). The interactive nature of social media provides an ideal platform for electronic word of mouth, or e-WOM, which is important for the success of tourism businesses (Para-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño & Diaz-Armas, 2011). While some small tourism businesses have joined the wave of e-commerce (Chan & Guillet, 2011; El-Gohary, 2012), not much is known about their performance in social media use. The focus of previous studies has centred on usage either in large tourism organisations such as hotels (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Kang, 2011; Withiam, 2011; Seth, 2012) or on one type of social media site utilised by business (mostly Facebook), leaving out other social media sites (Kelly, Hsiang-Ting & Matthew, 2013). This study aimed to contribute to knowledge of social media marketing by focusing on its usage within the small tourism business environment. Establishing how small tourism businesses are utilising social media for marketing purposes will assist those lagging behind to better understand the strategies being implemented by their competitors and review their own performance.

In order to examine how small tourism businesses are utilising social media websites, this study adopted the Digital Marketing Framework (DMF), which was formulated by Kierzkowski, McQuade, Waitman and Zeisser (1996). The Digital Marketing Framework is centred on five elements that are essential in e-marketing, namely attracting customers, engaging customers, retaining customers, learning about the customers and finally relating back to customers (Kierzkowski *et al.*, 1996).

The justification for using the Digital Marketing Framework is twofold: firstly, as acknowledged by previous researchers (Teo, 2005; Waters, Burnett & Lamm, 2009; Chan & Guillet, 2011), the Digital Marketing Framework is one of the most important frameworks in the context of digital marketing usage; and secondly, the characteristics of social media are similar to those of the interactive technologies discussed by Kierzkowski *et al.* (1996) when they proposed the model, such as the ability to communicate with individual clients and learn from customers' feedback.

The issue at hand

Social media is regarded as an essential communication channel for many businesses as it provides them with a platform to communicate and engage with customers and get valuable information about them, which cannot be done through traditional communication channels (Grewal & Levy, 2013). To small tourism businesses, social media marketing is important primarily because such businesses do not have sufficient financial resources to promote their products/services (Barnes *et al.*, 2012). Thus social media provide them with a platform to overcome the limitation of financial resources, giving them the opportunity to communicate with customers effectively (Jones, Borgman & Ulusoy, 2015). While many benefits for small business are associated with adopting social media for marketing purposes, a review of the literature on social media (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; El-Gohary, 2012) shows that fewer studies have focused on the use of social media by small tourism organisations, and there is little understanding of the social media marketing strategies deployed by tourism organisations

and their efficacy. In the South African context, studies which have focused on the utilisation of social media for marketing tourism services are limited, the most prominent work in this field having been conducted by Matikiti, Kruger and Saayman (2016), which focused on the utilisation of social media marketing in the South African accommodation sector. The work of Birch and Thompson (2014), on the other hand, focused on social media usage in the South African wine sector, whilst a study by Van der Bank and Van der Bank (2015) emphasised the advantages and disadvantages of social media to the tourism industry. Published literature on the utilisation of social media marketing by small tourism businesses in South Africa is scant, justifying the relevance of this study. The results of this study will provide baseline data on the social media marketing strategies deployed by small tourism businesses in South Africa.

Objectives

In accordance with the research problem stated above, the primary objective of this study was to investigate how travel agencies and tour operators in South Africa utilise social media for marketing, using the Digital Marketing Framework. The specific objectives of the study were as follows.

- To investigate the social media marketing performance of travel agencies and tour operators, using the Digital Marketing Framework
- To investigate the challenges faced by travel agencies and tour operators in using social media at each stage of the DMF
- To make recommendations on how the travel agencies and tour operators can improve their social media marketing strategies

Literature review

The literature on social media marketing and classification of social media sites together with an extensive explanation of the Digital Marketing Framework (DMF) is presented in the sections that follow.

Social media marketing

Social media marketing encompasses the sharing online of persuasive marketing information between consumers (Kirby & Marsden, 2005). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that there are many social media sites that can be used for marketing and they need to be distinguished. This argument is supported by Alizadeh and Isa (2014), who also indicate that since the inception of social media, researchers have tried to categorise social media into different groups (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Safko, 2012; Chan & Guillet, 2011).

