

Use of Social Media for Public Relations Purposes in Tourism¹

Turizmde Sosyal Medyanın Halkla İlişkiler Amaçlı Kullanımı

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ABSTRACT

Rapid changes in communication technologies led to important changes in methods and instruments of public relations activities. Institutional communication activities which were carried out by means of web pages of internet media have started gaining importance in the area of social media upon the rise of this phenomenon. Public relations activities such as crisis management, corporate image, organizational identity, promotion, informing and communicating have been started to be used efficiently in the area of social media. Social media not only changed the areas of communication but also changed the content of messages and the media settings of message senders and receivers. Additionally social media introduced the concepts such as "user generated content" and "customer generated media" and gathered its position in commercial planning by this feature. Social media became an indispensable component of tourism marketing. Traditional communication media have changed significantly upon the introduction and development of social media. Communicating with customers became an easy and low cost process. Creating trademark consciousness, ingathering trademark related groups, determining the target market and the attributes of target market became an easier process by means of social media instruments. It might be said that social media is perceived as a very efficient instrument regarding to the touristic product preferences of people. It provides more reliable information which is produced by the experienced and informed people directly related to the subjects such as tourism agency, destination, accommodation etc. and it provides such information by changing the information gathering methods of users.

KEYWORDS

Tourism, social media, public relations

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ÖZ

İletişim teknolojisindeki hızlı gelişmeler halkla ilişkiler faaliyetlerinin yöntem ve araçlarında önemli değişikliklere yol açmıştır. İnternet ortamında web siteleri ile gerçekleştirilmeye çalışılan kurumsal iletişim faaliyetlerinin sosyal medyanın ortaya çıkması ile bu alanda ağırlık kazanmaya başladığı görülmüştür. Sosyal medya ortamlarında da kriz yönetimi, kurum imajı, kurum kimliği, tanıtma, bilgilendirme, haber verme gibi halkla ilişkiler faaliyetleri etkin olarak kullanılmaya başlanmıştır. Sosyal medya kullanımı iletişim mecralarını değiştirmekle kalmamış, mesajın içeriğini ve mesajı gönderenle mesajın alıcılarının bulunduğu iletişim ortamlarını da değiştirmiştir. Sosyal medya aynı zamanda "Kullanıcıların Ürettiği İçerik" ve "Müşterilerin Ürettiği Medya" kavramlarını da ortaya çıkarmış, bu yapıyla da ticari plandaki anlamını kazanmıştır. Sosyal medya turizm pazarlamasının vazgeçilmez bir unsuru haline gelmiştir. Turizm sektöründe geleneksel iletişim mecraları sosyal medyanın ortaya çıkışı ile büyük ölçüde değişime uğramıştır. Müşterilerle iletişim kurmak hem kolay hem de düşük maliyetle gerçekleşmeye başlamıştır. Sosyal medya araçları sayesinde Marka farkındalığı yaratma, marka için topluluk oluşturma, hedef kitleyi belirleme ve onların ne istediklerini, nasıl hareket ettiklerini öğrenme daha kolay hale gelmiştir. Sosyal medya turizm sektöründe turistik ürün tercihinde son derece önemli bir araç olarak kendini etkin bir şekilde hissettirmektedir. Sosyal medya kullanıcılarının araştırma şeklini değiştirerek onların turizm acentası, gidilecek yer, konaklanacak mekân hakkında güvenilir bilgilere, daha önceden bu konuda tecrübe sahibi kişiler aracılığıyla ulaşmalarını sağlamaktadır.

ANAHTAR KELİMELE

Turizm, sosyal medya, Halkla ilişkiler.

INTRODUCTION

Computer-based communication has radically changed how information is created, possessed, shared and spread in its own environment (Antonson and Christopher, 2008:6). Networked computer-based communication environment has also resulted in changes in the basic principles how information is created, by whom it is possessed, how it is shared and distributed. At present, individuals spend most of their time online, that is, the electronical environments (<http://www.medialifemagazine.com>).

The increase in the use of Internet in different areas each day has pointed out new opportunities in many fields of everyday life with its facilitative and casual nature in all business models, especially in public relations.

It is now an inevitable necessity to use all modern means of communication such as social media, e-mail, SMS and the Internet, following the developing technology instead of newspaper, radio, television, telephone, catalogues and leaflets that were used as traditional means of communication by marketing, advertising and public relations, in order to get a share from both national and international tourism market. Social media is one of the most important means used by public relations in multiple function process to keep the strategic control of all messages sent by customers and to other parties or to influence them, that is based on data and encourages an intentional dialogue to establish profitable relations and to feed them, which is also described as an integrated marketing communication (Aslan, 2006: 19).

