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TOURISM WOLLONGONG'S SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

Background

In late 2009 Tourism Wollongong identified a need to better engage with past, present and future visitors to the region. At the time, Tourism Australia and a number of State Tourism Offices had started dabbling in the online space of social media. We began to actively monitor their movements and realised that this was an opportunity to engage with a wider demographic and market and step outside the traditional realms of destination marketing.

In conjunction with this market research, in late 2009 we employed a new staff member to dedicate half their time to develop social media as a new marketing channel. We created a Facebook account first, followed by Twitter, to test the marketplace and how we would fit the mould and develop an audience. As one of the only NSW regions in this space at the time, we were also looking at the opportunity to use this as a new channel for information distribution and gain a competitor advantage.

Case Study #1 – We Love the Gong

In April 2010 we launched 'We Love the Gong', a campaign aimed at the VFR (Visiting Friends and Relatives) market to act as a positive voice for the region and work to bring pride and passion back into a city that had been rocked by ICAC scandals, corruption and was making national headlines for all the wrong reasons.

Social media became the catalyst in the success of this campaign by providing a platform that allowed us to reach a global audience, and on a local level, it offered an easily accessible place for people to share their stories.

Current Strategies and Planning

We have seen the power of social media and conducted a range of market studies and a competitor analysis to better understand where we were positioned in the market against other RTO's (Regional Tourism Offices) and where we could better utilise this platform, it's reach and how to get a competitive edge.

Part of this research has seen us make an active shift from simply gaining followers to really lifting engagement and

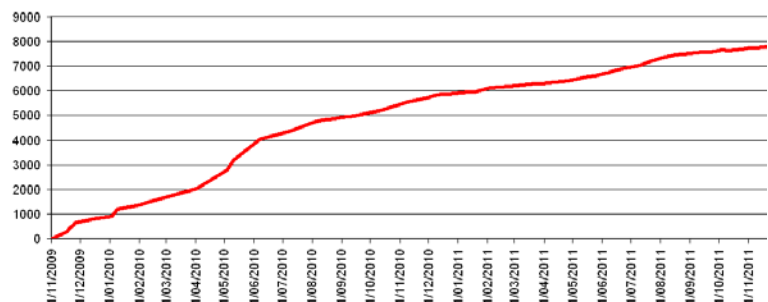
opening the lines of communication for past, current and future tourists to the region.

The 'We love the Gong' campaign

was instrumental in putting the pride back into the city and engaging with people, we are now working to ensure that we can keep this flame burning and maintain the peak interactions as per the figure 2.

We also began working closely with the University of Wollongong with Associate Professor of Marketing, Dr. Ulrike Gretzel presenting a report that outlined the reasons and behaviour of people who interact with destinations (figure 3), travel sites and what their motivation is to do so. We have been able to use this data to monitor our message to ensure we are offering the right content, at the right times for the right people.

Figure 1: Facebook Fans / Likers (Wollongong NSW Australia)



In 2010, Tourism Wollongong approached the NSW Trade and Investment (formerly Industry and Investment) who also acknowledged the importance of social media and assisted us with funding for a series of three social media workshops for our members to

learn about digital media and how it can be applied to their business. These seminars were a huge success and ran again this year with three sold out workshops. This broad approach to marketing Wollongong as a destination rather than a single entity or product has been a very valuable venture and has also allowed us to work closer with our partners.

Despite its obvious advantages, social media marketing has presented many challenges that have ranged from the need to invest in compelling content, resources, handling of negative feedback and costs of ongoing training and keeping up-to-date with the latest trends. To assist, we established an engagement policy and in March 2011, we hired a full time employee to manage all our social media communications and better align our channels to ensure a consistent and effective message was being sent regularly.