The classification proposed by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) is the most recognised in the field of social media (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) proposed a 3x2 scheme of classifying social media according to their level of self-presentation/self-disclosure (low–high) and their level of social presence/media richness (low, medium, high). In their classification Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) came up with six types of social media, which include blogs/microblogs, social networking sites, virtual social worlds, collaborative projects, content communities, and virtual game networks. However, this classification neglects other social media types such as social travel networks, which are more important in the marketing of tourism services (Alizadeh & Isa, 2014); hence it was included in the classification provided for this study. As social media marketing is performed through many different platforms (classified in Table 1), an explanation of these platforms was considered important in this study.

Table 1: Classification of social media sites

Social media category	Description	Example
Blogs/micro-blogs	Websites that allow users to keep logs and share personal experience and insights in a particular area	Tumblr Twitter
Virtual social worlds	Online applications that resemble the real world in a 3D environment and are represented by a customised human-like character; users can interact with each other in the virtual world	Active Worlds Second Life
Social networking sites	Focus on building relationships among people with similar interests and activities	Facebook MySpace
Collaborative projects	Sites where users interact with each other in the process of content collaboration; these sites help people manage and store collections of links and share bookmarks with others	Wikis Social bookmarking sites
Content communities	Designed for sharing of materials modified from pre-existing work, allowing users to add, modify or delete content in collaboration with others	Wikipedia YouTube
Virtual game networks	Computer-based online community environments that are designed and shared by individuals so that they can interact with each other in this simulated world through text models	World of Warcraft
Social travel networks	Allow travellers to exchange tips with each other before, during and after a trip; also called online review sites	TripAdvisor

Sources: Kaplan and Haenlein (2010); Alizadeh and Isa (2014)

The classification of social media sites that can be used for marketing having been provided, the next section explains how social media is being utilised by the tourism industry.

Social media and the tourism industry

With the advent of internet technologies, tourism marketers are “no longer in full control over their respective destination images” (Alizadeh & Isa, 2014). Travellers today have access to opinion-rich sites, such as social media sites, and can communicate directly with tourism organisations (Tussyadiah & Zach, 2013) and engage concurrently in domains of conversation with others without the knowledge and control of tourism marketers. Through social media sites, travellers are able to convey information about a particular destination, whether good or bad, which can affect the success or failure of that tourism destination. For instance, travellers could spread negative sentiments through word of mouth that tarnish the image of the destination or business concerned. However, social media offers a good platform for electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), which has several advantages over traditional forms of marketing, namely speed, global reach and ease of use (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011). Due to these immense benefits of social media, more tourism businesses are now using social media to market their products/services and to make personal conversation with customers (World Travel Market 2013 industry report). The 2010 survey conducted by World Travel Market revealed that two-thirds of tourism businesses in the world were planning to increase their social media marketing budget by 2012. Many tourism organisations are beginning to study and craft social media marketing strategies to their advantage (Hays *et al.*, 2013). In this Web 2.0 era, tourism businesses that do not implement social media marketing strategies will lack a competitive advantage (Stankov, Lazić & Dragičević, 2010; Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011; Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Nawaz & Mubarak, 2015). The next section explains the Digital Marketing Framework and how it can be applied to social media marketing.

The Digital Marketing Framework (DMF)

The Digital Marketing Framework was first proposed by Kierzkowski *et al.* (1996), who suggested that there are five steps that a business should follow to market itself successfully through digital technologies. The DMF is the most popular and widely used e-marketing framework. The first step specified by Kierzkowski *et al.* (1996) is to attract the audience,

customers and prospective customers to voluntarily visit an interactive application. In relationship to social media, there are various ways in which a business attracts customers to its social media site. For example, Chan and Guillet (2011) suggest the creation of a profile page with content that catches the attention of customers. Marketers at this stage should utilise the correct tools to attract the types of customer they are targeting. A number of marketing communication tools should be used to spread the business's web presence so as to maximise the effectiveness of digital marketing. After attracting the attention of the customer, marketers need to develop strategies for retaining the customers. Thus, the next step of the Digital Marketing Framework is to engage customers.

