How well do travel & leisure brands use social media?

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Date : June 14, 2016

Why and how do users of travel and leisure (T&L) products interact on **social** media? Are particular T&L businesses better at converting **social** media interactions into **brand** use? And what factors turn a **social** media interaction into usage of the **brand**?

A new report (BDRC Continental's **Social** Media Impact 'Freemium Report') looks at a range of T&L businesses: airlines, hotels, railway companies, coffee shops, online travel agents, car rental companies, airports and visitors attractions, to answer some of these questions. Some 40 **brands** fall under its scrutiny and come from many points on the T&L spectrum and include Alton Towers, Booking.com, British Airways, Caffè Nero, Heathrow Airport, Hotels.com, Starbucks, Travelodge and Virgin Trains.

BDRC Continental conducted initial interviews in Spring 2015 to produce a nationally representative sample of 1,007 people who had all used **social** media to interact with a T&L organisation in the previous six months. This means the survey was conducted among active **social** media users in the context of travel and leisure **brands**. An interaction was defined as: "any contact including a follow, a like, a share, a retweet, a check-in, asking a question, expressing an opinion, viewing pictures or reading posts".

Motivations and needs

The **Social** Media Impact report found 46% of Britons had interacted with a T&L **brand** on **social** media within the six-month timeframe. There were four motivations for doing this. First, was the aim of learning about a **brand** and its products (the Learners) and this accounted for 41% of those surveyed. Then came the Proactives (25%), meaning people who interacted to ask questions, express dissatisfaction, endorse a **brand**, share a **brand** experience, enter a competition or get a discount. Watchers accounted for 24%; they were the people who simply watch a **brand**'s information updates or engage in a **brand**'s **social** media campaigns. Finally there were the Connectors (10%), those who interact to connect to a cause or subject that is important to them.

Consumers can interact in all sorts of ways on **social** media. The most common activity in this survey is to 'like' a **social** media post or mark it as a 'favourite' (11%), while 8% clicked on adverts or web links. **Social** media provides a forum for asking questions (14%) with half doing this publicly and half by private message. **Social** media also offers a de facto complaints channel and in this survey 6% expressed dissatisfaction directly through the **brand**'s **social** media page.

Top social media platforms and their varying roles

Facebook trumped all others with 98% of respondents saying they use this site generally, with 59% saying it was the platform for their T&L interactions over the past six months. **YouTube** and **Twitter** were important with general usage of 73% and 55% respectively, although specific T&L **brand** interaction was much lower at 11% (**YouTube**) and 16% (**Twitter**). LinkedIn, **Instagram**, **Pinterest** and Tumblr commanded less T&L **brand** engagement at just 5%, 4%, 4% and 2% respectively.

Jon Young, associate director with BDRC Continental, comments: "The survey shows that **Facebook** is driving around four times as much T&L **brand** engagement as **Twitter**, five times as much as **YouTube** and 50 times as much as Tumblr. So for T&L **brands**, not all **social** media platforms are equal."

The **social** media platforms naturally have different roles too. People felt **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **YouTube** and **Instagram** are good for learning purposes and staying updated, but **Facebook** was singled out as a good platform for entering a competition while **Twitter** was the channel for endorsing an organisation or asking questions.

"There are varying degrees of engagement and reasons for use across different platforms," says Jon Young. "**Facebook** attracts the highest proportion of Learners, Pintrest the highest proportion of Watchers, **Instagram** draws Proactives while Tumblr attracts the Connectors. Awareness of the roles each platform plays will allow organisations to modify their content and tone on **social** media accordingly."

Social media and actual brand usage

But does **social** media do more than help with learning and staying updated? When the survey moved onto the issues of actually using a **brand**, there were some interesting results.

Jon Young notes: "The most important finding in our survey is that **social** media interactions lead to **brand** use. Around 1 in 5 **social** media interactions (22%) with a leisure organisation in the last six months attributed 'a lot' of influence on the decision to use or physically visit this **brand**. And 70% said that the interaction had at least some influence. This is a positive endorsement of the leisure industry's **social** media performance. **Social** media plays a vital role in driving custom."

