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Chapter 12

Blogs: “Re-inventing” Tourism Communication

Serena Volo

1. Introduction

The experiential nature of tourism, the dramatic evolution of digital technology and travellers’ willingness to share information through this technology have given rise to multiple forms of virtual tourist communities. The rapid growth of the Web 2.0 technologies and applications and their increasing functional sophistication allow for a rich, personalized and participative co-creation of information, easily shared among all actors (and all audiences) in the virtual community (Pudliner 2007; Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier 2009). In this new technological order, the tourist becomes not only the major source of raw experiential data input and the cognitive engine that translates the experiential data into meaning, but also the control centre for its distribution and use: a true egalitarian world of information.

The functionality of Web 2.0 technology has the potential to substantially alter much of the historical role of market behaviourists, market researchers, and advertising professionals by providing alternative means for creating, interpreting and acting on information. Alternatively, this new “travellers’ behaviour” data and information source might supplement the historic tourism marketing function (Mangold and Faulds 2009). Which version of these two realities actually materializes will depend on several factors, including how they are managed and what initiatives the various tourism stakeholders, firms and organizations undertake to adopt and integrate Web 2.0 technologies into their e-marketing practices. Regardless of what materializes, one thing seems certain: the study of travellers’ behaviour and destination marketing practices will forever be changed.

In this chapter the nature, use and role of online travel and tourism information search will be explored and its contribution to e-marketing theories and practices, including its potential to supplant or to supplement the more traditional marketing communication functions, will be evaluated. Then Tourism British Columbia’s use of social media will be analysed for its potential as a destination e-marketing vehicle and predictions made as to the future role of user generated content (UGC) in the marketing communication arena.

2. Communication in the Web 2.0 Era

The power of storytelling and word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has been recognized by marketers who often try to create “buzz” about their brands (Winer 2009; Litvin et al., 2008). Certainly, personalized testimonies are a very powerful means of information and opinion transfer about products and services. The power of word-of-mouth communication is widely recognized in the services and tourism industries, since to cope with the intangibility and the difficulty of pre-consumption evaluation most travellers undertake extensive information searches and look for advice of peers or “like-minded souls” to gain first hand recommendations (Murray 1991; Poon 1993; Fodness and Murray 1997; Sheldon 1997; Crott 1999; Lewis and Chambers 2000; Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier 2002; Chung and Buhalis 2008; Yoo and Gretzel 2011).

In today’s fast-growing cyberspace, interpersonal influence has become incredibly widespread and encompasses advice from circles of friends and relatives as well as strangers. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), also called “word of mouse”, thanks to its timeless and borderless nature has the power to reach and engage wider audiences than traditional word-of-mouth communication. According to Litvin et al. (2008) both marketers and customers engage in eWOM, and the level of interaction and the communication scope defines a typology of eWOM channels. Electronic asynchronous media encompass emails (connecting one customer to another), websites and product reviews (one-to-many communication), and blogs and virtual communities (many-to-many type of communication). Higher levels of interaction characterize synchronous communication varying in scope from instant messaging to chat rooms, to newsgroups.

As Winer (2009) points out, while marketers are still using offline traditional marketing communication, companies’ budgets are shifting towards the new digital media. Drivers of the movement towards new media encompass: the growing availability and usage of Internet, customers resistance to intrusive communication, market fragmentation, companies need to differentiate in highly competitive markets, consumers’ desire for trustworthy communication, customers’ search of interaction and desire for co-creation. Indeed, with the “hypermedia environment” (Hoffman and Novak 1996) there has been a shift from the unidirectional (i.e., producers to audience) “traditional mass communication model” to a “modified mass communication model” in which customers become co-producers of communication and interact with producers, media, and, most importantly, with other customers or potential customers. In the hypermedia environment the Web 2.0 tools have allowed a re-focusing from the marketers to the customers, with customers becoming creators and communicators of content. As Sigala (2009, p. 221) stated “Web 2.0 tools have tremendously changed the way people search, find, read, gather, share, develop, and consume information, as well as on the way people communicate with each other and collaboratively create new knowledge”. In this contemporary marketplace companies have witnessed a change in marketing communication paradigms, with a proliferation of social

