

Categorizing the Social Media Content used on Facebook by Tourism Organizations

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Abstract: *This study examines the ability to attract, engage, and retain tourists while fostering brand awareness and word of mouth through different categories of content posted on social media, specifically Facebook. The analysis is based on the assumption that tourism organizations are able to use social media as a dynamic means of interacting with new and existing customers. This study investigates the content marketing strategies applied by these portals through Facebook, one of the most popular social media sites and the largest social content creation platform. It is seen that Facebook offers unique opportunity for tourism businesses to engage customers through effective content, and in this paper we address two related questions. First, what type of content is being used to communicate with potential customers via Facebook? And second, how effective is this means of communication? We address these questions by analyzing 1000 Facebook posts in the Facebook pages of five popular tourism organizations - MakeMyTrip, Yatra.com, HolidayIQ, Travel Triangle, and Trip Hobo. Their popularity was identified by calculating the number of members who have joined their Facebook pages. Through content analysis of these posts, we identify three distinct content strategies: Way of life, Information Provider, and Market Development. By calculating the number of "Shares" each post could garner, the effectiveness of each strategy is measured. The results demonstrate that visual and action-oriented posts exert significant effect on online engagement and action of tourists. The findings of this study also reveal that the "Way of Life" strategy apparently has the biggest impact, generating largest number of "Shares". The main limitation of this study is that only five portals were analysed for a period of one month and as a result it might have missed out on fine strategies used by other portals as well. However, further research done on a greater number of travel portals for a longer time on a different social media platform will overcome this limitation. Repeating the same study in a year's time will most likely yield significantly different results, due to the constantly evolving nature of social media.*

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Facebook, Tourism Portals, Social Media Content

1. Introduction

Social media is widely used by all industries today as a part of their marketing strategies and plans, simply because this channel presents great opportunities and challenges. The marketing promotions through social media are often infused with customer centric messages in the form of direct or indirect selling advertisements. Social media presents a diverse collection of platform and tools to pass on the intended sales message to the target audience. Some platforms that have evaluated with exceptional access to the audience are Pinterest, Facebook, and Twitter. The most effective quality of social media is that it is readily available to anyone with an internet connection. Therefore, as compared to high-end promotional tools like the Television, organizations have now turned to the cheapest and by far the best platform that connects millions within seconds to increase their brand awareness and facilitate direct feedback from their customers. A business that understands the advantage of social media is well aware that social media is essential in developing new business in the current competitive and online driven marketplace. This quality is being widely used by the tourism organizations. One of the most commonly used social media platforms that are used by tourism brands to promote their travel products is Facebook. It is a content creation platform that offers adopting consumers a filter on the daily influx of information and thus offers a unique opportunity for businesses to engage customers into discussions. However, there is very less understanding of how tourism businesses actually use social media content to attract and engage with target audiences. This study proposes to categorize the

content used by the tourism organizations as a part of their marketing strategy. This categorization will help new and upcoming tourism brands to follow a theoretical approach while building their customer base through their Facebook pages. This will also help in investigating the relationships between consumer participation and their commitment to brands.

2. Literature Review

On analysing the marketing practices on different social media platforms it is found that the most common US social media sites have around three billion monthly visitors, as mentioned on eBiz of 2016. Businesses around the world have embraced social media platforms to decrease their marketing costs, segment their market, and increase the brand name. Most of the empirical literature analysed was focused on testing the effect of the campaigns and communication strategies. They arrived at a consensus that effective social media marketing is largely successful only through long term participatory relationship with the customer. Most studies have recommended to focus on relationship-based strategy instead of sales based ones. In short, most of the studies play an important role in improving our understanding of what leads to better social media marketing outcomes. There are studies on marketing efforts on the different social media platforms, on the effects of tool and channel selection on various platforms and on how content choices influence consumer outcomes. In short, there is a solid understanding of what organizations are doing on social media and how channel selection, content choices, and targeting and networking strategies

affect a broad range of consumer outcomes. This paper will however try to understand the theories behind the effects of the social media content used by the tourism organizations. There is no study that explores the relationship between the strategies used by tourism portals and how they effect the marketing context of the portal. This study will address this gap and analyse how the portals are using social media content to connect and engage with the customers.

