

Social Media Critical for Overseas DMOs in China

Overseas destination marketing organisations (DMOs) wanting to improve their marketing strategies in China should consider expanding their social media presence, according to SHTM Assistant Professor Dan Wang and a co-author. In a recently published study, the researchers highlight the variability in overseas DMOs' use of social media for marketing in what they describe as "China's unique social media landscape". The DMOs need to better understand that landscape, they argue, to gain access to its large audiences and the opportunity to build relationships with very many potential consumers.

DMOs and Social Media in China

DMOs are non-profit organisations designed to generate tourism for specific areas, develop destination images and provide information for visitors, the researchers explain. Yet in recent years DMOs have been criticised for failing to keep up with new technology as they pursue their objectives. Many have not developed effective marketing strategies on social media such as Facebook and TripAdvisor. Social media channels such as these, which make use of user-generated content, constitute a "substantial part of the online tourism domain" according to the researchers, and younger tourists in particular tend to "trust and rely on them" for making travel-related decisions.

Social media marketing differs considerably from that on more traditional channels such as TV and websites. The researchers give the

example of deciding which social media channels to use to achieve specific marketing goals. Such issues can be particularly difficult for DMOs involved in international marketing because the social media channels in other countries may differ, and there may be cultural differences in the ways that people use them.

The researchers note that in China, the social media landscape differs from those in Western countries as otherwise popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr are blocked. Consequently, the most popular Chinese social media sites, such as Renren, Sina Weibo and Tencent, "have captured 91% of China's Internet users". Given this situation, and that China has become "one of the most important tourist origin markets for DMOs", the researchers were interested in how DMOs use social marketing strategies in China.

Investigating Overseas DMOs

The researchers selected 10 DMOs based on the number of Chinese visitors the associated destinations received. Eight were national marketing organisations, including the Japan National Tourism Organisation in Shanghai, Korea Tourism Organisation, Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy of Indonesia, Singapore Tourism Board, Taiwan Tourism Bureau, Tourism Authority of Thailand and US Tourism Board. The remaining two – the Hong Kong Tourism Board and Macau Government Tourism Office – represented cities.

Posts and comments were collected from the official sites of the DMOs between 1 July and 31 August, a time of year when such organisations are "most aggressively promoting their destination as a summer vacation spot". The researchers then analysed the content of the posts according to their frequency, the amount of interaction with users and the type of content, such as whether it was professionally generated and whether it contained photos, text, videos or game-related messages.

Social Media Channel Used

The DMOs used three types of social media for destination marketing in China: micro-blogs such as Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo, social networking sites such as Renren and Douban and mobile social applications such as WeChat. Micro-blogs were the "preferred social media marketing vehicle" for most of the DMOs according to the researchers, with Sina Weibo the most popular. The decreasing popularity of social networking sites in China was reflected in the low number of posts on them. In fact, only the US and Hong Kong DMOs were active on Renren and Douban.

The most active DMOs were those from Hong Kong and Singapore, both of which used several social media outlets and posted on each at least once a week. The Korean DMO adopted a different strategy of focusing on just one micro-blog, Sina Weibo, where it was the most active DMO with "770 posts and

an average of 12 posts per day". The Macau, Thai, US, Japanese and Malaysian DMOs used the most popular outlets, such as Sina Weibo and WeChat, but were less active on them. The researchers suggest that although these DMOs were "aware of social media as a marketing platform", they did not use them for communication and marketing. Nevertheless, they were at least more active than the Taiwanese and Indonesian DMOs, which had no presence on any social media channels.

Content of Posts

Most of the posts contained professionally generated content intended to promote the destination and provide tourist information. Game-related content was the next most popular category, particularly on Sina Weibo, where the Singapore Tourism Board posted 64 game-related notifications and its Hong Kong counterpart posted 39. User-generated content was also popular with many of the DMOs, with the Singapore Tourism Board again the most active in this area with 59 user-generated messages.

The posts contained a mixture of text, text with photos, and text with videos, yet the researchers note that "photos are highly preferred to videos by all DMOs" even though videos are "arguably richer and more persuasive than photos". Very few posts contained only text, whereas almost all contained photos".

Interactions with Users

The Hong Kong Tourism Board had the highest number of followers on the micro-blog channel Sina Weibo at more than a million, with

the second-highest, the Singapore Tourism Board, some way behind with just over 400,000, followed by the Korea Tourism Organisation with 200,000. However, on the social networking sites the Singapore Tourism Board had the highest number of followers, followed by its Hong Kong counterpart.

Perhaps more important than the number of followers is how active those followers were. On Sina Weibo, for instance, although US Tourism Board had fewer than 50,000 followers, it had the highest number of reposts – over 40,000. The researchers also considered the number of posts with comments, or posts that stimulated discussion. The Hong Kong Tourism Board was ahead in this area, with 251 of its posts on Sina Weibo and 166 on Tencent Weibo receiving comments. The Japanese DMO also attracted a lot of discussion, with comments left on almost all of its 300-plus posts on the two micro-blog channels. There was very little activity on the social networking sites, with only the Singapore Tourism Board attracting a handful of comments on Renren.

Overall, the Hong Kong, Singaporean and Korean DMOs outperformed their counterparts in terms of the number of followers and message reposts, and the frequency of their interactions with followers. The researchers describe the Korea Tourism Organisation, in particular, as an "outstanding example of social media marketing in China". Despite limiting its activity to Sina Weibo, it had many followers and interacted frequently with them, offering many casual greetings and jokes.

Room for Improvement

Having considered the implications of their findings, the researchers comment that there is "ample room" for DMOs to improve their social media marketing strategies in China, especially in terms of emulating the Korean strategy. It will never be enough, the researchers write, to just to open a social media account without keeping it "active and live with interesting content, instant response and feedback, and an innovative style of communication". Success in this arena will require particularly sustained effort.

POINTS TO NOTE

- The social media landscape in China differs from that in the West.
- Micro-blogs are the most popular sites for DMOs and generate the most user activity.
- Professional posts with photos and text are the most popular type of content.
- Overseas DMOs need to improve their social media marketing strategies in China.

Yang, Xin and Wang, Dan. (2015). "The Exploration of Social Media Marketing Strategies of Destination Marketing Organisations in China". *Journal of China Tourism Research*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 166-185.