media-based conversations where customers are more interested in personalized, interactive, experience-oriented messages. Control over media consumption, ease and convenience of access are recognized as critical factors in the social media's contemporary communication paradigm (Mangold and Faulds 2009; Rashtchy et al., 2007; Vollmer and Precourt 2008). According to Mangold and Faulds (2009), in this new order of communication, managers have lost control over content and frequency of communication as social media has broadened the traditional scope of word-of-mouth. Furthermore, in the borderless social media communication space, the traditionally highly controlled frequency and content of a one-to-many (company-to-customers) communication has mutated into a freely written, always available many-to-many communication where challenges and opportunities for marketing managers are endless. Web 2.0 has contributed to users' communication empowerment and as Sigala (2009) has stated, they are considered a "tool of mass collaboration".

3. Tourism Blogs: Nature, Use and Role in Online Information Search

Definition of blogs

Blogs, short for weblogs, are free, public, web-based entries in reverse chronological order presented in a diary-style format. Rosenbloom (2004, p. 31) defined blogs as a "new form of mainstream personal communication" for information exchange and relationship building. Though definitions vary, this digital form of journaling gathers people's experiences, creating a "word of mouse" (Gelb and Sundaram 2002) characterized by: ease of access, interactivity, written format and anonymity, low set up costs and global coverage (Berthon, Pitt and Watson 1996; Dellarocas 2003). Du and Wagner (2006) identified multiple elements that make blogs valuable to users and associated their popularity with content, technology and social value, and identified – within the social value – blogs' word-of-mouth role.

Given the information-intensive nature of travel and tourism products and their difficulty of being evaluated before consumption (Halloway 2004), and tourists' desire to share their experiences, travel blogs seem to be an appropriate means to foster information exchange in the marketplace. With reference to travel blogs, Leu et al. (2005) pointed out how blogs combine text, images, videos, audios, links and a collection of tools to share authors' commentaries or news while they are travelling. In terms of communication paradigms, Litvin et al. (2008, p. 463) pointed out that blogs are interactive, but "asynchronous, channels that writers and readers access at different times", although synchronous access is a feature of blogs. Furthermore they have pointed out how blogs entail the "many-to-many communications" paradigm (Hoffman and Novak 1996) in which consumers communicate among themselves and also with the producers. Consumer-generated communication shared on the Web 2.0 is rich in "non-commercial, detailed, experiential and up-to-date information" (Yoo and Gretzel 2011) and certainly,

thanks to their narrative, storytelling nature, travel blogs are unique configurations of travel and tourism content ready to be consumed.

Nature of tourism blogs

Initiated as individual online diaries, the following major types of tourism blogs have evolved (Schmallegger and Carson 2008):

- Consumer-to-consumer (C2C): this widely spread form of blogs is used to share tourism experiences and to communicate with family and friends creating electronic word-of-mouth.
- Business-to-business (B2B): these blogs are a “networking opportunity” for tourism businesses (encompassing public and private, profit and nonprofit organizations) where stakeholders can communicate “industry trends, technological developments, research findings or marketing tips”.
- Business-to-consumer (B2C): also called corporate blogs, have the purpose of communicating companies’ offerings and to foster relationships with customers, and their content is created in-house or by professional bloggers.
- Government-to-consumer (G2C): similar to corporate blogs in their content creation process, these blogs are created by destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to communicate with their target markets.

The tourism industry’s readiness for and usage of blogs is under investigation. Recent studies have pointed out how companies and destinations should closely monitor user-generated content, focusing on identifying and satisfying the benefits users seek (e.g., information acquisition, sense of belonging, fun and enjoyment, cost and time saving) responding promptly to users’ needs, providing value and community tiding activities, using content to improve services and products, and enhancing customer relationships (Parra-López et al., 2011; Sigala 2010).

