

BUSINESS GROWTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA: AN ORGANISATIONAL ISSUE

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Abstract

The landscape of marketing has changed considerably over the last decade, with traditional print and broadcast media being expanded and largely replaced by social media platforms. The increasing development of marketing platforms have a large effect on the success and growth of organisations especially within the tourism and hospitality industry, as more travellers are utilising social media as a means of communication and information. The purpose of this research study was therefore to investigate the current use of social media among star-graded accommodation establishments operating in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. A web-based self-administered questionnaire was distributed to star-graded accommodation establishments, who were registered by the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA). A total of 361 useable responses were received. The findings mainly revealed that social media are used in accommodation establishments but that they are still learning how to fully and successfully implement social media platforms in their area of business.

Keywords: Social Media; Accommodation Establishment; Marketing; Usage; Promotional Mix Elements; South Africa; Star-Graded Accommodation Establishments

This article is based on the MCom thesis “The perception of social media as a promotional mix element in star-graded accommodation establishments in the Western Cape province of South Africa”, completed in 2014 by Ms Claudette van Niekerk (now Mrs Claudette Rabie). Therefore, a high level of similarity will be found between the methodology and results of this article and the Master’s study.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the landscape of marketing has changed considerably, as traditional media such as print and broadcast media has made way for a new wave of media platforms such as social media, blogs, forums and videos. These new media platforms, however, has an effect on an organisations’ marketing performance and the success of their business (Higuera, 2011; Stephen & Galak, 2010). Even though, at first, the vast majority of businesses did not instantly join the social media revolution (Merrill, Latham, Santalesa & Navetta, 2011), businesses are now going the extra mile to gain a competitive and differentiated advantage (Sweeney & Craig, 2010). The Internet, and social media, has resulted in the development of a number of innovative ways to bring businesses and customers together (Hatter, 2015). Organisations are nowadays more focussed on building online relationships and networks with potential customers (Mustonen, 2009).

The advent of social media, and the increase in the use of social media by consumers, has led to profound and innovative methods of doing business in all sectors and industries. Businesses had to rapidly adapt to this new trend in an effort to reach new customers and to reinforce their relationship with current customers (Perdue, 2010). This is no different for the hospitality industry, for which

social media represents a golden opportunity to constantly communicate with their customers and to forge long-term relationships (Withiam, ND). The main aim of this study was to investigate the current use of social media among star-graded accommodation establishments operating in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The study aimed to obtain a better understanding of the use of social media and how to implement it effectively in the hospitality industry.

2. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH STUDY

This article endeavours to essentially fulfil the gaps in the literature, and broaden the knowledge base regarding the use of social media as a marketing tool in star-graded accommodations establishments, specifically operating in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The research study therefore took on a business-centred approach in an attempt to determine the use of social media as a viable promotional mix element in accommodation establishments, an area that has, up until now, received limited attention in academic literature. The main research objective of this study was therefore to investigate the current use of social media among star-graded accommodation establishments operating in the Western Cape province of South Africa.

Star-graded accommodation establishments was surveyed for this study, due to the hospitality or accommodation industry being a very competitive market and a presence on social media and Internet is regarded as being central to the industry and the success of these establishments. The Western Cape Province was specifically chosen for the purpose of this study because this province is a leading tourism destination with a wide variety of attractions for business and leisure travellers (Western Cape Business, 2011). The researchers are of the opinion that the perception and insights of these establishments would provide a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge to similar accommodation establishments.

3. PROMOTION AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Promotion, according to Burrows (2009), is a form of communication, where the organisation or marketer conveys a message by means of a communication channel to the intended target market. It can therefore be said that promotion involves the distribution of information regarding a product or service of an organisation by using a combination of seven promotional elements in an attempt to sell these products or services (Moore & Pareek, 2010; Trehan & Trehan, 2010). These seven elements include, direct marketing, public relations, personal selling, sales promotion, sponsorships and new media. The combination of these seven promotional elements are known as the promotional mix, which attempts to create the most favourable combination of different personal and non-personal selling elements to achieve certain marketing objectives (Kurtz, 2011; Sandhusen, 2008). As this research project emphasis was on social media the focus of this discussion will be on new media, as a component of the promotional mix.

2.2. Conceptualising social media

Billions of people now merge a complex collection of e-mail, mobile short messages (SMSs), blogs, wikis, audio and video streams, forums, virtual reality games and social networking sites to connect them to the world and several other people (Hansen, Shneiderman & Smith, 2010), which has led to a fundamentally different way of doing business.

