

Adoption of Social Media Marketing by Tourism Product Suppliers: A Study in Eastern Province of Sri Lanka

S. Sabraz Nawaz

Senior Lecturer in MIT

Department of MIT
Faculty of Management and Commerce

South Eastern University of Sri Lanka
Olvuil Sri Lanka

sabraz@seu.ac.lk

K. Mohamed Mubarak

Senior Lecturer in Management

Department of Management
Faculty of Management and Commerce

South Eastern University of Sri Lanka
Olvuil Sri Lanka

kmmubarak@seu.ac.lk

Abstract

This study aims to examine the social media adoption models used by the tourism product suppliers in Sri Lanka and the challenge confronted and the opportunities available when they adopt social media marketing are also addressed. In this qualitative study, social media experts and managerial people from these firms were interviewed. The findings reveal that two main social media tools namely Facebook and Twitter are used by tourism product suppliers in Sri Lanka and the adoption of such media is still in early stage. Rather than using these tools as a medium of engagement with customers, these firms see them as an advertisement and promotional tool to push their customers. It was identified that based on firms' strategic framework they use SOM and in maturity level perspective they use SMSLC and SMMM as the social media adoption model. The study was limited to only the Eastern province of Sri Lanka and future researches can extend this to the entire country.

Keywords: Social media marketing, social media adoption model, Tourism product suppliers, Eastern province, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Social media marketing offers opportunities for tourism product suppliers, the suppliers of tourism product such as accommodation, recreational activities, transportation, tours, etc. to visitors, who embrace it into their organizations. Marketers can take on with knowledgeable crowd, work with them together, and network with them with a view to do marketing by using the social media, and also the social media marketing provides opportunity for businesses to develop trust among customers (Bonson and Flores, 2011). Because of the seamless platform provided by the social media to maintain good customer relationship management businesses can share knowledge needed by customers about the product and services (Chikandiwa et al., 2013) hence it is very much important for businesses to have strategies developed for the adoption of social media that would assimilate with the marketing communication of the business (Hanna et al., 2011). When it comes to the adoption of social media marketing by tourism product suppliers in the Eastern part of Sri Lanka might face challenges as well as opportunities because of the legal and uncertain nature (Chikandiwa et al., 2013) of social media.

To the best of authors' knowledge, little is available in existing published scholarly works on the adoption of social media marketing in Sri Lankan context in general and Eastern province especially. Therefore, this study attempts to address how social media have been adopted by the tourism product suppliers in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka and lay a foundation for these suppliers so that they can make use of this innovative set of tools.

Literature Review

2.1 Social media marketing

As mentioned previously the social media marketing allows businesses to involve, work together, network and connect with knowledgeable people in order to fulfill marketing purposes. In Sri Lanka there are several studies related to marketing challenges, marketing strategies and types of marketing for different types of industries to develop the market. (Shivany, Velnampy & Kajendra(2014, 2013) Velnampy & Sivesan(2012) Kajanathan & Achchuthan(2013)).

In order to establish and long-retaining relationships customers the social media marketing system mixes the principles of social media with the elements of marketing communication. This section reviews the recent developments in social media in the business context and understanding of the resulting advancements in social media adoption models.

Contributions have been made by researchers in many facets to deliver solid foundations for business entrepreneurs to adopt the social media (Chikandiwa et al., 2013). Businesses materialized the usage of social media tools and techniques with their clear definitions and classification as micro-blogs, blogs, social networks, media-content sharing, social bookmarking as well as voting-sites (Singh et al., 2008) however marketers and experts had uncertainty about the potential opportunities of the media as well as unforeseen challenges accompanying by them. On one hand, by these social media awareness about a brand can be built up, products and services can be made 'visible', knowledge can be shared, reputation can be increased, new customers can be acquired, existing customers can be retained, customer relationship can be improved, promotional costs can be cut down, new products can be developed (Bolotaeva and Cata, 2010) but these media carry challenges such as people can comment negatively and these may affect the image, customers can control the brand of products or services and also contents are in customers' hands, moreover businesses have to encounter legal issues as well as security concerns (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) on the other hand.

