

# Engaging Festival Audiences through Social Media

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to provide insight into the current state of social media use (and non-use) by festival organizations. Social media use by festivals is described and examined in relation to the festival's customer relationship orientation. In total, 446 festival administrators completed a survey that asked a range of demographic, logistical, social media use, and customer relationship and engagement questions. The results reveal that the number of social media platforms used and timing of social media use are related to customer orientation. Strategies for organizations to enhance their social media presence are discussed.

**Keywords:** events, festival, social media, customer orientation, engagement

## Introduction

Social media has been rapidly adopted across the world with penetration rates varying regionally (We Are Social, 2017). Within less than a decade, millions of consumers joined social media platforms (McIntyre 2014). Today there are 2.8 billion social media users worldwide, with 79% of internet users on Facebook, 32% use Instagram, and 24% use Twitter (We Are Social, 2017).

Social media can help organizations build and maintain relationships with consumers to enable their long-term sustainability (Trainor et al, 2014). Past research has shown that social media platforms facilitate a firm's ability to better address customer needs (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, and Agnihotri, 2014), which can enhance performance. Organizations with a customer orientation tend to build stronger customer relationships (Rapp et al, 2010). Understanding how customer orientation and social media use are related can provide insight into how organizations can meet their consumers' needs through online relationship building. Existing organizational research acknowledges the industry specific nature of social media integration and researchers suggest a need to examine these issues in specific industry settings (Hudson & Hudson, 2013; Trainor et al 2014).

Festivals are temporary ‘themed public celebrations’ (Getz, 2007) and as attraction they are a featured sector of the tourism industry (Nickerson & Kerr, 2014). Festivals, because of their impermanent nature, need to find ways to engage with audiences on an ongoing basis and social media offers this opportunity. The broad purpose of this research is to provide insight into the current state of social media use (and non-use) by festival organizations, and to examine the relationship between social media use and customer orientation (Jayachandran, Sharma, Kaufman, & Raman, 2005; Trainor et al., 2014; Sashi, 2012).

## **Methods**

First, a comprehensive online search was conducted for all festivals within Canada and the United States of America. State and provincial destination marketing association and festival association websites were used to identify festivals. This resulted in a list of all known festivals (N = 2390). The primary contacts for all the festivals were then sent an email invitation to participate in an online survey. The International Festival and Event Association also sent the survey link to their members (n=~166) one month later to ensure a diverse range of festivals were captured.

In total, 446 festival administrators completed the online survey, resulting in a 17.5% response rate. Participants were asked a range of demographic, logistical, and social media use questions. The data was imported into SPSS 22 and then cleaned and coded for missing variables. Descriptive statistics were computed for preliminary analyses.

## **Results**

The participants who completed the survey on behalf of their festival ranged from senior administrators (43%), marketing specialists (15%), producers and event management staff (9%), and other staff/volunteers (12%). The sample included festivals run by non-profit organizations (76%), with the majority hosted at a single site (62%) and attracting a regional audience (48%). On average, festivals were 7.3 days long and had been operating for an average of 25 years. The genre of festivals varied. The most common festival genre was music (28%) and over 1/3 of festivals classified themselves as “other” (36%). In terms of the format of the festivals, the most common types were performance (33%), spectator (27%), or participatory (22 %) festivals.

The primary people responsible for festivals’ social media accounts were most often paid staff (59%), followed by unpaid volunteers (22%). For the festivals with a paid staff member, the individual responsible for managing the social media account was usually someone who did this on top of their other responsibilities (56% of staff). Most festivals used at least one social media platform (99%) and had been using social media for an average of 6 years. Facebook (83%), Instagram (57%), Twitter (66%), and YouTube (42%) were the most commonly used platforms. When asked about the amount of posting, festivals posted most frequently ‘multiple times daily’ the week before the festival (51%)

and the week during the festival (74%). After the festival most organizations reported posting to social media once or more on a weekly basis (58%). The rest of the year the majority of festivals reported only posting monthly or not at all (53%).