3. Research Methodology

In this study, we conduct an analysis of 1000 posts sent by 5 tourism organizations during the month of February on the

social media platform, Facebook. February 2017 was selected as it is one of the peak season months when a lot of bookings are made for Easter and Summer Holidays and Weekend Breaks starting mid of March. This helps us to conceptualize what the organizations are posting and what broader strategies these posting behaviors suggest along with the relationship between these strategies and measures of customer engagement. The major tourism portals selected are - MakeMyTrip, Yatra.com, HolidayIQ, Travel Triangle, and Trip Hobo, basis their popularity that was identified by calculating the number of members on their Facebook pages. The below table details the basis statistics of the Facebook page of each portal.

Table 1: Basic Statistics

Travel Portal Name	Facebook Page Link	No. of Likes	Member Since	No. of posts in February 2016	No. of posts in April 2016
MakeMyTrip	https://www.facebook.com/makemytrip/posts	1,905,349	2000	500	750
Holiday IQ	https://www.facebook.com/holidayiq/posts	1,710,827	2004	186	300
Yatra.com	https://www.facebook.com/Yatra/posts	1,541,783	2006	124	150
Travel Triangle	https://www.facebook.com/traveltriangle/posts	350,283	2010	100	140
TripHobo	https://www.facebook.com/TripHobo/posts	306,030	2011	120	188

The analysis is divided into the following levels:

- Inductive message-level analysis of 1000 posts, focusing on the topics, originality, and audience orientation of the content
- Examine each portal’s aggregate collection of posts

4. Study Platform

Facebook allows users to collaboratively create and manage tags, organize content, and share information within their social networks. It is widely used by public and organizations alike to share and promote their ideas, products or services. With a billion-plus membership, Facebook has taken the internet community by storm and today it is practically unimaginable to ignore Facebook’s influence on any business segment. The travel industry is no exception. Today travellers post their observations, interact with fellow travellers, criticize or praise various aspects of travelling through Facebook. Moreover, the introduction of designated Tourism Pages for potential travellers have made a huge difference in terms of reaching the exact target audience. No matter which part of the world you are in, Facebook contains travel related advertisements pertaining to all the destinations and these are spread across travellers located in any part of the world.

Sample: Major Tourism Portals.

The travel portals selected were on the basis of their popularity on social media; the travel portals selected are “MakeMyTrip”, “HolidayIQ”, “Yatra.com”, “Travel Triangle”, and “TripHobo”.

MakeMyTrip proposed travellers to think travel and forget about everything else. MakeMyTrip takes care of everything for travellers including, holiday packages, flights, hotels, rail tickets, bus tickets, rented cars. What keeps MakeMyTrip going was enabling and inspiring travellers to discover new places, helping them plan holidays and encouraging them to share their holiday experiences with the community.

HolidayIQ thrives on traveller opinions and travel insights, which have helped them into evolving into a large traveller community since they started out in 2004. With more than 50,000 listed hotels and 2000 destinations, and loads of hotel and holiday reviews shared by travellers daily, HolidayIQ has all the travel information travellers will ever need. No wonder millions of travellers plan their holiday on our website every month. The member of HolidayIQ is entitled to numerous privileges. Travellers can complain about or praise a hotel through a hotel review, tell what they loved or hated about the recent vacation or just tell the world what an awesome photographer they are by sharing pictures and videos narrating their holiday experience. Starting from Beachbums, Heritage Seekers, Foresters, Flashpackers, and many more, the HolidayIQ Traveller Community is brimming with travellers who hail from all corners of India, armed with strong opinions, and share one common passion – the love for travel.

Launched in August 2006, Yatra.com is today ranked as the leading provider of consumer-direct travel services in India. It has emerged as the most trusted travel brand in India. Yatra.com is a one-stop-shop for all travel-related services, a leading consolidator of travel products providing reservation facility for more than 36,000 hotels in India and over 500,000 hotels around the world. Yatra.com provides information, pricing, availability, and booking facility for domestic and international air travel, hotel bookings, and holiday packages along with bus and railway reservations.

Travel Triangle provides personalized holidays that includes offbeat attractions, local cuisines, local activities, village tours or local shopping.