Users of blogs: From lurkers to co-creators

Despite today’s great use and variety of opportunities to get involved with Web 2.0, a number of previous studies confirmed that in Web 2.0 communities “a small core of participants” creates most of the content (Preece, Nonnecke and Andrews 2004; Bishop 2007). The level of involvement or engagement in the usage of blogs, as in other consumer-generated media, depends on the level of interaction the user has with the blog content (Van Dijck 2009; Shao 2009; Yoo and Gretzel 2011). People who limit their usage of Web 2.0 application to browsing, consuming and occasionally asking questions are defined as “lurkers” (Preece, Nonnecke and Andrews 2004). According to Shao (2009), passive use includes: consuming (browsing, watching and reading) and participating (interaction is limited to content such as ranking it or extended to user-to-user communication). Active use encompasses all content producing activities from the text blog entries,

to uploading pictures, videos and adding links. Individual differences in content creation and use have been identified in past studies and socio-demographic characteristics have been found to differentiate people's Web 2.0 use and creation behaviour and choices of type of Web 2.0 applications (Yoo and Gretzel 2011). In their study of personality influence on the creation of travel content in cyberspace, Yoo and Gretzel (2011) found that 83 per cent of their sample of 1682 panelists (travellers and Internet users) had never posted materials online, while half of the sample had somehow used travel-related content. Although, according to the findings, half of the sample used consumer generated media for planning purposes. Yoo and Gretzel confirmed the existence of a gap between use and creation of content, and identified lack of time and interest as the major barriers for content creation.

Tourism blogs' role in online information search

Online opinions have become more utilized in buyers' purchase decisions from entertainment to manufacturing products (Guernsey 2000; Pan, MacLaurin and Crott 2007), and an impact and time-saving effect in the decision-making process has also been acknowledged by readers of online opinions (Bickart and Schindler 2002; Hennig-Thurau and Walsh 2003). Company sponsored blog sites have been successful as they provide a "conversational human voice" (Kelleher and Miller 2006) and bloggers trust of online blogs is more than that of traditional types of media (Johnson and Kayne 2003). Weiss, Lurie and MacInnis (2008) investigated the value of information provided by "strangers" on the web and found out that providers' response speed, depth of responses, experiences and reputation relate differently to the information seeker's goal orientation, whether it is, a decision-making or a learning orientation.

According to past research (Crotts 1999; Price and Starkov 2006; Pudliner 2007; Schmallegger and Carson 2008) blogs are likely to become a preferred travel information source that can considerably change tourism and hospitality companies' communication. Blogs published on virtual travel communities are growing in popularity due to the perceived higher credibility of consumer opinions which are seen as more authoritative word-of-mouth communications compared to traditional tourist information sources (Johnson and Kayne 2003; A.C. Nielson 2007; Chung and Buhalis 2008; Mack, Blöse and Pan 2008; Schmallegger and Carson 2008).

Certainly, blog users find blog posting useful, although tourism scholars concur as to the uncertainty of the exposure to, and the usefulness and impact of eWOM on tourists' decision-making process and their ability to transform consumers' tourism experiences (Pan et al., 2007; Pudliner 2007; Xiang and Gretzel 2010; Volo 2010). Recent research has analysed blog content and blog readers' comments, their frequency, their reactions to positive and negative content and travel bloggers' level of involvement when related to the processing

of advertising messages posted in blogs (Huang et al., 2010; Volo 2010; Zehrer, Crotts and Magnini 2011).

Social, functional, psychological and hedonistic benefits are the motivators for using social media in tourism planning, and a series of social and personal incentives (e.g., altruism, availability of technology, trust) have been identified as stimulators of usage, whereas debate on the costs associated with use is still open (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004; Parra-López et al., 2011; Sigala 2011; Yoo and Gretzel 2011).

4. Social Media: Supplanting or Supplementing Traditional Marketing Communication Functions?

It has been acknowledged that communication conveyed through consumer-to-consumer travel blogs is substantially different from marketing tourism communication manoeuvred by companies and destinations (e.g., Schmallegger and Carson 2008; Volo 2010). The consumer-to-consumer blogs, given the spontaneity of the commentaries and observations, allow for reporting both positive and negative experiences with tourism products and services, whereas marketer driven blog communications are biased towards the positive attributes and features of products and services (Volo 2010). In providing travel information the potential tension between the tourism industry and online consumers has been noticed by Xiang and Gretzel (2010) who have also pointed out that blogs are gaining power in distributing travel information, and they warn tourism marketers that their role could become irrelevant if they do not cope with the new social media strategies.

