Consumer involvement in the creation of E-WOM through social media - Case of the tourism sector

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Abstract—The E-WOM which is becoming increasingly popular has become a powerful tool used by consumers in order to optimize their purchasing decisions and minimize the risk of dissatisfaction. The E-tourist in the tourism sector should no longer be considered as a target but as a partner who contributes to the promotion of a company’s services. He is now an integral part of the digital marketing strategy and becomes a consummator by influencing internet users.

Index Terms—E-WOM, social media, consumer empowerment, connected client.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies that address consumer behavior have focused attention on the concept of traditional word-of-mouth. With the development of web 3.0 and new online communication platforms, we are witnessing more and more a growing interest in electronic word-of-mouth, called the E-WOM.

The Internet has, therefore, created the concept of Consumer Empowerment, where consumers become influencers of opinion by holding the power to encourage potential clients to take action or give up. This construction of a "collective intelligence" on the Internet (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008)[1], based on the opinions of Internet users contributes to the consolidation of the relationship between the company and its customers.

Word of mouth is considered by Day (1971)[2] as interpersonal communication established between a receiver and a transmitter perceived as non-commercial by the first party. Consumers increasingly have access to information about products and services, brands, etc. They are much better informed, therefore, information flows more rapidly and resources are increasingly available (Pavlov, 2003)[3].

According to Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) [4], the credibility and effectiveness of electronic word-of-mouth have a significant impact on consumer behavior and purchasing intentions: information-seeking consumers have great empathy for others consumers who post opinions on the Internet rather than information designed and published by marketers.

E-WOM AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT IN THE TOURISM SECTOR

Henning-Thurau[5] defines E-WOM communication as the positive or negative affirmation on the Internet made by potential or current customers about a product, service or company. The emergence of the commercial Internet during the 1990s has enabled consumers to rely on this technology for their decision-making and to successfully complete the purchase evaluation process.

Arndt (1967)[6], one of the earliest authors who took an interest in the phenomenon, defined word-of-mouth as an oral and informal communication, from one person to another who is unrelated to a commercial source: « an oral, person to person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale ».

E-WOM compared to traditional word-of-mouth reaches a larger target thanks to the spread of messages across the Internet. Its scope includes more individuals and creates virtual relationships between Internet users who are not necessarily linked to a personal relationship.

Online consumer opinions play a key role in the purchasing decision process for tourism services and The Intercontinental Hotel Group (IHG) has experienced this: They have sent a promotion to 150 members of their loyalty club, and by tracing the offer, they found that 1600 people registered to benefit from the promotion. Electronic word of mouth has given power to the web to create viral marketing.

Consumer experiences are mostly characterized by the concept of immersion (Formerino, Helme-Guizon and Gotteland, (2008)[7], which concerns experiential marketing with personal and subjective experiences that change from consumer to consumer depending on the situation.

Singh (1990)[8] argues that there is a dual dynamic of electronic word-of-mouth through social media:

- The intensification of the process of negative word of mouth if the company does not react to the complaints and dissatisfaction of customers: The consumer becomes irritated and therefore intensifies his activities; however, he
catches the attention of other Internet users and gets their support.

- The change of theme in the discussion process since a conversation about a complaint against a service could get as a response the recommendation of a competitor's offer.

The credibility of the personal source is also a factor of consumer influence in the virtual sphere, but Internet users rely primarily on the impersonal content of messages and publications. The reliability of the source thus lies between the exposure of the consumer to the E-WOM and the degree of influence of this same source on him.

THE CONVERSION OF CUSTOMERS INTO E-WOM SENDER

It is often argued that a satisfied customer talks about his or her experience to five people while an unsatisfied one talks to ten. These figures have become obsolete and have multiplied with the continued growth of the Internet which gives customers the power to communicate around the perception of service consumed in a global way.

According to a study conducted by TNS in 2009[9] on Internet usage statistics 30 days before the booking was made, prospective travelers spend four hours online consulting about twenty sites to compare offers, read opinions of Internet users.