Participants were asked about how social media is used to engage attendees (see Table 1). Items were based on the process of consumer engagement outlined by Sashi (2012). Understanding festivals' social media use in relation to their customer orientation may help unveil the role that social media plays within the broader scope of engaging attendees. Customer relationship orientation was examined using the scale developed by Jayachandran et al. (2005). Table 2, shows that festivals feel they have a high customer relationship orientation.

There was a significant positive relationship between the number of social media platforms used and customer orientation ( $r_s(302) = .123, p = .032$ ). There was also a relationship between customer orientation and the amount of posting to social media during certain periods. Specifically, greater posting the week before the festival ( $r_s(302) = -.220, p = .000$ ) and the week after the festival ( $r_s(301) = -.127, p = .028$ ) were associated with a stronger customer orientation. Notably, the amount of posting the week during the festival ( $r_s(299) = -.054, p = .356$ ) and the rest of the year ( $r_s(302) = -.111, p = .053$ ) were not related to customer orientation. Note that a greater amount of posting was coded at 1 where as no posting was coded as 6.

Table 1. Consumer Engagement Through Social Media

Please indicate to what extent you agree to disagree with the following statements by selecting the response that best describes your festival.	N	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>
We use social media to engage festival attendees	354	7	1
We use social media to gain the trust of festival attendees	355	6	1
We use social media to add value to the festival attendees' experience	355	7	1
We use social media to develop an emotional bond with festival attendees	355	7	1
We use social media to encourage festival attendees to use word of mouth to promote the festival organization	355	7	1
We use social media to enhance festival attendee loyalty	354	7	1
We use social media to get festival attendees involved in the festival community	351	7	1

Note: Where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

Table 2. Customer Relationship Orientation

Please indicate to what extent you agree to disagree with the following statements by selecting the response that best describes your festival.	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
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In our organization retaining attendees is considered to be a top priority	358	7	1
Our employees are encouraged to focus on relationships with attendees	315	6	2
Our volunteers are encouraged to focus on relationships with attendees	342	6	2
In our organization relationships with attendees are considered valuable assets	351	7	1
Our senior management emphasizes the importance of attendee relationships	339	6	2

Note: Where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

## Discussion

Results reveal that festivals across Canada and the United States are actively using social media to engage attendees and that the majority of social media engagement occurs the week before and during the festival, with a decrease in engagement after the festival. This research suggests that while festivals value social media engagement both before and during the festival, the post-festival experience is over-looked. Tourism is a multi-phase experience that begins before attendance and continues beyond the initial visit (Clawson & Knetch, 2013). Festivals should consider actively engaging attendees on social media throughout the year in order to use these platforms to enhance attendees' overall relationship with the festival organization.

The greater a festival's customer orientation post more they post leading up to and immediately after the festival but regardless of their orientation festivals struggle to use social media the rest of the year. Results suggest that a key issue may be staffing. During previous stages of this research focus groups and interviews with festival administrators were undertaken and revealed that social media is often taken on without a formal strategy and is simply tacked on to existing activities and responsibilities (Van Winkle & Comer, 2013). The research presented here revealed that social media is usually handled by a paid staff person on top of other responsibilities. This may be taxing given the demands of social media marketing. Given the perceived importance of social media engagement for festivals, it is recommended that festivals employ staff whose expertise include social media engagement. A thoughtful strategy may help ensure staff can successfully manage social media on top of more traditional job responsibilities and social media automation may alleviate the burden associated with the added workload.

## Conclusion

Further analyses of these data will examine theoretical models explaining relationships between social media use and non-use, consumer engagement, and customer orientation to better inform the ways that organizations can use social media to enhance the attendee experience. Additional research is needed to understand the relationships between these variables in other attraction settings and tourism industry sectors, as this research was limited to festival organizations. The findings represent the experience of Canadian and

American festival organizations. Given the different social media penetration rates across the globe, findings cannot be generalized to other geographic contexts. This research will add to the festival and social media literature to better inform the planning and facilitation of social media use for festivals to ensure that the festival experience is enhanced (rather than hindered) by engaging attendees through social media.

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