To engage customers, marketers need to generate interest and encourage participation on their web page (Kierzkowski *et al.*, 1996). Generating interest and participation will encourage visitors to continue revisiting the site, and this can lead to a successful interaction or transaction. Posting creative content of high quality which is valuable to customers should engage the customers and create a user-friendly site. Once customers have been attracted and engaged, marketers need to retain them, which is the third step. Relationships with customers can be built by maintaining contact with them (Kierzkowski *et al.*, 1996). Continuous renewing of content by marketers on their profile pages can create a reason for customers to revisit their profile pages. The focus of marketers at this stage is to lure customers to interact with the business or other users of that web page. According to Kierzkowski *et al.* (1996), at this stage marketers can “make use of the switching cost concept by increasing the time and energy that the customers spend on the site” or to develop a virtual community on the web. Chan and Guillet (2011) add that if the business invests more resources and establishes relationships with customers, it could retain customers by preventing them from switching to competitors' sites. Learning about the customers is the fourth step of the DMF. With their interactive nature, social media sites provide an opportunity for marketers to learn about the preferences of their customers, which will help the business to enhance its future service. At this stage marketers can make use of digital media to test their services or products and get feedback from customers. The final step of the DMF is to relate back to the customer. Because of the two-way communication offered by interactive media, marketers have the opportunity to deliver a personalised service or communication about the availability of a personalised service. At this final stage, Kierzkowski *et al.* (1996:6) emphasise that marketers need to maximise the “full potential of the interactive media, especially those particularly applicable to the business's product/service category”. The Digital Marketing Framework, as proposed by Kierzkowski *et al.* (1996), is presented in Figure 1:

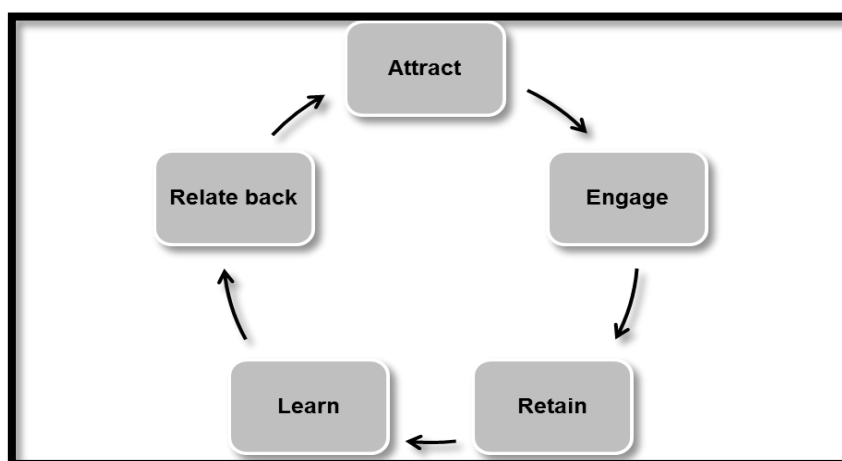


Figure 1: The Digital Marketing Framework
Source: Kierzkowski et al. (1996)

Though the Digital Marketing Framework was proposed with a focus on other digital media, not social media specifically, its benefits and the characteristics of each step can aid in explaining social media marketing. Through social media, businesses can attract customers, engage them through online forums, and learn about their tastes and preferences by posting questions and testing new products. Thus, the Digital Marketing Framework is also relevant in explaining social media marketing usage.

Methodology

The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature. Its aim was to do the groundwork towards understanding how social media marketing is being implemented by South African travel agencies and tour operators. An exploratory research design was used when since background information on a particular topic was required (Taylor, Catalano & Walker, 2002). The population for the study included all travel agencies and tour operators in South Africa who use social media sites for marketing. The database of the travel agencies and tour operators was obtained from the Association of South African Travel Agencies (ASATA) and from the Yellow Pages directory. A questionnaire, which was delivered to the businesses through e-mail, was the primary instrument used for data collection. An independent research company was contacted for data collection. The questionnaire was directed to owner managers and marketing managers of travel agencies and tour operators. It was successfully completed by 150 travel agencies and tour operators, and the data was analysed using descriptive analysis and factor scores to check the association of items.

Questionnaire design

In order to design the measurement instrument for this study, two studies were considered, a study by Teo (2005) and one by Chan and Guillet (2011). Teo (2005) investigated the usage of online tools by business-to-consumer firms as perceived by the managerial staff using the DMF. Managers were requested to rate the extent to which they used online tools at each stage of the DMF. Similarly, Chan and Guillet (2011) used the DMF to investigate the marketing performance of Hong Kong hotels on social media sites. Chan and Guillet (2011) grouped social media marketing activities into the five steps of the DMF and investigated how hotels performed at each stage. The items used in the present study to evaluate the marketing performance of travel agencies and tour operators on social media sites were based on the questionnaire used by Teo (2005) and Chan and Guillet (2011) and slightly modified to ensure validity in determining the usage of social media sites for marketing by travel agencies. Appendix A shows the items used for this study.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Demographic information was captured in the first section, and the second section captured information on the marketing performance of travel agencies on social media sites. Various marketing strategies as proposed by Chan and Guillet (2011) were used to evaluate travel agencies' performance at each step of the DMF. Managers or marketing personnel were asked to state the frequency at which they performed the activities suggested by the Digital Marketing Framework, using a five-point Likert scale (1–never, 2–almost never, 3–sometimes, 4–almost every time, 5–always), as adopted from Vagias (2006). The final section of the questionnaire focused on the challenges faced by travel agencies when using social media marketing.