CONCEPT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Described as a new technology and even on a challenging definition as a new era, Web 2.0 applications gives individual users an opportunity to create their own contents, to express their own opinions and to share their own viewpoints with others (Jalali, 2009: 198). The keystone of social media that involves all means of communication using these applications is sharing, integrating all users on a common point and enabling them to get information in order to make better choices most of the time (Evans, 2008: 31).

When Web 1.0 was used, there used to be a content emitter and a content reader. After Web 2.0 is introduced to users, it offered a media system that provides two-way information sharing instead of one-way and simultaneous information sharing. After Web 2.0, website visitors have become not only consumers, but also producers. Web 2.0 can communicate with many people

simultaneously and use many applications via social media tools. Presently, we are using Web 2.0 technology. However, experts mention about a transition to Web 3.0 in a very short time, which is characterized by ‘semantic web’. Web 3.0, in short, refers to a system in which machines can read, understand and interpret (<https://prezi.com>).

Social media refers to the content prepared by users in order to share, discuss and cooperate by creating highly interactive environments using mobile and web-based technologies (Kietzman et.al.; 2011:242).

In this environment, the content producers involve the users themselves, not the professionals when compared to other media environments. Using the technologies based on the Internet and web, this monologue of field-media becomes a two-way interaction in social media (Solis and Breakenridge, 2009:180).

New media is away from popularization and “subject to changes, enables an individualized dependability and an environment that is independent and distributes control” when compared to traditional concepts of media such as television, newspaper and radio (Akar, 2010: 16). Therefore, freedom is freedom in comparison to other tools, but within its own environment it is limited to what its developer provides; interaction is created within the limitations involved and allowed for users completely by the source, that is, interactive environment. The characteristics of new media are listed as follows (Lister et.al., 2009:13)

- Digital
- Interactive
- Linked texts
- Virtual
- Networked
- Simulative

New world offers new media, new channels and new markets. Such means of communication or interaction in traditional or company-controlled media as newspaper, magazine, radio and television are highly in one-way nature. This is also true for many online media tools. Final users can only watch something under the control of somebody else or stay in touch with it. However, social media is many-sided. It enables users to participate into mutual online

conversations and provides an opportunity to spread it. One of the distinguishing characteristics of social media is that it is also the participant. Final users can shape, create and share their content. Social recognition is shaped via participation and reciprocation (Akar, 2010: 25-26).

SOCIAL MEDIA: NEW POWER OF MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

For individuals, social media is an interactive means of sharing, but it is, for companies, a means of public relations that brings new opportunities together with new threats (Yavuz and Haseki, 2012: 127).

The reasons why social media is so powerful are based on the fact that it is cost-efficient, it can spread the information quickly and it is continuously updated, created in a sincerity-based environment, enables to know target population better, it can also make an evaluation and assessment, it establishes direct communication with persons and it collects reliable data using references (Symantec, 2011: 7-9).

Companies also keep in step with the benefits and wide use of social media and start to transfer their business into social media, which once used to be conducted over websites. The traffic and congestion in social media has created these applications that companies advertise their products and services. Companies begin to share their promotions and news on their products over social media (Eryilmaz and Zengin, 2014:48).

The effects of present technological developments, wide use of Internet and especially use of Web 2.0 that has turned social media into an important part of our daily lives created a need for change in our points of view about advertising and advertisements. Although the main objective of advertising is still to persuade consumers to buy a product or a service, the means and channels of communication in advertising have changed, resulting some other changes in the nature of advertising (Yurttas, 2011: 37).

The biggest advantage of advertisements in social media is that they can be used as a means of viral marketing. Social network users take advantage of all types of information sharing offered by the media in order to share the brands they like or don't like. Therefore, it is now easier to increase their success for companies if their products or advertisements show a good performance, then they can spread from mouth to mouth in these environments (www.ntmedya.com). Social network websites enable companies to get an idea

about the preferences of consumers as targeted by the marketing managers, their areas of interest, needs, lifestyles and then to create effective advertisements for them (Kazancoglu et.al., 2012: 161).

Social networking websites with a large number of visitors and users offer great opportunities for companies that give an advertisement and now it is almost unnatural for brands or products not to have a profile or a group over a social networking website. Brands have the opportunity to directly communicate to their consumers over their profiles or groups on sharing websites and follow the positive or negative attitudes of target populations about them from the comments and forums placed in their pages and they can get an exact idea of what needs to be done in further steps (www.ntmedya.com).

New Internet technologies not only changed the Internet pages, but also the customers started changing. Some marketing experts define new customer types as 'Adprosumer', which is derived from the combination of 'advertiser, producer, consumer' (Maldonado (2008) and Pons (2008).

The revolution of social media has given the consumers all around the world a great power, therefore pushing companies to think about how they can be more precise and flexible. Following the global crisis, social media forced companies, organizations and even governments to think about how they can deliver their messages without spending much money and having to use such press organs as television or radio (Kerpen, 2011: 4).