Trip Hobo is a platform to discover great itinerary created by travellers; it enables you to create a itinerary or edit a plan. Trip Hobo is the world’s largest repository of user generated Trip plans. A Trip Plan (Itinerary) contains details of the trip including attractions to be visited, hotels to stay, things to

do, and places to eat. Also there are no charges for using Trip Hobo.

Data

We found that all tourism organizations maintained an active and publicly available account on Facebook. Based on the maximum number of followers on Facebook, the travel portals, "MakeMyTrip", "HolidayIQ", "Yatra.Com", "TravelTriangle", and "TripHobo" create and maintain an official presence on Facebook and interact with a huge number of consumers through informative articles, travel destination pictures / videos, holiday deals, etc. This data collected during February 2017 includes number of posts sent, account description, number of shares, number of account likes, and number of users followed and following

Plan for Analysis

To document, categorize, and conceptualize the range of marketing strategies followed through social media this study uses a primarily inductive, theory-building approach. The data is analysed inductively to identify communicative actions and marketing strategies that are unique. Such qualitative inductive analyses are ideally suited to identifying categories of marketing practices that are exceptionally used by tourism portals in Facebook.

5. Analysis of the data

First, the Facebook posts are analysed. The aim is to gain an idea of the range and type of messages the tourism organizations are sending in their daily posts. It is already established that the posts are largely focussed at developing a relationship with the customer, the question is, what type of relationship? The analysis is guided by the intended relationship role suggested by the message posted on their Facebook pages. The relationship is used to categorize the social media messages into informational messages, or messages conveying information, reports, and news on the organization or anything of potential relevance to the audience or dialogic and connecting community-building messages, or those that employ dialogue, conversational, and interactivity in the attempt to put the potential traveller into a role as active conversationalist or community-builder. It also categorizes the posts into promotional messages, or those that seek to place the potential traveller in the role of agent who will undertake some specific action for the organization, such as purchasing, viewing, volunteering, or spreading the word.

Second, a set of broad strategies the organizations are using in their posting actions are identified.

Third, the relationship between the strategies identified in the second stage and the indicators of engagement, particularly the number of shares per post are analysed. These relationships will then be used to help develop theoretical insights into the effectiveness of various organizational posts strategies on audience engagement.

Collectively, these three sets of analyses will enable identification of the types of messages the tourism organizations are sending in this social media context, the

broad marketing strategies they are pursuing, and the relative effectiveness of the strategies identified.

Data Analysis

Analysis of Facebook Posts:

In line with the Analysis plan, the starting point for inductive analyses is the intended audience role of the posts. On categorizing the posts, three key dimensions are identified: 1. Intended Audience Role; 2. Content Source; and 3. Aspirational Nature of the Content

1) Intended Audience Role

First, there was no evidence of posts that explicitly sought to put the potential traveller in a conversational role through asking feedback, or a question, or other forms of dialogue or interactivity. Facebook provides the possibility for dialogic engagement; however the organizations chose not to use this. Instead the organizations are using posts that explicitly place the potential travellers in an "action" role. This maybe because being the start of booking for the peak holiday season, the tourism organizations focussed more on gathering purchase rather than engaging the members in a lazy conversation. First the tourism portals uses a product or service and prompt the potential traveller to use it. Secondly, a minority of action posts prompted audiences to partake in activities not related to the organization but rather to a "Way of Life" the business was supporting. Most common were posts asking followers to take an impromptu holiday to an off-beat destination, or a long weekend break to celebrate Women's Day with your mother, etc.

Also a great majority of the posts are informational in nature. These put the audience members in the role of knowledge consumer, or passive recipient of information. The difference between these informational posts and action posts is that the latter explicitly prompt the travellers to buy a service or make an appointment with the travel agent while information posts simply relay the bits of information about some service or destination, or holiday plan. The key conclusion here is the social media content used by our sample organizations seek to place the audience in either an information consumption role or a "doer" role, especially as a consumer of products and services.

2) Content Source

The second dimension, content source, refers to whether the posts come from within or without the organization. Internal posts typically involve either a direct sales message or information that relates to organization activities, highlights from organizational events, and relevant organization-specific news, facts, and reports. External posts share useful information the intended audience from an extended source of tools. These posts include links to YouTube, Flickr photo albums, Blogs, etc.