Findings and discussion

Of the companies which were investigated, 35 (23.3%) were tour operators and 115 (76.7%) were travel agencies. The social media sites most commonly used by travel agencies and tour operators were Facebook (48.4%), Twitter (30.2%) and TripAdvisor (21.4%). Travel agencies and tour operators indicated that they use these sites mainly to communicate about services on special offer and new services on offer. The next section presents the descriptive results of the performance of the travel agencies at each step of the Digital Marketing Framework.

Marketing performance of travel agencies at each step of the DMF

Travel agencies and tour operators were requested to identify the activities they perform when marketing through social media sites at each stage of the DMF. The scales used to measure the frequencies ranged from 1–never to 5–always. In presenting the results, those who indicated “never” and “almost never” were grouped as NO, while those who indicated “sometimes”, “almost every time” and “always” were grouped as YES. (Their responses are presented in Table 2 to Table 6.)

Table 2: Step 1 – Attract

Phase 1: To attract customers to our business	YES (%)	NO (%)
Present a profile page on social networking sites	100.0	0
Show the website link on the profile page	50.0	50.0
Show services on discount on the profile page	54.6	45.4
Show pictures of services offered by our company	65.3	34.7
Provide company phone numbers on our social networking site home page	54.7	45.3

When travel agencies and tour operators were asked to indicate the activities they perform to attract customers to their social media sites, it was observed that all the companies investigated present a profile page on social networking sites as a way of attracting customers (Table 1). Half of the travel agencies and tour operators (50%) admitted that they show their company’s website on their profile pages, while the other 50% do not show their websites. More than half of the travel agencies (54.6%) promote discounted services on social media sites, and 65% of the travel agencies show pictures of services offered by their companies. Lastly, 54.7% of the companies provide their phone numbers on their social media site home page. Generally, most companies are performing well in attracting customers to their social media site home page.

Table 3: Step 2 – Engage

Phase 2: To engage customers in our business	YES (%)	NO (%)
Answer customers’ enquiries on social networking sites	37.3	62.7
Handle customers’ complaints on social networking sites	33.3	66.7
Introduce new services to guests through social networking sites	53.3	44.7
Allow for a discussion wall on the home page	38.7	61.3
Engage customers in lucky draws	41.3	58.7

To engage customers, the activity performed by many travel agencies and tour operators is introducing new services to the customers (53.3%) (Table 3). However, the performance of the travel agencies and tour operators in other activities to engage customers was poor. Only 37.3% of the companies answer customers through social media sites. Handling customers’ complaints on social media sites was another activity which is not being performed by many travel agencies and tour operators, with only (33.3%) of them doing so. The majority of the companies (61.3%) also do not provide a platform for customers’ discussion on their social media site home page. Only 38.7% of the companies perform this activity. Lastly, a fairly good number of the companies engage customers in lucky draws, though the statistics are not impressive (41.3%). Generally travel agencies and tour operators’ performance in trying to engage customers is not impressive. This is similar to the findings of Kelly *et al.* (2013), which also revealed that the hotels that they investigated had challenges in engaging with their customers on Facebook.

Table 4: Step 3 – Retain

Phase 3: To retain customers of our business	YES (%)	NO (%)
Present games, contests and forums to users	40.7	59.3
Provide hyperlinks on our home page to related sites	44.7	55.3
Have security features and privacy statements	44.7	55.3
Listen and respond to negative comments immediately	56.0	44.0

Travel agencies and tour operators investigated in this study had a generally poor performance for this stage. The results in Table 4 show that out of 150 investigated companies, only 40.7% present games, contests and forums to users, 44.7% provide hyperlinks to related sites, and 44.7% have security features and privacy statements on the home page of social media sites. A fairly good number (56%) of the travel agencies and tour operators listen to negative comments and give an immediate response.