Foundation so as how social media tools can strategically be used by businesses was presented by Kietzmann et al. (2011). Social media strategies ascertained by Clemons (2009) were that social networks should not be monetized but businesses should try to look for engaging with the social media tools and with their customers. Rather than using these strategies in a fragmented manner businesses should integrate them with their traditional marketing strategies; however it must be ensured that they do not push towards the customers since these push techniques keep the customers away (Pitt and Berthon, 2011) from the media. By means of working together with customers on the social media networks customer-based product development programmes can also be established Ahlqvist et al. (2008). Even though social media adoption strategies are insufficient Dragger et al. (2010) suggest in their study, when developing a plan to embrace the social media marketing businesses are advised to carry out a situation analysis. Hence this study looks forward filling this gap by means of delineating a social media adoption model which can be used by business organizations that would like to adopt the media.

2.2 Social media adoption models

In the literature little work has been done on the adoption of social media because of the early stage of social media in the business world. Data on the adoption of social media adoption were gathered by reviewing online articles, magazines as well as blogs. Organizations need to formulate strategies to adopt social media and come out with frameworks on so as how to execute those strategies inside the organization, this framework are referred by researcher (e.g. Chikandiwa et al., 2013) as the social media adoption models.

Experts have classified social media adoption models into two broad categories. The first adoption model is based on the organization's strategic framework. In this category there is only one model called Social Organizing Model (SOM) (Owyang, 2010) is practiced. Different strategic framework is shown by the SOM; within each framework social media can be defined differently as "centralized, distributed, coordinated-hub and spoke, multiple hub and spoke or holistic" (Chikandiwa et al., 2013).

When the strategic framework of adoption comes from one department in the higher level of organization it is said to be centralized; when each department in the organization has its own plan on the adoption, it is said to be distributed strategic framework; when the strategy settles between centralized and decentralized, it is said to be coordinated hub and spoke in which tactical framework comes from a single department higher in level but it is decentralized at the adoption where each department has its own framework for adoption. With the same nature of coordinated hub and spoke, if each department's products or unit has different strategic framework stated at department level for the adoption; it is said to be multiple hub and spoke. Within an organization if each department has the liberty to involve in the adoption of social media and then these fragmented attempts are coordinated; it is said to be holistic framework; however it is not like decentralized one.

In the second category of the social media adoption models the categorization is viewed based on the stage of maturity level in which an organization is in the adoption. The five categories of social media adoption models listed by Chikandiwa et al. (2013) are Social Media Strategy Learning Curve (SMSLC), Social Media Adoption Curve (SMAC), Social Engagement Journey (SEJ) and Social Media Maturity Model (SMMM).

2.2.1 Social Media Strategy Learning Curve (SMSLC)

According to the SMSLC (Smiciklas, 2011) there are four phases of the maturity an organization can have in the adoption of social media; they are emerging, tactical, integrated and social. In order to understand the strength,

weakness, opportunities and threats an organization has in the space of social media, a SWOT analysis is done by the organization when it is in the emerging phase. Understanding of social media, the features and tools the media have is needed by an organization in the tactical phase to ensure it has necessary capacity to implement and adopt the same. Since an organization will be in advanced use of social media in the integrated phase there will be a need for supportive leadership strategy to promote the use of the media then the strategic goals of the social media should be associated with the organizational goals and the actually adopted media should be monitored and measured on routinely. The last phase is social in which organizations will be open with flat organizational structure so that employees have freedom to make use of internal as well as external audiences to communicate.

2.2.2 Social Engagement Journey (SEJ)

In order to bring out a comprehensive deployment of a connected social organization the phases that an organization should take, namely traditional, Dabbling in Silos, operationalizing, real results and fully-engaged-organization, are focused by the SEJ model (Carfi, 2012). Each and every department makes communication independently with its market in traditional phase. When it comes to the Dabbling in Silos phase, a particular department or some individuals are entrusted to be actively engaged in the creation of awareness about the social media and thereby establishing valuable associations with the market. The company completely adopts the social media marketing in the operationalizing phase where the policies and strategies are articulated. The Return on Investment (ROI) is realized in the results phase; the organization is completely and openly involved with its customers in this phase.

2.2.3 Social Media Adoption Curve (SMAC)

“Learning, observation, broadcast, participation, relationships and collaboration” Chikandiwa et al. (2013) are the six sequential stages contained in the SMAC model (MiXTMedia, 2008). Organizations learn about the social media and what can be done to the organization by the media in the learning phase. Without getting involved in the social media arena, in the observation phase organizations look at the movements in the social media. Organizations engage in the social media in the broadcasting stage in which by broadcasting to the audience only one way communication is focused. Two-way communication takes place with the audience in the participation stage in which organizations understand that the social media is a tool which can be used beyond merely broadcasting. The initial two-way communication with the customers and the audience in the media evolved to become a long-lasting bond in the relationship stage. In the collaborative stage of this model benefits are enjoyed by both the organizations and the audiences by means of the collaboration they have on the social media, both parties actively contribute in creating values.