As past research suggests, there are two objectives that communication tries to achieve (e.g., Carlson and Zmud 1999; Daft and Lengel 1984; Weiss, Lurie and MacInnis 2008) – viz., uncertainty reduction and equivocality reduction. Therefore, consumers who lack information and want to remove ambiguity actively search for information and look for immediate feedback, and in this regard blogs are an endless source of information and communication for consumers and companies alike. The power of solicited and unsolicited organic information agents, that is word-of-mouth and word-of-mouse sources, has been recognized in past research as very powerful (Govers et al., 2007). In their study of tourism destination image formation, the authors found that covert, induced and autonomous agents (e.g., news, documentaries, books) of information were mentioned as the first most relevant source of information in destination image creation, while a travellers' own experiences and the experiences of others were the second most relevant source, and finally, overt induced information, such as tourism promotion, seemed to have very limited influence. These findings agree with past research in that they highlight customers' appreciation for personalized messages (Singh et al., 2008) and in emphasizing the persuasiveness of personal stories and experiences of other tourists (Woodside 2010).

Both blog readers and writers do feel a sense of empowerment in using this type of media, and certainly among the reasons for using social media, functional benefits (e.g., information gathering during trip planning) have been acknowledged as important motives, but virtual communities are also known to satisfy other types of needs that their users try to fulfill: These include social needs (e.g., keep in touch with known users or start new personal relationships), and psychological needs (e.g., feel part of a community of peers, escape everyday life Wang et al., 2002). Recent research has shown the multidimensionality of users' value provided by social media usage, including emotional, aesthetical and non-monetary types of value (Sigala 2010; Yoo and Gretzel 2011).

While there are no clear signs, at least not in current practice, of a full scale displacement of traditional marketing communication tourism companies and destinations must now integrate blogs and other social media into their communication strategy if they want to remain relevant to the emerging tourist mindset. The extent to which companies and destinations use corporate or governmental blogs as legitimate communication vehicles will determine the results and benefits that accrue from them. Considering what research on blog usage suggests, and current practice/use of social media, it is difficult to imagine the more traditional functions of marketing communication competing favourably with the emerging social media. Consequently, it is difficult to imagine traditional marketing functions surviving, and certainly not in their current form. The Web 2.0 platform however, will be subject to ever greater scrutiny, criticism and suspicion as it replaces the more traditional market communication channels and becomes the unchallenged leader in market communications and suffers unavoidable learning curve setbacks. Ironically, this is likely to force the traditional channels to become more customers relevant. And what we are likely to see is the traditional marketing functions supplementing the functions as taken on by the social media. How long traditional marketing functions will remain relevant, even as supplements to the new virtual order, will depend on the rate at which the public adopts the Web 2.0 as their preferred source of information, which by all indications will be sooner than later. The following example of tourism destination usage of social media represents a case of best practice, evidence of a changing communication paradigm and support of the need for more theory development on tourism 2.0.

5. Blogs and the Changing Market Communication Paradigm: The Case of HelloBC.com

Tourism British Columbia social media strategy

Tourism British Columbia (Tourism BC), the British Columbia destination marketing organization, uses the expertise of online marketing specialists and social media strategists to exploit Web 2.0 functionalities with the aim of learning from users' content and engaging them to spread viral marketing about British

Columbia (BC). These measures provide encouragement to all type of users, from pure lurkers to creators. Besides creating awareness of the BC destination in the minds of potential tourists, the social media programs are attempting to involve the local community, stakeholders and the industry in their exploitation of the media. While the full exploitation of these efforts, through the monitoring and measuring of the results are still under investigation, to date the amount of viral marketing generated from the social media programmes and strategies has been enormous. From exclusive contests sponsored by Facebook and Twitter, to photo contests via Flickr and travel games promoted by Life Points to content posted on YouTube, the social media strategists of Tourism British Columbia seem to have learned the art of “reading, responding and engaging” users. Key social media influencers are contacted to learn about them and are often involved in tourism activities designed to encourage them to communicate more about BC and its offerings. Online media strategists gather data through social media to help them understand what it is about the BC destination that makes it resonate with visitors and to help them identify market opportunities and to evaluate the potential of new products.

