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Consumer Generated Content - Trends and Implications for Branding

Many travel and tourism operations have recognized the importance of including consumer generated content on their Web sites but usually do so in the form of edited testimonials. At the same time, travelers are provided with an ever increasing number of opportunities to voice their opinions in raw/unedited and honest form. Blogs, podcasts, wikis and personal Web spaces hosted on social networking sites such as MySpace.com are growing fast in use and popularity among travelers who want to document and/or share travel experiences. Given the growing use of the Internet for travel planning, an ever greater number of travelers will tap into this "collective travel intelligence" available on the Web. This will challenge established travel guide, travel agent, as well as travel supplier Web sites (Rand, 2006).

The statistics speak for themselves: As of January 2006 eMarketer (2006a) reported 26.6 million blogs to exist online, with a new blog being created every second of every day. A 2003 Pew Internet & American Life study (2004) reports that 44% of US Internet users have contributed their thoughts and their files to the online world. Their generation of content available online includes a variety of media (21% have posted photographs to Websites; 17% written material, 5% audio files and 3% video files). Tripadvisor currently features more than 4 million reviews and opinions from travelers and about 200,000 traveler photos covering 19,000 hotels (Trendwatching, 2006). IgoUgo.com reports 350,000 members sharing destination reviews, trip journals, and photos (Outside Magazine, 2006). In addition, a search on Google for "travel" and "podcast" currently results in 30 million entries (Google, 2006). More than 6 million Americans have listened to podcasts and 29 percent of the 22 million Americans who own MP3 players have downloaded podcasts from the Web (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005). eMarketer projects that the US podcast audience will grow to 15 million by 2010 (eMarketer, 2006b).

The question is: Can tourism businesses and destinations successfully brand their products if their efforts can potentially be eroded by a single travel review? One of the challenges lies in search engine optimization. User generated-content is very search-engine friendly. Especially for smaller properties, a consumer is very likely to stumble across reviews before even reaching the branded site. High rankings in search engine results ensure that consumers become exposed to convincing and consistent brand messages before they seek validation in traveler reviews, making them more likely to discredit negative information subsequently found (Shavitt & Brock, 1994). Another issue is establishing trust. Established brand Web sites seem to have an advantage over consumer-generated content when it comes to perceptions of trustworthiness, reliability and accuracy. The latest Internet study conducted by the Center for the Digital Future (2006) indicates that information pages posted by individuals have very low credibility, with only 11.5 percent of users saying that the information on Web sites posted by individuals is reliable and accurate.

Not all tourism businesses shy away from integrating consumer-generated content on their sites. The big online travel agencies solicit traveler reviews and ratings. JetBlue Airways asks consumers to submit stories online at http://www.jetblue.com/experience/ or visit their touring JetBlue Story Booth to make a recording. Tourism destinations seem to be much more reluctant, often because of their quasi-governmental status, and only a few have started to use consumer-generated content to their advantage. Switzerland Tourism, for instance, has recently implemented a user rating system for hotel properties on their MySwitzerland.com Web site. Those who have ventured into the world of consumer-generated media seem to be quite successful. IgoUgo reports increases in conversion by 10 percent for those travel sites that integrate consumer-generated content (Eyefortravel, 2006). Many tourism businesses seem to forget that travelers very often will be looking for other customers' experiences no matter what. Given the ease with which consumers can now generate their personal evaluations in the form of different media, they will find them; if not on the Web site of the specific brand or destination, then somewhere else.

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