Social media consumers keep in touch with other people and friends by the help of the focus point enabled by social media and they voluntarily present information about themselves in order to get the best benefit from online experiences by keeping interactions among them. One of the most important characteristics of social media advertising when compared to traditional advertising is that the content is less exhausting and costly so that users can easily reach these valuable data. Such data can be personal or sometimes include information on social or interpersonal relations. (www.iab.net/media)

Besides all these advantages, social media can also damage companies if they are misused. Social media is seen to be quite risky, serious and crucial indeed when all possible damages are taken into consideration. The misuse of social media can lead to a loss more than 4 million dollars approximately within a single year. Some 28% of companies believe that social media can be harmful to brand image and customer trust. The average annual cost of any damage on brand prestige is estimated as 638.496 dollars and it is also stated that 27% of

companies lost their customers, employees or organizations because of social media, it caused direct income loss for 25% of them, total loss amount estimated as 619.360 dollars. The average cost of court expenses caused by social media is 650.361 dollars (Symantac, 2011: 7-9)

EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON TOURISM SECTOR

In tourism sector, there are two important components, people and technology, which keep changing and increasing its significance (Meydan, 2007: 411). The developments in technology encourage the wide use of Internet in tourism sector, raise awareness among consumers and have an effect on consumer demands. Presently, the Internet serves as a new channel of communication and an alternative channel of distribution for travellers when obtaining trips, products and services in tourism industry (Law et.al., 2004: 100).

There is not only a national, but also an international competition in tourism. As a result of this global competition, companies and customers exceed their traditional limits due to purchase, sell or complete other commercial actions, therefore removing the borders of national markets or making them vague. New global vision pushes companies to run their business all around the world instead of a single country, therefore expecting them to use their core competencies and information effectively (Demirci and Aydemir, 2008: 9).

When the purchasing habits of consumers are examined in tourism, it is seen that they benefit from the Internet and social media greatly especially when searching for information, doing research, evaluating alternatives, selecting or purchasing and other post-purchase actions (Odabasi and Odabasi, 2010: 38-39).

Other than the website or advertisement brochures that are prepared by tourism companies and only focus on positive sides, the comments and evaluations of other people who experienced a service earlier are seen to be more effective for potential buyers when purchasing a touristic product. Hence, now it is more preferable by tourism consumers to use social media and related applications that give an opportunity to reach these comments and evaluations easily (Eroz and Dogdubay, 2012:144).

The process of composing travel experiences for a tourism consumer over social media has three different stages. These stages are as follows: (Milano et.al.,2011:4)

- Past experiences: This is consisted of travel stories of other people. It enables tourism consumers to get information before making a travel decision.
- Experiences on travel and accommodation: In parallel to the developments in information and communication technologies, tourism consumers can share their real-time experiences over social platforms using their mobile applications.
- Experiences after travel and accommodation: This is consisted of comments, evaluations and feelings expressed by tourism consumers about their travel experiences after ending their travel over social media platforms.

While the number of people who evaluate the hotels they stayed after coming back is 46% and who evaluate the restaurants they visited is 40%, 76% of them share their photos over social media.

Although 70% of individuals collect data about hotels, it is seen that they searched on social media and this information available on websites affected the hotel selection of 64%. Tourists can conduct many activities about their accommodation by using means of social media (Atadil et.al. 2010: 119-125). Some examples are as follows:

- Tourists can read about the contents on an accommodation company over blogs, can comment on them or even be the author of those contents.
- They can follow their favorite accommodation companies on Twitter, the most popular micro-blog website, and get in touch with the latest developments simultaneously.
- Before deciding to accommodate in a hotel, they can exchange information with other people they already know on social networks or get some reviews from their linked friends and then make a decision after these exchanges.
- They can obtain information about a facility using the photos or videos shared on such video or photo sharing websites as YouTube or Instagram about an accommodation company.

- They can be a part of campaigns organized by accommodation companies by becoming a member of their fan pages on Facebook, which is the widest social network around the world.
- They can share such content as information, photos and videos using social networks with their friends or links during their stay.
- When they are treated unfair or faced with an unpleasant situation, they can find a solution by sharing this problem with management, legal authorities, non-governmental organizations or people they already know via social media, or they can choose to retaliate from or advise other people against this facility.
- On the other hand, they can share the positive attitudes, services or facilities they liked in a accommodation company with other people, they can honor it and express their thankfulness using social media.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS IN TOURISM

Hotels use social media to introduce their products and services, for public relations, to keep in touch with tourists, to get feedback on their satisfaction or complaints, to announce their promotions, special offers and exclusive events. The hotels that are members of such social networking websites as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube can reach their consumers without needing an extra equipment or software. The virtual communities, organized by members of social networking websites, can be a target population, easy to reach by tourism companies (Kasavana et.al., 2010: 68-82).