Table 5: Step 4 – Learn

Phase 4: To learn about customers of our business	YES (%)	NO (%)
Record valuable customer and prospective customer information	30.0	70.0
Encourage chat groups	32.7	67.3
Use social media sites to carry out market research	38.0	62.0

The travel agencies and tour operators investigated in this study performed poorly for this stage. Results in Table 5 illustrate that out of 150 investigated companies only 30% get and keep valuable information about customers, and only 32.7% encourage chat groups. The majority of the companies (62%) do not perform market research using social media marketing. Similarly, Chan and Guillet (2011) discovered that most hotels in Hong Kong did not perform well for this stage of the DMF.

Table 6: Stage 5 – Relate

Phase 5: To relate back about our business	YES (%)	NO (%)
Update customers about new content	46.7	53.3
Engage in real time interaction with the customers	27.3	72.7
Respond directly to individuals	48.0	52.0
Provide linkages to core business	51.3	48.7

For the last stage of the DMF, the performance of the travel agencies is again not impressive. The performance is relatively poor, as illustrated Table 6: of the 150 investigated companies, 46.7% update customers about new content, only 27.3% engage in real time interaction with customers, and 48% respond directly to individuals. The next section presents results of factor analysis, which was done to measure the adequacy of the sample as well as to get the factor scores of each underlying factor in the Digital Marketing Framework.

Factor analysis

Sample adequacy was assessed using the Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) test. According to Field (2000:445), if the KMO value is greater than 0.5, the sample is regarded as adequate. Table 7 illustrates that a value of 0.605 was obtained, supporting the adequacy of the sample. Inter-correlation of the variable was calculated using Bartlett’s test of sphericity. If the value is greater than 1, there will be inter-correlation of variables (Bartlett, 1937). Results in Table 7 show a chi-square value of 336.935 with 149 degrees of freedom, which is significant at .01, implying that the variables are not inter-correlated.

Table 7: KMO and Bartlett’s test results

KMO and Bartlett’s test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy.		.605
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. chi-square	336.935
	Df	149
	Sig.	.010

α=0.05 (95%significance level)

In order to identify the association of the items with each underlying factor in the DMF, factor scores were calculated. Factor scores are an output of factor analysis. Each item’s loading

represents how strongly that item is associated with the underlying factor (Field, 2000:445). The loading or weight of each item falls between -1 and 1. A negative figure indicates that the item does not possess characteristics similar to the measured underlying factor and is not useful (Holgado-Tello, Carrasco-Ortiz, del Barrio Gándara & Chacón-Moscoso, 2009). A factor score of > or = .55 is regarded as good. "A factor with three or more loadings greater than 0.6 is reliable regardless of sample size" (Field, 2009:647). Table 8 illustrates that all the factors had three or more loadings greater than 0.6. From the results in Table 8, it can also be deduced that most marketing activities performed by the investigated travel agencies and tour operators fall in the first phase, attracting customers, with 4.83 mean value, followed by retaining customers (3.38), engaging customers (3.13) and relating back to customers (2.99). The least performed activities, according to the results of this investigation, fall in the learning phase, with 2.01 mean value, implying that travel agencies and tour operators are not doing well in this phase. This supports the results from descriptive statistics explained earlier in this study.

Table 8: Factor scores for each item

Activity performed at each stage of the DMF	1	2	3	4	5
1 Attract:					
Present a profile page on social media sites	.89				
On profile page the website link is shown	.73				
Show services on discount on profile page	.44				
Show pictures of services offered by the company	.84				
Provide company phone numbers on the social media site home page	.72				
2 Engage:					
Answer customers' enquiries on social media sites		.92			
Handle customers' complaints on social media sites		.83			
Introduce new services to guests on social media sites		.83			
Allow for a discussion wall on the home page		.70			
Engage customers in lucky draws		.36			
3 Retain:					
Present games, contests and forums to users			.70		
Provide hyperlinks on home page to other important sites			.73		
Have privacy statements and some security features			.59		
Listen and respond to negative comments immediately			.67		
4 Learn:					
Record valuable customer and prospective customer information				.73	
Encourage chat groups				.72	
Use social media sites to carry out market research				.63	
5 Relate back:					
Update customers about new content					.78
Engage in real time interaction with the customers					.31
Provide linkages to core business					.67
Respond directly to individuals					.85
Total variance explained (%)	82.0				
Reliability coefficient	.83	.75	.67	.69	.73
Average inter-item correlation	.45	.37	.43	.36	.40
Mean value	4.83	3.13	3.38	2.01	2.99

Stages and items adapted from Chan and Guillet (2011)

The other objective of the study, apart from examining the marketing performance of travel agencies and tour operators' on social media sites, using the Digital Marketing Framework, was to identify the challenges which they face in implementing social media marketing. Accordingly, the next section reports the challenges highlighted by South African travel agencies and tour operators.