Social media have been explained by various authors as an Internet-based application (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), allowing user-generated content to be created by individuals and the general public (Daugherty, Eastin & Bright, 2008; Haataja, 2010). It entails the conversation between people; the sharing of opinions, experiences, content, and information for making a better or more informed choice (Jerving, 2009; Madia & Borgese, 2010; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

Social media is one of the fastest growing means of communication and has revolutionised not only how people interact with one another, but also how businesses interact with their consumers. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube have been identified as the most used and most popular social media tools for personal and business use. These social media tools have allowed organisations to

deliver unfiltered messages to their target markets, which stimulate relationships, transparency and autonomy (Jenna Communications, ND). By means of utilising social media, businesses, large or small, can reach more customers and build effective long-term relationships if applied correctly. Assenov and Khurana (2012) suggests that an increase in the use of social media as a marketing channel in organisations, will allow them to communicate more effectively with their customers, advertise and also sell their products and service offerings. Organisations should therefore have a strong social media marketing plan and presence on the web in order to successfully utilise social media tools (WordStream, ND). Amidst others, the hospitality or accommodation industry has also started utilising social media as a tool for advertising and creating brand awareness (Assenov & Khurana, 2012). The fact that the use of social media is increasing at such a rate makes it even more crucial that businesses and, in particular, accommodation establishments use these means.

2.3. The hospitality industry and social media

Marketing in the hospitality industry has always been a fundamental element in driving sales. However, since the advent of digital technology, the hospitality industry had to adapt their approach to reap the benefits digital technology has to offer (Ckettmann, 2012). Social media has rapidly become an fundamental channel of marketing and has a major influence on the general public when communicating brand messages and leveraging promotions to generate revenue (Ckettmann, 2012). There are numerous social media platforms and tools that can be used in the hospitality industry, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, MySpace and YouTube (Assenov & Khurana, 2012; Lim, 2010). Popular customer review websites frequently used in the hospitality industry is TripAdvisor, which allows customers to share and gather travel related information that is autonomously posted by other travellers (Miguéns, Baggio & Costa, 2008). Peer-review websites, such as TripAdvisor, have given rise to conversations and assessments of accommodation establishments; restaurants and other services on a broad scale (Assenov & Khurana, 2012). These websites, which allows for public expression, have left many establishments scrambling to regain control of their products and images (Windels, 2013).

The hospitality and accommodation industry can make use of social media to engage and communicate with customers and potential clients in order to recognise and satisfy their needs and wants. Social media tools allow establishments to interact with customers before, during and after their stay at the establishment (Lim, 2010). Assenov and Khurana (2012:327) state that social media tools can be utilised in accommodation establishments to serve as a 'cost cutter', as social media is a low cost medium used to communicate, more directly and efficiently, with customers and stakeholders. Windels (2013) identified three social media endeavours accommodation establishments should consider implementing in order to utilise social media effectively:

- The hospitality industry and accommodation establishments should take customer service to the next level, by listening to online conversations and being proactive.

- They should offer customers value and engagement so that their business can grow.

- They should also use social media for target marketing and building new business relationships.

Social media offers the hospitality industry an abundance of advantages, such as being affordable, viral and has the potential to spread brand awareness rapidly and broadly, and it is said to be able to create attention and immense amounts of traffic to their website (Lim, 2010).

2.4. Social media usage in the South African hospitality industry

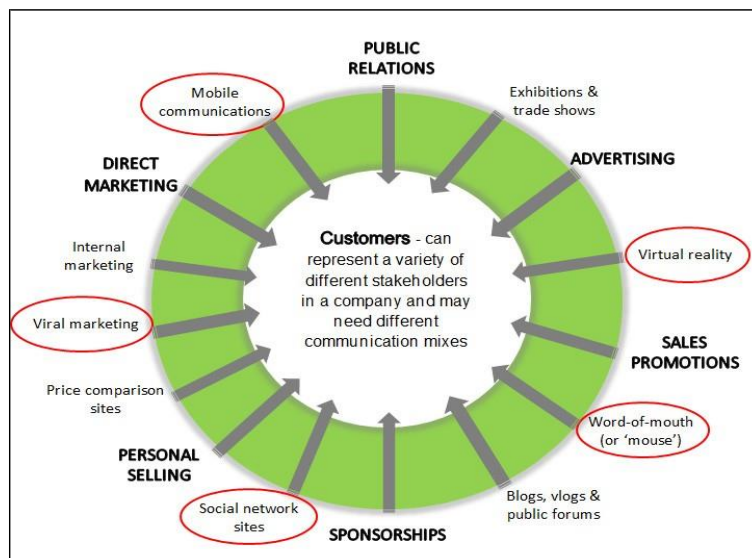
The use of social media has exceeded most expectations and has grown rapidly over the past few years. Empirical literature provides countless justification of the usage and effectiveness of social media by individuals worldwide. Facebook is the most popular choice of individual Internet activity with more than 11.8-million Facebook users in South Africa alone (World Wide Worx, 2015). YouTube has become the second most used social networking platform among South Africans, with an active user base of 7.2-million users (World Wide Worx, 2015). Twitter, on the other hand, who has seen the most growth in the past, has slowed down from a dramatic growth of 129% to a healthily 20% increase in the past year (from 5.5-million users in 2013 to 6.6-million users in 2014) (World Wide Worx, 2015). The intensified use of social media as a corporate platform in South Africa revealed that 95% of major brands in South Africa use Twitter as