The market is continuously progressing towards a market of conversations where social networks become a powerful source of electronic word-of-mouth. Tourism professionals do not always master the codes of operation of social networks and the mismanagement could have a negative impact on the E-reputation of the institution.

Blogs, considered as UGCs (User-generated content), create more and more content and continuous interaction with users. Companies have understood that behind blogs hide an audience to target, but the debate around their credibility is maintained especially with the advent of the phenomenon of monetizing blogs with sponsored articles.

Online review sites are also tools that encourage the development of electronic word-of-mouth since prescribers are no longer the media or guides, but Internet users who have undergone the same experience.

Customers are more likely to share a bad experience than a good one, since an experience that has given satisfaction is a service that has been paid and a result that should be logical. On the other hand, a bad experience is both disappointment and frustration on the part of the client. Electronic word-of-mouth appears as a means of expression to outsource their dissatisfaction.

THE DEGREE OF CONSUMERS’ CONFIDENCE IN RELATION TO THE E-WOM IN THE TOURISM SECTOR

Services as experiential products are characterized by the fact that their evaluation can only be carried out after consumption. This reinforces the need for consumers to consult the opinions of Internet users who have experienced the same experience.

In this context, Senecal and Nantek (2004) [10] argue that the influence of recommendations in servuction is greater compared to other product types.

A study of 28,000 Internet users in 56 countries by the American leader Nielsen in the field of consumer behavior studies in 2013 shows that E-WOM is now a more credible means of collecting information compared to websites and TV spots.

84% of consumers questioned confirmed that they trusted the recommendations of their friends and family rather than other forms of advertising. The study also shows that customers are less and less influenced by advertising spots and any other form of paid advertising: This trust decreased by 20% compared to 2012.

This trend can be explained by the approach that a relative or a surfer in most cases shares his positive opinion about a service without being motivated by remuneration or a sponsor who will reward his efforts.

However, Internet users are now aware of sales incentives and are increasingly wary of the words of commercial and marketing ads. The customer becomes more suspicious and takes time to evaluate the offers and feedback from consumers.

THE MECHANISMS USED TO ENCOURAGE THE CLIENT’S COMMITMENT TO THE E-WOM IN THE TOURISM SECTOR

In a sector like tourism, where the demands of customers are increasing, new concepts have emerged such as wikinomics; economics of collaboration between human groups. This new economy characterized by the transparency of the market is manifested through various social media to create the phenomenon of viral marketing.

Tourism actors have understood that consumers are the best prescribers, but a customer who is satisfied with the service he has had will not necessarily be part of it on the Internet to encourage other Internet users to undergo the same experience. For a consumer to be an ambassador for the brand, he must be encouraged, motivated to talk about it on the Internet and become an E-WOM writer.

This concept was also developed by Tommy K.H. Chan (2014) [11] by studying the antecedents and consequences of online customer commitment within brand communities.

The growing popularity of social platforms like Netlog, MySpace, Facebook... has enabled the strengthening of online communities, therefore, researchers have begun to dig into the role of customer commitment on networking sites.

Sung and Al (2010) [12] conducted field exploration by taking as samples the members of a community belonging to a Korean virtual brand: He identified six predominant social and psychological motivators that impact consumers' decisions to become active participants: interpersonal usefulness, brand, loyalty, entertainment research, information seeking, and research incentive.
Brand communities develop a common awareness and an obligation to society that is supported by consumer’s trust and loyalty.

All of these elements developed by Tommy KH Chan and al led to the development of a conceptual model that lists the characteristics of virtual communities (support of the system, common values in the group, freedom of expression and recognition) impacting the online commitment of consumers, while creating an intention to reproduce the purchase and opening a continuous word-of-mouth cycle.

Encouraging client commitment in servuction or the so-called "The Empowered Involvement" is an approach that encourages clients to express their opinions about a new service, the components of the offer for the sake of improvement. The Internet user, therefore, feels involved in the design of the service offer, which gives rise to a positive psychological effect.