Challenges in implementing social media marketing

Travel agencies were requested to state on their own some of the challenges they face in implementing social media marketing. Two major challenges were highlighted. One of the major challenges highlighted is a lack of time to commit to social media marketing and to support social media marketing initiatives. Due to the fact that social media marketing is time consuming, as it requires someone to be on the site to check what customers are posting, it is difficult for travel agencies and tour operators to sustain it. This is not difficult to comprehend

as most travel agencies are small companies that employ very few people. This is similar to the findings of Chan and Guillet (2011), who concluded that most hotels in Hong Kong were failing to utilise social media marketing effectively due to limited time to support social media marketing initiatives. Snyman and Visser (2014) also concluded that limited time is a major constraint inhibiting the usage of social media by South African dentists. It is advised that for travel agencies to sustain social media marketing, they need to acquire personnel dedicated mainly to this aspect.

Lack of adequate skills in utilising social media for marketing is one the major hindrances preventing travel agencies and tour operators from conducting marketing effectively on social media sites. This result is consistent with the findings of previous studies. Au (2010) concluded that the main reason why tourism businesses lag behind in the adoption of Web 2.0 technologies is their lack of technical know-how. Chan and Guillet (2011) also indicated that "inability to use social media to disclose the company's identity" is one of the main challenges faced by hotels. A recent study by Matikiti *et al.* (2016) also revealed lack of skills as a challenge affecting the usage of social media marketing by accommodation establishments in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Companies should facilitate the training of staff to acquire necessary skills on social media marketing, as this could assist in overcoming the challenge. Alternatively, travel agencies and tour operators could hire IT people who have proper knowledge of social networking sites or can imitate what others are doing. Very few travel agencies and tour operators highlighted lack of knowledge on managing negative comments as a deterrent to their effective usage of social media sites for marketing.

Recommendations

Considering the findings of the study, the researchers provide the following guidelines to assist South African travel agencies and tour operators to improve their social media marketing strategies. These guidelines will also assist in meeting the final research objective formulated for the study.

Guideline 1: For the improvement of social media marketing

The preliminary results of this study revealed that although social media marketing has been implemented by travel agencies and tour operators in South Africa, most of them are not performing well in marketing on these social media sites. A reason for this outcome could be inadequate skills in the effective use of social media sites for marketing. The results revealed that most travel agencies and tour operators are not doing enough to keep customers engaged on their social media sites. To keep customers engaged on the social media sites, it is proposed that travel agencies should provide different activities for them, such as a platform where customers can discuss the company's service or products. By doing so, a travel agency or tour operator would be able to tap into what customers are discussing about their products and make adjustments where possible. If customers are engaged, it is easier to create interactions within the community and to retain customers (Kierzkowski *et al.*, 1996). Thus, businesses such as travel agencies and tour operators should design content that is valuable and of interest to their customers or to potential customers in order for them to have a reason to continually follow the site. Travel agencies and tour operators could engage customers on their social media sites through the creation of games. Customers would visit their sites to play those games and at the same time be able to see the products being marketed on that site. Alternatively, creating a photo-related contest on sites such as YouTube, where customers are allowed to upload photos of their favorite destinations or attractions, could also assist to increase the engagement of customers.

This strategy would assist the business in two ways. Firstly, the business could learn about the tastes and preferences of their customers, and secondly the business could use the uploaded photos of customers on their home page to attract other customers.

Guideline 2: For the retention of existing customers and attracting new customers

Customers normally retain their involvement with a social media site when something new is regularly posted there. Travel agencies and tour operators are therefore advised to continuously update content on the home page in order to retain customers and attract new customers. "Engagement and the encouragement of participation are both key in attracting and retaining users" (Hays *et al.*, 2013). Another strategy that could be used to retain customers is to engage them in lucky draws whereby the one who wins the draw is given a discount on a service or product offered by the travel agency or tour operator.