Tourism British Columbia blog communication

HelloBC.com, the British Columbia official tourism website, in addition to all the typical features of a destination website, has a blog that allows locals and travellers to share their experiences and hold online discussions about attractions and activities in BC. The HelloBC.com blog provides a good example of destination blogs, featuring different posting opportunities and differentiating among consumer-generated content and DMO content. The value of the blog comes from the attentive and updated selection of content made by the HelloBC social media staff and its integration with other social media. The blog contains 1922 posts distinguished in the following subsection: (1) Field Reports, (2) 2010 Olympics, (3) Podcasts, (4) Tips from Travellers, and (5) Tips from Us.

“Field Reporting for Tourism British Columbia”, described as a pilot project meant to increase awareness of British Columbia tourism offerings and experiences, was hosted on YouTube.com and embedded on HelloBC.com. Field reporters were people proficient with the use of video camera and who were passionate about BC. The selected reporters were sent to all BC regions to shoot UGC style videos that were posted on YouTube.com. The program sought to create buzz and was successful since its inception. It drove online traffic to the official tourism destination website and allowed Tourism BC to gather users’ statistics. Field reporters as well as other regional tourism organizations and stakeholders involved in the project were also encouraged to blog in personal blogs or in a HelloBC.com blog or any other blog platform to further enhance the benefit of social media.

The 2010 Winter Olympics was a key event on which BC was able to capitalize using social media, with 72 blogs posted on the “2010 Olympics” blog subsection

between October 2009 and May 2010, of which seven contained a video and 60 contained at least one picture. The strategists of Tourism British Columbia supported and encouraged key influencers to talk about the Olympics making use of several social media and relating them to create benefits across the different media. A Twitter expert engaged followers and proposed general trip ideas and specific event related trips, and kept track of people’s interest using Twitter deck. A Twitter contest was also developed for the occasion of the Pre-Olympics, and for which the prizes for the contest were tickets for the Olympics. While Tourism BC was able to triple its followers on Twitter, the winners were also solicited to blog about the Olympics and invited to be field reporters, thus becoming key influencers.

The 23 “Podcasts” posted are mostly excerpts from a radio segment on “All Points West”, a CBC Victoria show, which confirms the linkages between HelloBC, the local community, stakeholders, and residents. The focus of these podcasts ranged from small, local events to places to visit.

“Tips from Travellers” (1323 blog entries) and “Tips from Us” (356 blog entries) represent the main share of HelloBC blogs. The first tip posted under the category “Tips from Us” dates back to August 2005. The first tip posted under the category, “Tips from travellers” dates back to February 2007, which is quite early in social media communication development if compared to most European DMOs websites. The style of writing of the blogs authored by the HelloBC bloggers is as informal as any traveller blog entry, which shows how HelloBC style is embedded into UGC.

Finally, in the HelloBC blog platform, blogs can be filtered by location, activity and media throughout five years of archived content. Each blog has a rating, allows for comments, has a Google Maps link to show locations, and functionality for sharing with friends through other social media, and content feeds. Integration with External Web Frameworks such as Flickr (pictures) and YouTube (video) allows bloggers to include their own multimedia content and allows for doubling the potential reach of content across social media.

Blog users’ rules: What to communicate and how

A website user can choose to become a registered Tourism BC blog user and propose travel stories for consideration; these stories are subject to a selection process and Tourism BC reserves the right to accept or edit content to protect individual privacy. Instructions to providers of content to the HelloBC blogs include: be experiential, be unbiased (not promotional) in content, add your videos, include fun, and clean (no children pictures, no spam, and no profanity) and locally related content in short entries. It also kindly suggests to anyone who wants to promote products and services to use other appropriate programs, listings, and pages of the website. This important note allows for differentiating traditional promotional activities from user-generated content. Registered users can decide if they want to receive e-updates about British Columbia tourism activities and attractions, and

great visibility is indeed also given to traditional marketing communication tools – e.g. travel information, brochures, etc. – and to special offers. Finally, blog user registration data is protected in accordance with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, and not disclosed outside of Tourism British Columbia and, significantly, bloggers can, at any time, request removal of content.