"The Brand Ambassador programs" is also a means used by tourism establishments where it is a question of inviting satisfied customers of the proposed service to become privileged ambassadors of the brand benefiting from promotional offers to be shared with their friends and families. This approach creates buzz marketing on social media and gives the company the image of an institution that rewards the loyalty of its customers and cares about their well being.

One of the widely used mechanisms in the tourism sector is to invite trend makers also called opinion leaders to pre-test the service first and then talk about it on social media and thus implicitly influence other Internet users to live the same experience.

This brings us to an even broader trend called "Tryvertising" (Try, trial, advertising), which offers exclusives to a few customers known for their consumption of the same service so that they can come to test a stay in a hotel or a new dish in a restaurant with a person of their choice. This type of practice is generally followed by social media publications to gain more visibility on the web and attract the attention of Internet users.

These mechanisms used to encourage the customer's commitment to the E-WOM in the tourism sector are real means to optimize the promotion of an establishment via electronic word-of-mouth.

A satisfied, listened and supported customer can naturally become a service advocate on a voluntary basis by helping the sales force improve sales provided that this process is done in an honest and transparent manner without wanting to deceive consumers and without falling into a vision of unfair competition.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this communication was to show that the commitment of customers in the tourism sector through the E-WOM is an approach to be encouraged by companies via several channels including social media. This approach allows institutions to benefit from feedback from consumers online to improve the quality of service and develop the sense of proactivity of customers.

This communication also enabled us to highlight the direct relationship between Ethical Marketing and Digital Marketing, as establishments in the tourism sector increasingly use their values in communicative messages published on social media, thus creating an exchange of positive and negative comments between Internet users that impact the reputation and brand image perceived by the company.

In a context where customer experience has always been paramount to establishing a company's reputation, Web 3.0 offers service companies a window of opportunity to sell and deliver the desired image. This is an opportunity for hotels, restaurant... to maintain direct communication with consumers and to surprise them continually.

Social media in the tourism sector is seen as a channel that generates constantly renewed content, characterized by the sharing and speed of interactivity. With the development of M-Tourism (Sales of mobile tourism products), the distribution of messages and comments has become instantaneous, which facilitates the creation of the viral buzz: For example, a user dissatisfied with the quality of service of a restaurant can leave a negative comment on online review sites like Trip Advisor or Gogobot, which will be quickly relayed by the community on several other groups.

For the tourist establishment to benefit from the positive impact of E-WOM Marketing, institutions have understood that communication must be put in place to target influencers and opinion leaders. The latter will be considered as intermediaries to pass messages on to internet users. This idea joins the theory of two-tier communication "Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz (1955-2008)" which states that the message is first broadcast vertically to the opinion leaders and then horizontally within the membership groups who are under pressure.

The question that arises is to identify influencers who have a real impact on Internet users in order to inform them of new developments, by conducting a face-to-face direct marketing campaign for a personalized sale.

According to Gensollen (2009)[13], connected tourists now have the possibility to compose their stay themselves in view of all the "authentic" features and information published by consumers who have already had the same experience. Advice prior to the act of purchase is increasingly emphasized through the "existing meta-information" which responds
perfectly to the phenomenon of acculturation at the time of purchase of a tourist service.

Service companies in the tourism sector are now aware that it is no longer enough to conquer simple customers, but committed clients able to speak on behalf of the brand and recommend it to their peers. But to get to this point, we first need to inspire trust in consumers and create a healthy and honest Enterprise-Client relationship. This requires respect for the company's ethics, the sharing of common values with citizens and the continuous work to improve the services offered.

Customer commitment is a long-term strategy, which certainly interests companies more and more, but does not necessarily represent their number one objective, especially if they are in a preliminary stage of launching the product. Time will show them their flaws, their weaknesses that should be worked on, always in order to listen to customers' expectations, attract them, attach them to the company and then transform them from satisfied customers to committed clients: There we can say that the commercial and marketing strategy is successful.

REFERENCES


[9] TNS, a firm specialized in ad hoc studies, present in more than 80 countries, study conducted in 2009.


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