Due to our focus on engagement, we have noticed, particularly our Twitter account (@Wollongong_nsw) has become an unofficial voice for the city. We receive daily comments from around the world, but majority of these aren't tourist related. To stem this

Figure 2: Weekly Interactions with Facebook Fans

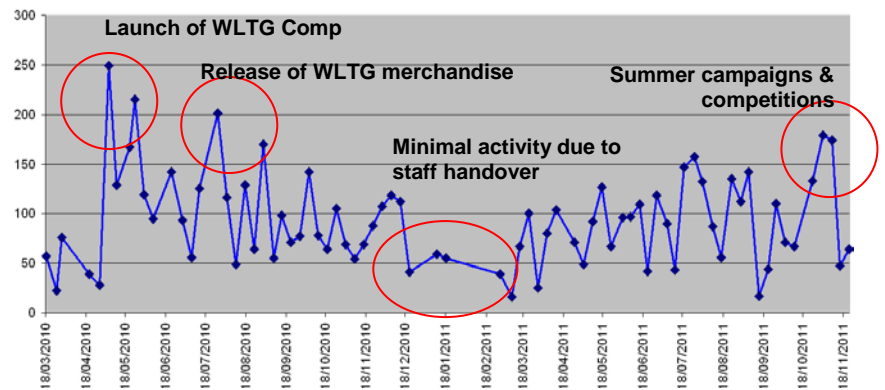
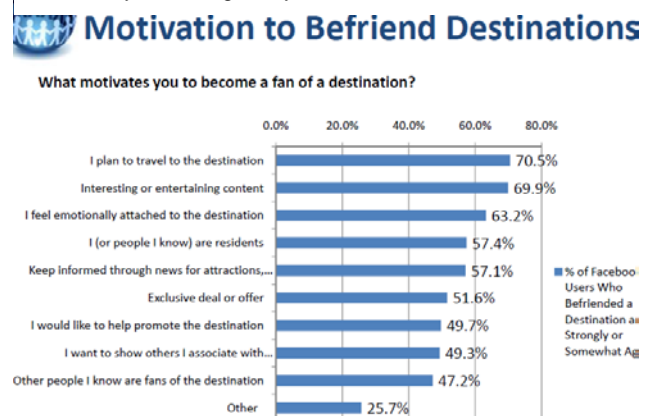


Figure 3: Social Media – The Sequel.
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flow, we do focus to send out tourist or event specific posts daily to ensure we are still providing visitor services in addition to engaging with fans

A conversational calendar has also been established to schedule content and monitor this activity and determine what posts received the most engagement and what our market was receptive to. It became clear early on that on Facebook particularly, photos that show great weather, great shots or simply ‘proud’ Wollongong moments receive more interaction than an offer to win or when directly asked to act upon something (enter, buy...).

We see social media as an opportunity to engage with a larger audience, providing significant economies of scale and the ability to help many at the one time. As a whole, our social media marketing strategy is a multifaceted operation that utilises a variety of channels including a Word Press [blog](#), social media ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Flickr](#), [YouTube](#)).

Case Study #2 – Visitor Information provided via social media

With over 1,900 followers on Twitter (@wollongong_nsw) and 7,800 fans on Facebook (www.facebook.com/WollongongNSWAustralia) we provide daily posts and tweets on the latest happenings, seasonal deals, offers/competitions and upcoming events in the city.

As a business we understand that not everyone is on social media and we have ensured that this method of engagement doesn’t replace any traditional methods, it simply provides another distribution channel to the bricks and mortar of our Visitor Information Centres.

With the growth in mobile devices and smart phones, our twitter followers have also increased as we actively engage with tourists on the road, or en-route to Wollongong. Utilising the Twitter platform, Tweetdeck, we use key terms such as ‘Wollongong’, ‘Grand Pacific Drive’ and the campaign hashtag #welovethegong to proactively seek out people who have asked questions or are planning to travel.

Future plans and activity

In addition to the above channels, last month we signed a Tourism sponsorship with TripAdvisor to closely align the region with the world's most popular travel review website as part of our focus on being 'destination' experts on Wollongong.

Our focus moving forward is to continually engage and monitor opportunities to branch off campaigns such as Tourism Australia's current instagram promotion that is encouraging people to upload their photo's using this application with the hashtag #seeaustralia.

Training continues to be an essential aspect of our business with our staff attending industry events, such as #TourismTweetups to discuss the latest trends in the marketplace and meet the people and reasons behind campaigns such as the Instagram example to inspire new ideas and opportunities that can be executed on a local level.

We continue to work with professionals in their field, including University of Wollongong Associate Professor Ulrike Gretzel who has assisted us in looking at the changing trends of travellers, in particular the Gen Y's who are turning to social media for their information and travel planning.

We also have plans to launch a competition in early 2012 asking people to submit their photos on their travels around the world in their 'We love the Gong' shirts. Already we have been sent images from over 15 different countries so we are hoping to reignite this passion on a global scale.