6. Conclusions and Practical Implications

Reflections on the changing communication paradigm

In this true egalitarian world of information in which consumer-generated, simultaneous and multidirectional communication has supplemented the traditional company-generated one-way communication, companies face the challenge of re-inventing their communication, tailoring it to the new media so as to be relevant in the marketplace while coping with the relative loss of control and risks associated with this democratic and global communication environment. Tourism marketing communication has mutated since the widespread deployment of Web 2.0 tools, and in order to maintain an integrated approach to communication, companies and destinations need to better understand the changing paradigm of communication and evaluate how the lessons learned in the last decade of online communication could be successfully integrated in new models of offline tourism marketing communication. That is, a shift is needed in current thinking and marketers should not apply old rules to the new social media environment but rather learn from it, understand the tourist 2.0 and apply the Web 2.0 communication paradigms to enhance the integrated marketing communication model to deliver their messages in a more interesting, innovative and effective way. In contrast to traditional media where marketers decide and manage media choice, message content, reach and frequency, and can maneuver communication in an integrated way, in social media tourism, marketers must move from the traditional online, or offline, display of their products and services to a new role of mediator and user of consumer-generated content. Certainly, the level of control ascertained by marketer's changes according to the different types of social media under consideration, while the importance of reach and frequency gets outshined by the importance of networking. Still the exploitation of social media, by which destinations and tourism enterprises can facilitate their marketing objectives, cannot be haphazard. There is much in current service marketing theory that can and should guide the development of the market communication functions within the social media context. But there are also many unknowns that must be investigated scientifically and much new theory building needed to make sense of the new communication paradigm and to make it conceptually manageable and therefore useful to tourism practice. Tourism BC usage of social media is a good "best practices" example, but more theory development is needed to define a model that can ensure social media marketing success and integrate related success measurement methods and predictions.

Practical suggestions and implications

Tourism companies’ and destinations’ social media, and blogs in particular, still have great need for improvement, and while the critical recommendation is to use blogs strategically, a number of suggestions can be drawn from past research and practice and from the experience and implications of the Tourism BC case:

- Use the simultaneity and multidirectional nature of blog communication.
- Use blogging throughout the company’s internal and external communication.
- Use different categories of blogs to target appropriate markets on which to build on-going relationships, and provide exclusivity and individual communication when possible.
- Confront the changing communication paradigm: listen to the customers, accept their empowerment, understand their real stories, share the communication authority with them.
- Be credible, provide real information and acknowledge cases of promotion
- Share knowledge and experience with customers: market and competitive intelligence as well as insights on current trends on the marketplace will be gained.
- Humanize your messages, use the power of narratives, engage customers and understand their emotional connections to places, products, services and causes.
- Identify passionate customers who become advocates of your company.
- Encourage repeated visitation of your blog and cross-usage of social media
- Profile social media users to market them accordingly.
- Integrate your other communication tools and other social media into your blog.
- Commit to timely communication through blogs, especially for those potential tourists looking to reduce uncertainty and equivocation.

Thoughtful planning and cooperation among DMOs and tourism suppliers in the destination marketplace could allow for an integrated approach to communicating their offering and their brands to bloggers, and controlling and exploiting user generated content posted in consumer-to-consumer blogs. Furthermore, the “supply mediated blogosphere”, in which DMOs and tourism companies could maintain a certain level of control, should be integrated with the “demand originated blogosphere” in which consumers freely report their tourism experiences through narratives.

Tourism experiences are well-tailored to be told in a narrative form accompanied by pictures and videos that blogs are an almost natural means of communication in today’s technological world. The HelloBC blog shows that social media and blogs in particular, can be used effectively for operational as well as strategic purposes. While the new social media reality may have some of the appearance of the old “laws of the market jungle” it really is a very different “brave new reality” that can

and likely will benefit both consumer and producer. In conclusion, the blogosphere is a completely new game, and all of the challenges that have confronted traditional marketing communication functions will be migrated to the virtual world, though probably in significantly mutated ways: the need for an entirely new set of metrics to track and understand the reach and effect of social marketing communications, the challenge of communication and marketing campaigns' lifespan and reach that with social media are in the hands of customers. Finally, blogs will likely become inextricably linked to, even synonymous with, brands, destinations or products. Consumers, not companies will drive the process, creating a new set of opportunities for marketing communication theory and practice development.

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