3) Aspirational nature of Content

This dimension relates to whether the content presents aspirational material to the potential traveller. The tourism portal posts content that present a Way of Life that the intended audience would love to be a part of. Collectively, these dimensions provide insights into the nature of the organizations' posting strategies. It is seen that there is more variety in organizations' informational posts. If the post puts

the potential traveller in an information-recipient role, the post type varies according to content source, directness, and aspirational focus. Some informational posts are what we call “Way of Life” posts; these messages are typically aspirational in nature, and present content related to hotel searching and tour package tips along with various recreational and “Way of Life” recommendations.

6. Effectiveness of Strategies

The final stage of the analysis was to consider the relative effectiveness of the different dimensions. The effectiveness of each dimension was assessed by determining the aggregate number of reposts / shares each strategy generated across organizations. The results showing the number of reposts associated with each strategy are summarized in the below table:

Table 2: Effectiveness of Organizational Strategies as reflected through the number of Shares

Organizational Marketing Strategy			
Total Posts	Way of Life Posts	Information Provider Posts	Market Development Posts
High	3000 Shares		
Medium			500 Shares
Low		11 Shares	

To determine the number of shares associated with each strategy, we first counted the total number of shares each travel portal received in February 2017. The type of posts with the maximum shares was considered as the primary strategy that was adopted by the organization. Thus, each organization was considered to present either a “Way of Life”, “Information Provider”, or “Market Development” post. The total number of shares the organization received for each post was noted. For instance, all shares from the “Way of Life” strategy from all organizations were summed and represented in the above table. Same process was followed for the other two strategies.

The findings suggest that the “Way of Life” posts strategy was associated with the highest number of reposts (3,000 in total). Since the “Way of Life” strategy allows organizations to identify with a particular clientele and provide aspirational templates for prospective clients, the range of material posted is broader than that of the “Market Development” and thus reaches a larger and more diffused audience. The Market Development strategy, in turn, which generated a moderate number of reposts (500), is more directly linked to the organizations’ mission by seeking to create a larger market for tourism products and services. Lastly, and surprisingly, Information Provider posts received a low number of reposts: merely 11. It maybe because considering the peak season intent, most of the audience was intended to first book a product or take a service and then resort to gather additional information about the destination. Provided the same study was conducted during the off season the posts that were important conveyors of tourism information would appear to result in a substantial return on investment in terms of interest of the audience.

7. Discussions

Based on the analysis, three distinct organizational-level posts strategies are identified: Way of Life, Information Provider, and Market Development. In the third and final stage, we develop propositions about the relative effectiveness of these marketing strategies by relating them to the total number of reposts / shares, which serves as the primary measure of campaign effectiveness or the “reach” of a marketing campaign into a target audience. The “Way of Life” strategy had the biggest impact, generating the largest number of reposts, followed by the “Market Development” strategy.

Beyond examining the types of messages organizations were sending, the primary goal was to develop insights at the organizational-level to help understand the types of strategies tourism businesses were pursuing on social media. What all three strategies share in common is a lack of a direct sales or selling strategy. Rather, all adopt a more long-term approach to develop a clientele. The ultimate effectiveness of the strategy will depend in large part on the organizations’ success in reaching a favorable network position.

We found that the “Information Provider” was the least effective in terms of immediate ROI and that the “Way of Life” strategy was most effective. However, although the “Way of Life” strategy generated a far higher return in terms of message distribution, it is possible that the “Market Development” strategy will render stronger financial returns in the long term. Delivering an answer to this question would be an excellent topic for further study.

8. Limitations

While discussing the limitations, this study has focussed on a small sample of tourism organizations that are functioning chiefly in India. Care must be taken while generalizing the same for other entities and in other geographical areas. These limitations notwithstanding we believe this study delivers valuable conceptual and theoretical insights into how marketers are using not only social media platforms but social media tools in general. As the number of social media platforms continue to multiply, the decisions about which strategy to pursue, which messages to send, and which channel to send them on will only become both more frustrating and potentially more rewarding to the budding entrepreneurs. Facebook offers an opportunity for businesses to engage customers suffering from information overload by carving out unique, long-term branding and relationship-building strategies. The potential implications of this for social media marketing scholars will also be substantial.

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