The survey also looked at how **social** media shaped the resulting sense of satisfaction with the **brand**. A total of 75% said **social** media interactions had exercised at least 'some' influence.

Jon Young adds: "It was also clear that there was an "information first, emotion second" dynamic at work. Our key driver analysis shows that providing 'useful' and 'interesting' information are the two biggest drivers of converting **social** media use to purchases and **brand** satisfaction. The next most important drivers are posts that are 'entertaining' and 'inspiring'. To maximise effectiveness, leisure organisations should ensure their content contains useful information as well as emotional triggers. The most effective organisations offer a combination of the two."

Generation Y loves to connect

Were younger respondents the ones using **social** media most? Yes, the survey showed this clearly. The survey divided the 46% (who had had **social** media interaction with a T&L **brand** in the past six months) into three tiers: Generation Y, Generation X and Baby Boomers. It was no surprise that 66% of Generation Y (ages 18 to 34) had interacted with T&L **brands** in the stated time frame, while for Generation X (35-54) it was 50% and for the Baby Boomers (55+) it was much lower at 35%.

Generation Y want to belong. They are the age group most likely to interact with leisure **brands** on **social** media and to be converted to purchases 'offline'. They are the age group with the lowest proportion of 'learners' (35%) – this compares to 46% for Baby Boomers and 47% for Generation X. Generation Y are also most likely to be 'Connectors' (25%).

The Generation X age band mostly comprises 'learners' (47%) for whom finding 'useful information' is the key activity. Baby Boomers are least likely to use **social** media to interact with leisure **brands** – only 6% described themselves as 'Connectors' – half of the 12% seen for Generation Y.

Top T&L sectors

The survey showed clearly that car rental companies are getting the best out of **social** media. BDRC covered Avis, Europcar, Enterprise, Sixt and Hertz. They generate the highest levels of satisfaction (85%) and the highest **brand** usage conversion (83%) as a result of **social** media interaction. This is driven by their provision of a good balance of useful content and inspiring or entertaining updates. So it is in the car rental sector you'll find the highest likelihood of using a **brand** as a result of **social** media interactions (and the highest degree of **brand** satisfaction arising from the **social** media experience). In fact, in the case of car rental companies, 26% said **social** media posts exercised 'a lot of influence' and directly prompted them to use the product. This was higher than any other T&L business category.

"We were initially surprised with the success of car rental companies but when we looked at their **Facebook** pages we saw some really inspiring posts," says Jon Young. "Rather than focus on the transaction, they talk about the romance of travel and the open road. Car rental companies demonstrate how a fairly dry transaction can be made into so much more with interesting and inspiring **social** media content."

But visitor attractions do well too. The likelihood to use a **brand** (or make a physical visit) as a result of **social** media interaction is 74% while 80% said the interaction had 'at least some' influence on personal satisfaction with the **brand**.

Online travel agents scored the same ‘likelihood to use’ (74%), but a lower score (76%) for ‘at least some’ influence on satisfaction. The survey found that online travel agents with the most influence in driving use were Lastminute.com (31%), Hotels.com (25%), Booking.com (20%) and Expedia.com (14%).

Airlines scored 73% ‘likelihood to use’ and 72% ‘at least some’ influence on satisfaction. There were weaker results for hotels, with 65% agreeing there was a likelihood of using a **brand** as a result of **social** media interactions. Again with hotels, 69% said ‘at least some’ satisfaction with the **brand** was driven by their **social** media experience with it.

The survey showed people are motivated to read **social** media posts right across the eight T&L categories. In fact, reading posts was the ‘main reason’ for a recent **social** media interaction. Visitor attractions did best in this respect, scoring 44%, with airports (42%) and railway companies (41%) close behind.

This article first appeared in www.mycustomer.com