2.2.4 Social Media Maturity Model (SMMM)

The last adoption model we discuss is the SMMM (Luxembourg, 2011) which consists of four phases namely “ad-hoc, experimental, functional, and transformation”. In the ad-hoc stage, as the name implies, social media are attempted individually by the employees of organizations without any structure. Organizations accept the social media and start looking inside in the experimental stage where test implementations are done to estimate the experience from the media. After the experimental stage, in the functional phase where the policies and practices of the use of the media are defined, the organizations adopt in their business processes the social media to assist the organization. The horizon between the organization and the audience disappears and an open network for collaboration emanates in the transformation stage.

2.3 Opportunities

Companies benefit from the adoption of social media (Chikandiwa et al., 2013). Customers are enabled to make informed decisions about the purchases before they purchase goods or services as well as during the purchase time (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Companies that adopt social media marketing acquire marketing intelligence because of the discussions taken place on such media. Brand awareness is improved, customers’ behaviour on purchasing is impacted, communication and evaluation before and after the sales are aided and customers or audiences are also increased because of the social media adoption by companies (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Ahlqvist et al., 2008). New product development programmes are assisted, lifetime value can be maintained and customer relationship marketing is improved by the enhanced engagement with customers but to be successful, creativity, methodical processes and constantly improved tactics are also needed from the companies’ ends (Chikandiwa et al., 2013). Since they are free and easily accessible, social media tools, as a business model, offer much opportunities for tourism industry.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was used since this study is of exploratory in nature (Sekaran, 2006). In order to have cross-sectional perspective of the adoption of social media marketing by tourism product suppliers, the population of the study was such products suppliers in the Eastern province, which include three districts namely Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee, of Sri Lanka. Comprehensive review of published literature and observations were done. Due to the scarce availability of social media experts discussions with only four experts were possible. These experts had ample experience in both tourism sector and marketing communication. These experts were identified from local newspaper articles and referrals so that the study was able to use knowledgeable experts. Although seven experts were identified, only four of them entertained the requests from the researchers. Each discussion with the expert lasted up to one to one and half hours and these discussions were recorded with their consents. Direct and phone interviews were also conducted. Interviewees were the managers, owners or people who had decision making power to adopt social media marketing. Tourism product suppliers, informants and interviewees were selected with convenience (Sekaran, 2006).

Three months' long, August 2014 to October 2014, observation was done on the social media profiles and activities on Facebook, YouTube and Blogs of 48 tourism product suppliers who had been selected conveniently (Sekaran, 2006) in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka. The investigation of the observation included analysis of conversation or exchanges and what was discussed between the firms and their customers, what were updated in their social media tools, how often they update i.e. how active they were on the media and how these firms interacted or responded to the customers and audiences.

Although 48 firms' social media profiles were analyzed only 32 interviewees, who were in capacities or managers or owners or decision makers, were contacted since they only expressed willingness and the structured interview lasted between 30 to 40 minutes and during this three-months lasted interview the researchers were able to gather first-hand data about on the social media marketing adoption from tourism product suppliers' perspective.

Findings

Findings of this study is presented by the tools used followed by the adoption models utilized by the tourism product suppliers in the Eastern belt of Sri Lanka also the opportunities and challenges posed by the social media marketing are also discussed.

4.1 Demographic data

As noted previously, out of the 48 firms only 32 were contacted since others refused to get involved in the interview and also were not in a position to explain and share their approach of social media marketing with outsiders as they claim to be in the infant stage of such effort. The findings reveal that 69% of the suppliers have been using the media for one to five years, 28% of the firms have been using the media marketing for six to ten years and only 3% i.e. only one firm has been using the social media marketing for more than ten years; this information provides more understandable details about the adoption and usage of the media, Table 1.