a marketing tool, while 93% make use of Facebook. Fifty-one per cent of South Africa's biggest brands indicated that they intend to increase the social media marketing endeavours and budgets, and intend to focus their attention on content marketing (73%) and multimedia content (60%) (World Wide Worx, 2015). These statistics serve as proof that social media has gone mainstream in South Africa, among both individuals and businesses.

2.5. Social media as a hybrid element of the promotional mix

Barnes and Barnes (2009) argue that social media can be considered a hybrid element of the promotional mix seeing that social media allows organisations to communicate with their customers and enables customers to converse with one another. Mangold and Faulds (2009) furthermore argue that social media comprise of characteristics from a variation of certain traditional promotional mix elements, such as advertising, direct marketing and personal selling. Richardson, Gosnay and Carroll (2010), on the other hand, also assert that the promotional mix no longer includes only the traditional six elements of the promotional mix, but that social media, among others, is now regarded as a viable element of the promotional mix. Richardson *et al.* (2010) maintain that the blend of tools used has changed over time from the traditional six promotional mix elements to the inclusion of new media tools, such as mobile marketing, word-of-'mouse' and other social media applications. The expanded communication mix was therefore introduced and is portrayed in figure 1 below (Richardson *et al.*, 2010).

Figure 1: Extended communications mix



Source: Adapted from Richardson *et al.* (2010:57)

Figure 1 shows that at the centre of the extended communication mix is the customer, which can include a variety of different stakeholders in the organisation and might need to use different communication mixes, such as the

marketer or the manager. The traditional promotional mix elements are now merged with new media, such as virtual reality games, word-of-mouse, blogs, vlogs, forums, mobile communications, viral marketing as well as social

networking sites (see Figure 1). These new elements are now being considered as a hybrid element of the promotional mix and should be considered and integrated together with the traditional promotional elements to create a complete marketing message.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this research study, the researcher opted to follow an exploratory research approach. To determine the current use of social media as a promotional mix element in star-graded accommodation establishments, a web-based (Survey Monkey) self-administered questionnaire was distributed to star-graded accommodation establishments, who were registered by the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA). The study focused solely on the Western Cape for the purpose of this study, as this province is a leading tourism destination with a wide variety of attractions for business and leisure travellers (Western Cape Business, 2011). The sampling method utilised for this study was simple random sampling in order for the researcher to substitute the non-responses from the list available. The questionnaire was

administered to star-graded accommodation establishments, operating in the Western Cape, and a total of 361 useable responses were received. Data was analysed using SPSS, version 22.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings and interpretation of the empirical study will be discussed in the next section. A summary of the profile of the respondents who participated in the research study will be provided, followed by the use of social media for business and marketing purposes, as well as the current use of social media amongst star-graded accommodation establishments. This section will conclude with a correlational analysis of the current use of social media as a promotional mix element and respondent's perceived effectiveness of the use of social media.

5.1. Profile of respondents

A summary of the profile of respondents who participated in the survey is given in table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the profile of respondents

Type of accommodation establishment			
Formal service accommodation	10,8%	Camping, caravanning & backpackers	3,1%
Guest accommodation	51,8%	Other	6,6%
Self-catering	27,7%		
Stars graded according to TGCSA			
1-star	1,4%	4-star	44,0%
2-star	5,3%	5-star	8,3%
3-star	40,2%	None	0,8%
Position held in establishment			
Manager	26,5%	Owner	61,3%
Marketing manager	3,9%	Front desk/receptionist	1,8%
Sales representative	1,1%	Other	5,4%
Permanent employees employed at establishment			
Less than 5	61,6%	101-150	0,7%
5-10	24,7%	151-200	1,1%
11-50	10,0%	More than 200	0%
51-100	1,8%		
Travellers primarily targeted			
Leisure	37,3%	Local markets	9,0%
Business	3,6%	International markets	9,0%
Both leisure and business	59,1%	Both local and international	82,1%

Table 1 show that respondents mainly encompassed guest accommodation establishments (51.8%), which consist of B&B establishments, guest houses and country houses. The majority of respondents operated a 3- star (40.2%) or 4-star (44%) establishment, with less than 5 employees (61.6%). Respondents who answered the research survey were mostly the owner (61.3%) or the manager (26.5%) of the establishment. These establishments aimed to target leisure and business travellers (59.1%) as well as local and international travellers (82.1%).