Guideline 3: For learning about customers through social media sites

Travel agencies and tour operators should use social media sites to learn about their customers' preferences and their behaviour online. This information is vital for the success of the business's marketing efforts, as it would assist the business to tailor-make its services. This could be successfully done through supporting chat groups on their sites, indicated on the profile page, to learn about the behaviour of their customers. When customers are chatting, the social media marketer of the business should join the conversation and be alert to respond to comments. Where possible thought-provoking questions should be asked so that users genuinely want to respond. This is another way of conducting marketing research through social media sites.

Guideline 4: For the management of social media sites

Social media marketing can be time consuming. To overcome this challenge, travel agencies and tour operators are advised to focus on at least one social media site which it can manage. They should select one social media site and devote time and resources to learning how that site is used for marketing. Focusing on a number of social media sites would cost the business time. Thus, travel agencies and tour operators should first check the sites most commonly used by their competitors and adopt one to focus on with the sole purpose of promoting their services. This would give the travel agencies and tour operators an opportunity to understand that particular social media site better, which could increase the chance of performing well when using that site for marketing.

Guideline 5: For the effective use of a social marketing site

The purpose of promoting a service is for customers to know what is offered so that they can make a decision about purchasing the service. When travel agencies conduct marketing on social media sites, they should provide hyperlinks to related sites which show other services and products offered by the business. For instance, a link could be included on the profile page of Facebook or Twitter to the formal website of the travel agency or tour operator. It is sometimes not attractive to post all of the business's products/services on the profile page, as the site would become clumsy. Hyperlinks provide a business with an opportunity to showcase a number of products/services on offer, using the same social media site. This is a cost-cutting measure, as it reduces the cost associated with advertising a product/service separately.

Guideline 6: For providing customers with a sense of security when using social media sites

Due to prevalent scams in the cyber environment, most social media users are concerned about security issues. Therefore, for a business to be able to retain customers, a privacy statement and security features should be presented.

Limitations and areas of further research

The study focused only on small tourism businesses, which might not give a true picture of the actual usage of social media marketing within the tourism industry. A study is therefore

needed which compares the usage of social media marketing in both small and large tourism businesses. This may give a true picture of how social media is being implemented. The study used a cross-sectional approach, which can provide only a snapshot of how travel agencies are performing at a particular time. A study is required which uses a longitudinal approach to investigate the performance of hotels over time. In addition, this study used the views of managers to investigate the marketing performance of travel agencies on social media sites, which might not give true reflection of social media marketing in the tourism industry. Future research in this area could imitate this study but use the observation method to investigate the usage of social media marketing by travel agencies and tour operators in South Africa.

Conclusion

The study's main aim was to investigate the marketing performance of travel agencies and tour operators in South Africa on social media sites, using the Digital Marketing Framework. The results revealed that the travel agencies investigated in this study were doing well especially in the first stage of the DMF (attracting customers). However, the performance of the companies in the second stage (engaging customers) and third stage (retaining customers) was relatively poor, since fewer companies were following the strategies proposed for these stages. The results revealed a very poor performance in the fourth stage (learning about customers), with very few companies using social media marketing to learn about their customers. The performance of the companies in the last stage of the DMF (relating back) was also not impressive. Generally, although travel agencies and tour operators in South Africa use social media marketing, they are not maximising the full potential of this interactive marketing medium. The main challenges highlighted by most companies are limited time to support social media initiatives and inadequate command of the skills required to perform social media marketing effectively.

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APPENDIX A: Items used to evaluate social media marketing performance

Phase 1: To attract customers to our business
Present a profile page on social networking sites
Show our website on social networking site page
Promote discounted services on social networking sites
Show pictures of services offered by our company
Provide company phone numbers on our social networking site home page
Phase 2: To engage customers in our business
Answer guests' enquiries on social networking sites
Handle guests' complaints on social networking sites
Introduce new services to guests through social networking sites
Present a discussion wall on the social networking site page
Engage customers in lucky draws
Phase 3: To retain customers of our business
Present games, contests and forums to users
Provide hyperlinks on our home page to related sites
Have security features and privacy statements
Listen and respond to negative comments immediately
Phase 4: To learn about customers of our business
Capture information about customers and prospects
Support chat groups
Perform market research using social networking sites
Phase 5: To relate back about our business
Update customers about content change
Engage in real time interaction with the customers
Provide personalised responses
Provide linkages to core business

Adapted from Chan and Guillet (2011)