Table 4: Social Media Usage by Tourism Product Suppliers

Period	No. Firms	Percentage
01 - 05	22	69%
06 - 10	9	28%
11 and above	1	3%
Total	32	100%

It was revealed in the findings that the selection of which social media tool to use was very much influenced by the type of customers and the location of such customers these suppliers were targeting. Blogs are used when the firms target corporate customers. According to the experts and the discussions with the interviewees, Facebook and Twitter are most used; especially the Facebook is most used by these tourism product suppliers when compared with Twitter, YouTube also noted by some respondents. As it costs much effort and time to manage and administer blogs many of the firms are reluctant to use it also they did not fail to list LinkedIn in this category hence they are less used, this is supported by the finding where only one firm which uses the social media for more than ten year only has its contents on the blog and further supported by the opinions of the social media experts that the social media marketing strategy is still in its infancy in Sri Lanka.

According to the experts and other interviewees Facebook and Twitter were the more effective, successful and catching ones than other tools. They emphasized that more than being mere advertising or marketing instruments these social media tools are immensely supportive for building and sustaining customer relationship, also they did not fail to mention the importance of the utilization of YouTube for purposes such as making awareness about the brands, rich-media based advertisements and so on. Experts have opinion that these social media marketing tools are seen by many firms in Sri Lanka as a platform for collecting feedback from customers, making mass communication, promoting sales, advertising and making brand awareness and promoting the reputation however these firms engages less with customers, have less involvement with communities or relationship building or knowledge sharing; this is supported by the finding that indicates 83 percent of the interviewees acknowledged that they use the social media tools for advertising, managing the product brands and promoting sales and a little of them mentioned the knowledge sharing or building relationships. Experts felt that many firms in the country have the misconception that having more fans on their Facebook profile pages is reflection of their tactic of social media strategy.

Experts expressed different views on how firms could effectively use the media. They viewed that the media should be of distributed nature and used by people like sales personnel and managers thereby making the social media system depersonalized; they said “the media should talk about the people and not about the firms”. Another expert made opinion “rather being a pushing tool, the social media should be pulling the customers towards the organizations”. The other expert mentioned that “the firms in the country fail to pay attention to their customers on the social media profiles and they continue to bombard the customers with only with their promotional material and advertisements”. The ‘commonsense’ that the media should be about the customers and not about the tourism product suppliers was generally agreed upon by all these experts they were of the same view that the firms should avoid mimicking themselves on the media (Chikandiwa et al., 2013; Parent et al., 2011). It was noticeable that the firms studied have adopted the social media to a considerable extend however they still use the traditional method of advertisements and sales promotions; the reason for this nature was attributed by the managerial staff of these firms was that they have both local as well as foreign customers and local customers were easily reachable by the traditional method; this was also supported by the experts’ views that the Sri Lankan customers still in the early stage of taking to social media. Almost all of the interviewees of the same view that the strategy of using social media marketing should be integrated with the conventional marketing strategy for a certain period time in future as well since the level of adoption and acceptance of social media within the tourism product suppliers is still low having about 36% showing positive acknowledgement of the social media within these firms.

4.2 Social media adoption models

The findings indicated that, except two firms that did not have any formalized method for the adoption of the media, tourism product suppliers knowingly or unknowingly embraced the social media adoption models that take into account the phases of maturity in social media adoption and the organizational strategic frameworks as well. Knowledge workers in these firms acknowledged the vital role played by the strategy of having all patrons in the organizations involved in the process implicitly implying the adoption model was Centralized Social Organization Model out of the SOM category (Owyang, 2010) which was evidenced by the fact that these firms had teams of employees who were dedicated to take care of the media issues and these teams were the controlling centres. The fact that these firms consider their level of maturity was confirmed from the interview that managers were commonly agreed upon the idea of conducting an environment analysis using SWOT before they go for social media adoption and had concerns if they could sustain the media strategy.

4.3 Challenges

Brand images of firms would face big challenge if an organization does not have any specific strategy or policies on its social media marketing; both the experts and other respondents were on agreement on this point. Further they were of the view that the tourism product suppliers might implicitly lose the control of their brand images to the hands of customers; this was witnessed by a respond from a senior manager of a firm who said “we are thinking of discontinuing our presence on social media due to the pressure we have been in so far from the customer on our profile” and another manager was of concern that the comments posted by the customers on the company’s profile almost damaged the company’s name, hence making it clear that these tourism product suppliers fear about the status of their brands.

A social media expert worried “the absence of functional blogs and the reason why many companies are misled is because there are inexperienced people who claim to be social media experts; this is one of the challenges!” he said. More than 88 percent of the respondents were of the same view about the scarcity of experience social media experts and the immature stage of social media industry in Sri Lanka; this indicates the inadequacy of human resource in social media technology in the country.