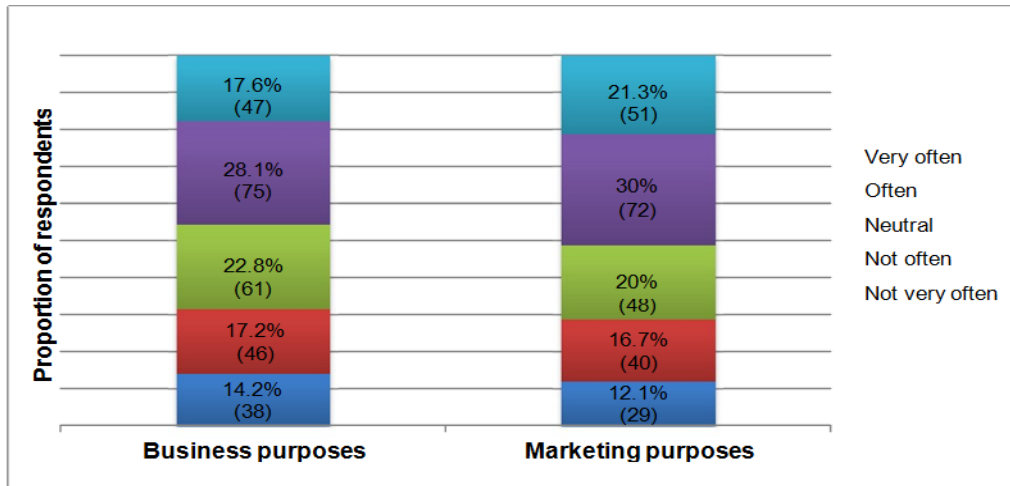
5.2. The use of social media for marketing and business purposes

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they used social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TripAdvisor and Pinterest, as a promotional mix (or marketing) element in their establishment. The majority of the respondents (276 or 77.3%) indicated that they did use social media as

a promotional mix element, while 80 respondents (22.7%) did not. Those respondents (276 or 77.3%) who indicated that they used social media as a promotional mix element were asked to indicate, on average, how often they used social media for business (such as market research and reservations) or, alternatively, marketing purposes (such as to post specials and competitions). The results are shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 indicates that 75 respondents (28.1%) and 72 respondents (30%) used social media often for both business and marketing purposes, respectively. The findings show that respondents used social media for business and marketing purposes in a very similar manner, as the distribution of responses are similar. It can therefore be assumed that, on average, the respondents displayed similar patterns of social media usage for both business as well as marketing purposes.

Figure 1. Use of social media for business and marketing purposes



5.3. Current use of social media

The research study also endeavoured to establish the main reasons as to why star-graded

accommodation establishments currently make use of social media. The results are presented in table 4.

Table 4. Current use of social media in accommodation establishments

<i>Does your establishment currently ...</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
promote the brand, products and/or services via social media?	216 67.5%	104 32.5%	320 100.0%
use social media to monitor customer trends?	108 34.7%	203 65.3%	311 100.0%
research new product ideas via social media?	108 34.8%	202 65.2%	310 100.0%
collect and track customers' reviews on social media?	200 62.7%	119 37.3%	319 100.0%
determine customer loyalty via social media?	112 35.8%	201 64.2%	313 100.0%
engage in marketing activities on social media?	170 55.2%	138 44.8%	308 100.0%
consider social media as an effective promotional element?	225 72.3%	86 27.7%	311 100.0%

Evident from table 4 is that respondents used social media in their establishment mainly to achieve the following:

- Consider social media an effective promotional element (225 or 72.3%);
- Promote their brand, products and/or services via social media (216 or 67.5%);
- Collect and track customers' reviews on social media (200 or 62.7%); and
- Engage in marketing activities on social media (170 or 55.2%).

Respondents, however, did not use social media to monitor customer trends (203 or 65.3%), research new product ideas (202 or 65.2%) or determine customer loyalty via social media applications (201 or 64.2%). From these results, it appears that the respondents currently only used social media for promotional purposes and not to conduct any form of marketing research. Star-graded accommodation establishments should consider utilising social media for research purposes, as it could be beneficial to their growth and success.