Hotels, airline companies and other segments of billion-dollar travel industry use social media more and more for their public relations and increase their brand recognition. Airline companies broadcast introductory films on YouTube and offer reasonable flight prices over social networking websites such Loopt. Social media can be used at every stage of travelling. A travelling person can do anything over the Internet from booking to choosing restaurants to eat (<http://www.turizmanaliz.com/>).

One of the best examples here is Marriott Chain Hotels. Marriott Chain Hotels prepared a page named Marriott Courtyard Facebook in order to keep in touch with its customers. Such five-star hotels as Hyatt and Hilton have an

increasing number of followers on Twitter. A chef in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Washington get in touch with his customers on Twitter, ask them what they wish to see in the menu this season or which special dishes they would like to have on specific days. And even he organizes contests, offering free dinners to the winners in the end (<http://www.turizmanaliz.com/>).

It is emphasized by experts that tourism companies may accomplish some of their objectives by using social media. Laboy and Torchio (2007:6) state that there will be significant gains for tourism companies in terms of public relations if they can really accomplish these objectives. These objectives are as follows:

Prestige follow-up and management: Tourism consumers comment on brands, destinations, companies, products and services through blogs, forums, comment websites and other social media platforms. Tourism companies can track down these comments and manage their prestige (Laboy and Torchio, 2007). For example, TripAdvisor consume comment website is established on the idea that consumers can rely on the comments of other consumers when making their travel plans (Miguens et.al., 2008). There are more than 45 millions of comments on travel in TripAdvisor, all made by tourism consumers all over the world (TripAdvisor, 2011).

Brand Reinforcement, Brand Awareness and Customer Acquisition: In social media platforms, tourism consumers organize blogs, make recommendations, prepare a list of places they wish to visit during their travel and download photographs to share with other tourism consumers. For example, in Yahoo Travel website (www.travel.yahoo.com), tourism consumers prepare their travel plans by selecting destinations they wish to go, hotels they wish to stay, the car they wish to rent and products or services they wish to have, etc. In Yahoo Travel, tourism consumers can contact with official websites of tourism companies via hyperlinks and let tourism companies gain new customers. Becoming aware of brands over social media and gathering information about them by tourism consumers increase brand awareness and brand reinforcement (Laboy and Torchio, 2007).

Customer Engagement, Customer Services and Customer Profiling: In social media platforms, customer services enabled by Web 2.0 technologies are applied. These include continuously updated local activity calendars of destinations, price comparisons among hotels, experiencing of destinations visually in 360°, and similar services. Tourism companies create profiles for

tourism consumers in social media platforms and establish strong connections with consumers (Laboy and Torchio, 2007).

It is only possible for companies to present their ethical applications besides their quality standards in order to get a higher competitive advantage in travel and tourism sector (Beeton, 2006).

One of the most important problems to face with while organizing operations of public relations in tourism sector is disobeying ethical principles. The drawbacks of information shared in social media websites indicate the fact that the comments are highly subjective and the service quality perceived by persons can change from one person to another. Customer satisfaction is fundamental for tourism companies and any unethical application may give them irreparable damages. It is very important to internalize these ethical codes by tourism companies and their partners and to adopt it as a management style. In addition to this, consumers must also investigate the reliability of any information and its source when using social media and then make a decision accordingly.

RESULTS

It is now much easier, thanks to the means of social media, to determine the target population and to get an idea of what they want and how they behave. Presently, many company owners and managers follow comments and views on their business over social media and use the means of social media as an effective tool of managing customer relations. Customers, effectively contacted over social media, share their satisfactory personal experiences and become a supporter or spokesman of a brand. Social media should not be seen as a field, in which all problems of public relations of a tourism company will be solved. It should be seen as a supporting factor for operations and applications of traditional public relations. Tourism companies should establish and follow policies based on their ethical principles when using social media for public relations.

Social media is very dynamic and flexible, therefore requiring accounts to be updated continuously. Trained social media personnel must be employed in tourism companies to manage their social media accounts. These personnel must track down all other social media environments and give an immediate response to any problems there may occur. Tourism companies must award the customers who have stated positive comments about their company after their accommodation, at least state their thankfulness. Social media has become the

quickest and most effective tool of intervention during crisis management, which is one of the main functions of public relations. All positive and negative comments about a tourism company over social media must be responded and appreciated. In this way, people will have the impression that companies value them. Tourism companies must design their social media icons in an attractive way and place them into their websites. Tourism companies must also leave a blank space in their forms to let customers write down their social media addresses. This enables companies to maintain their communication during and after their accommodation. Offering special discounts to the followers over social media may increase the number of followers who follow their social media accounts. Also, translation of social media message into several other languages will make it easy to reach target population.

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