The Power of User-Generated Content

User-generated content, made possible through Web 2.0 and facilitated through social networking and We(b) logs, blogs (Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, WeChat, and other social media platforms), found its way into the world of tourism and hospitality and is having a profound impact on the entire tourism industry. "User-generated content, because it is genuinely one traveler speaking to another, offers the sense that what you see (or read) is really what you want to get: an experience that is authentic and out of the mainstream (p. 14)."[15] Perhaps the ultimate in user-generated content is Periscope. With Periscope, users activate their smartphone cameras allowing viewers to become virtual tourists.

Social media is not only allowing consumers to research tourism sites and book services, but they can also create content and engage with companies. This new media format, like all technological innovations, has created both opportunities and challenges for tourism service suppliers. Opportunities are presented as awareness and interest can be created by posting positive comments. However, challenges arise when negative comments appear. Because information will be created and disseminated at lightning-fast speeds, organizations must now monitor what is being said and distributed about them.

There is more being written about some locations, hotels, restaurants, and local "hot spots" than could ever be read by one person. In fact, "[d]ue to the high volume of user-generated content typically found on social media and networking sites, it is difficult for each travel supplier to absorb it all."[16] Like any technological advancement, decisions will have to be made on how to monitor and respond to the information that is being created. This monitoring function is especially important, as anything can be posted, true or untrue, requiring the need for rapid response to legitimate customer complaints and to correct false information.

Many tourism suppliers and online travel agencies are actively managing their brand presence on social networking sites, such as Facebook, and microblogs like Twitter. They are connecting with consumers by providing convenience, instant gratification, personal control, and relevancy. Alaska Airlines' Jenna, an online virtual assistant, provides website visitors the opportunity to chat and ask questions. United Airlines' Twares makes special offers only to their followers on Twitter.

There is no question that social media is a growing and important source for online travel information searches. It is also an important tool for travel planning and may well continue to grow into the primary source for travel information as these sites seem to be available everywhere. Research has shown that in search engines, social media websites are one of first few results appearing when searching for travel-related information.[17]

When information is acquired and analyzed from every customer touch point, meaningful relationships can be formed with customers from the information collected.

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It seems like there is an app for almost everything, and there probably is. When it comes to tourism, you can find an app that will help you dream, plan, book, and enjoy every step of your trip. And, while you are doing all of this, marketers are connecting with you to enhance your experiences. If you have not already used some of the following apps, take time to try them out before you take your next trip:

Cedar Point VR	Time Out	GateGuru
Google Maps	Gogobot	TripCase
SkyScanner	Lonely Planet	Field Trip
Maps.Me	Stay.com	Yelp

The list could go on and on, but you get the idea. Get APPING!