5.4. Current use of social media as a promotional mix element vs. perceived effectiveness of the use of social media

Furthermore, the study aimed to determine the relationship between respondent's use of social media as a promotional mix element and their perceived effectiveness of the use thereof. Table 5 shows the correlations between the current use of social media as a promotional mix element and respondents' perceived effectiveness of the use of social media in their establishments.

Table 5 shows that more than half of the respondents who currently used social media in their establishment perceived their establishment's use of social media as 'getting there' (124 or 51.5%). As expected, respondents who did not use social media would not perceive their social media endeavours to be effectual (24 of 34.4%). To investigate the possibility that there may be a statistical relationship between respondents' perceived effectiveness of the use of social media and whether they were implementing social media in their establishment, the data was subjected to a chi-square test of independence. The results of the chi-square test are shown in table 6.

Table 5. Cross-tabulation: Current use of social media as a promotional mix element vs. perceived effectiveness of the use of social media (n=311)

			Do you use social media as a promotional element in your establishment?		Total	
			Yes	No		
Currently our establishment's use of social media is ...	Extremely ineffective	Frequency count	18 _a	24 _b	42	
		Percentage (%)	7.5%	34.3%	13.5%	
	Ineffective	Frequency count	38 _a	31 _b	69	
		Percentage (%)	15.8%	44.3%	22.2%	
	Getting there	Frequency count	124 _a	12 _b	136	
		Percentage (%)	51.5%	17.1%	43.7%	
	Effective	Frequency count	50 _a	2 _b	52	
		Percentage (%)	20.7%	2.9%	16.7%	
	Extremely effective	Frequency count	11 _a	1 _a	12	
		Percentage (%)	4.6%	1.4%	3.9%	
	Total		Frequency count	241	70	311
			Percentage (%)	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Each subscript letter denotes a subset of "Do you use social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TripAdvisor, Pinterest, etc.) as a promotional element (i.e. marketing tool) in your establishment?" categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from one another at the .05 level.

Table 6. Chi-square test: Current use of social media as a promotional mix element vs. perceived effectiveness of the use of social media (n=311)

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi square	75.137 ^a	4	.000
Likelihood ratio	74.369	4	.000
Linear-by-linear association	59.779	1	.000
N of valid cases	311		

a. 1 cell (10.0%) has expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.70.

The chi-square test of independence revealed at the .1% level of significance that there is a significant relationship between the respondents' current use of social media as a promotional mix element and how effectively they perceived they were currently using social media ($\chi^2(4) = 75.137, p < .001$). The proportion of respondents that were using social media (59 or 63.4%) was larger for those who were getting there, effective and extremely effective in their social media activities, than for those who were using social media ineffectively and extremely ineffectively. The converse is true for those who were not using social media. The findings would therefore suggest that star-graded accommodation establishments should familiarise themselves with social media to be more effective in their use and implementation of social media. The more familiar one is with social media, the more effectively one will be able to implement it.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this research study was to determine the current use of social media as a promotional mix element in star-graded accommodation establish, operating in the Western Cape of South Africa. The findings indicated that the majority of respondents were currently using social media for both business (45.7%) and marketing (51.3%) purposes at the time of the study. These respondents started utilising social media approximately one to two years prior to the study, but did not have a permanent employee who was solely responsible for the social media activities of the establishment. The results also suggested that respondents primarily utilised social media to promote the brand, product and/or service (67.5%);

track customer reviews (62.7%); and engage in marketing activities (55.2%).

Accommodation establishments in the Western Cape that were surveyed, however, generally used social media less to monitor customer trends (65.3%), research new product ideas (65.2%), or to determine customer loyalty via social media applications (64.2%). Alternatively, respondents (72.3%) considered social media as an effective promotional mix element. These findings suggest that social media is perceived to be a viable promotional mix element among star-graded accommodation establishments operating in the Western Cape Province of South Africa.

It is recommended that star-graded accommodation establishments consider implementing social media for the purpose of predicting and monitoring customer trends. Ostrowski (2013:1) is of the opinion that social media has frequently been leveraged for the purpose of anticipating trends. Stoutenburgh (2014) further states that social media can be used as an early warning system that assists in enlightening businesses as to what direction they should be venturing into to be successful. Also, by utilising social media for the purpose of monitoring customer trends, businesses have the ability to create proactive communication strategies to provide consumers with solutions across a wide range of issues (Stoutenburgh, 2014). Utilising social media for the purpose of tracking customer trends can therefore be beneficial to a business in understanding customer needs and wants and continuing to be a leading competitor in the market.

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