Experts were of the view that “management of companies treat social media as a mass communication tool and they try to pump advertisements to their customers in their profile but these customers do not like to be bombarded with such adverts and rather want to be listened to and engaged with therefore this will end up with customers resisting to these sites.” and also they expressed their understanding that because most of the top management in companies have traditional marketing mentality they pose resistance to adopt social media marketing strategy. On the other hand, management of the firms interviewed are of the feeling that they could not find any mechanism to measure the positive outcomes of their efforts for rolling out in the arena of social media marketing.

The study found challenges faced by the social media industry by delineating the views from experts and management; however it wanted to find the solutions for the above as well. All managers and experts insisted on the need of training the staff of how to manage comments that are to create negative impact and what to on the profile. Most of the respondents agreed that top management or the decision making authorities in these firms should be educated about the social media marketing so that their level of acceptance of this hot strategy would increase. More than half, 54 percent, of the respondents noted that researches should be carried out and such knowledge be disseminated to make all stakeholder aware about the adoption of social media. Also they emphasized about having organization policies covering employees and customers with regard to the social media. Majority of the managers were of the view that the employees in charge of customer care should ensure that customers were properly treated and their queries were satisfactorily attended; in case of failure to do so it would reflect on the social media profile of the firm. Also, the experts pointed out that firms should try to devise measurement tool to see evaluate the tangible return on these firms’ efforts on the social media.

4.4 Opportunities

An expert explained a case where a company managed to regain its publicity and trust using Facebook. Because of its nature the social media carry opportunities for organizations to get connected with their customers and wipe out any negative publicity and also the media help firms bring the reputation and brand image to peak when managed properly. It was agreed by 78 percent of the respondents that the media assisted them in developing and promoting and developing their new tourism products and services. One manager said that “as we are able to publish videos on these media, it has been very easy for us to publish videos of natural scenic beauty of this coastal belt of the country and beacon potential customers”. It can be said considering the profiles of these tourism product suppliers and the conversation taking place on that forum, the media help them bring improvement in their products and services as well as come out with such products or services that are made to serve and satisfy the requirements of customers resulting in customer loyalty. Based on the above it is very much agreeable that social media can be an effective tool in delivering custom-tailored products and services, being transparent in the industry, building up brand image, keeping them present on the Internet and gaining competitive advantage as well.

Discussion

It is obvious that the social media and the media’s application in marketing and adoption of it for engaging with customers is still early, immature and infancy stage with many industries doing acid tests in Sri Lanka the researchers find it difficult to solidly conclude on the argument of social media adoption models used in Sri Lanka. According to an expert, the tourism product suppliers were knowingly or unknowingly experimenting the social media marketing in Sri Lanka hence the maturity level of tourism product suppliers is a hybrid of the test phase and ad-hoc phase of the SMMM (Luxembourg, 2011), and also some hints of experimental implementation of SMSLC (Smiciklas, 2011) can also be seen. Finding revealed that teams of employees were taking care of the media and the social media marketing was centralized in such teams in these firms, which indicates that SOM (Owyang, 2010) is practice by the tourism product suppliers in Sri Lanka. The firms can make use of these social media to develop new product and services. These media are seen by most as a new method to get involved with customers. As was found, many top management people did not see the media as marketing tool; they were still stuck in traditional belief and also customers recognize the media very low (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). The management people are uncertain about the benefit of adopting social media therefore firms should formulate strategies and tools amalgamate the media with their promotional mix (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) and to weigh the pros and cons such adoption (Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). It can be realized that the tourism product suppliers in Sri Lanka have not reaped fully the benefits from the adoption of social media marketing and still have a long way to travel, milk such maximized benefits and prosper and compete in the industry in the country and the world.

Conclusion

This study has found that the social media marketing has generally been adopted by tourism product supplier in Sri Lanka especially the Eastern province of the country and this adoption has been instrumental in retaining their customers and reconnecting the discontinued ones and the authors recommend these suppliers should merge the social media and their conventional marketing strategies together since the social media is still in its infancy in the country but foreign tourists are much higher in using the social media, in the case of local customers these firms can bring the customers into the arena of social media and should engage with their customers. The social media adoption models discussed in this study are in their early stage and future researches should focus on developing more on these adoption and study implementation models as well because implementation and adoption of social media marketing is felt to be playing a major role in determining the success of the hospitality management sector in future.

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