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HOW ARE SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS CHANGING THE HOTEL INDUSTRY? CAN YOUR HOTEL BENEFIT FROM IT?

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Abstract

When it comes to marketing, few tools in the hotel industry are as powerful as social media. Social media influencers are a hot topic these days in the hotel industry. Thanks to their sizable caches of personal data, platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have made it easier than ever for hotels to target specific markets based on age, location, gender and interests. Even with the impact of social media in general, one of the fastest growing methods for choosing a target audience now are social media influencers. Hotels are using influencers as the face of their advertisements, because influencers endorse opinions about their products, which are shared on social media platforms and help spread viral conversations about the hotel brand online and have completely changed the way guests are making their accommodation decisions. In the age of people posting and sharing their lives online, guests are more inclined to make hotel accommodation decisions based on what the influencers they follow are posting. Therefore, for hotels, using social media influencers enables the opportunity of a practice of building relationships with the influencers who build relationships for the hotels. Whether a social media influencer's audience is small or large, an influencer can reach consumers via their blogs and social networks that the hotel may not be able to.

Keywords*: Industry, Influencers, Hotel, Hospitality, Social media*

Introduction

With most hotels being dependent on word-of-mouth, which with the advent of social media has spread beyond from a limited group to the whole world, and good reviews from loyal guests, makes the social media a perfect tool for marketing promotion and branding in the tourist market (Ristova and Angelkova-Petkova, 2018a). Since hotels nowadays have a harder time reaching out to guests, influencers play a growing and important role in word-of-mouth marketing. More

and more hotels are engaging them for campaigns, and the benefits are numerous. Just by getting an influencer from respective niche, meaning a specific market segment, share a post; the hotel can get thousands of targeted people viewing the post overnight. Influencers are a great way to build a larger follower base in a short period of time in the hotel industry, and the basic success is based just on the fundamental basis of peer-to-peer recommendation (Terttunen, 2017). This research further seeks to understand the notion of social media influencers to a better understanding of the process of engaging influencers in hotel marketing and promotion.

The phenomena of social media influencer

Over the last decade, we have seen social media grow rapidly in importance. Social media is now a part of the digital technology that now is connecting the guests with their opinions and recommendations with millions of people, including their friends on the social media, and common travelers with similar opinion who they never actually met (Ristova and Angelkova-Petkova, 2018b). Inevitably, these people look up to influencers in social media to guide them with their decision making. According to Freberg et al. (2011), social media influencers are a new type of endorsers who are independent and shape audience attitudes through different types of media. Francalanci and Hussain (2015) explain it as users of social media who have acquired a wide audience. De Veirman et al. (2017) explains that a social media influencer can be defined as a user of social media who accumulated a great following and established credibility and whose high reach and authenticity can lead to impact and persuasion in interaction with their following. Social media influencers are people who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a particular topic. They make regular posts about that topic on their preferred social media channels and generate large followings of enthusiastic, engaged people who pay close attention to their views. Social influencers are self-made; they have built their own audience over time based on their expertise and smoothly become opinion leaders. Bakshy et al. (2011) stated that 'influencers are content creators and storytellers, and they know how to create enthusiasm' (p. 65).

Following how fast the technology and with it the social media developed, the concept of social media influencer grew substantially in the past 10 years. Influencers now share relevant opinions that generate authentic conversations. They have earned through time and engagement their relationship with their followers and it developed a two-way communication that an influencer genuinely provides to people who are interested in what they post on their social media profiles (Alic et al., 2017). Influencers now operate on blogs and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest or YouTube. Having the most authentic and active relationships between the influencer and their followers, brands are now recognizing and encouraging because influencers can create trends and encourage their followers to buy products they promote.

The rise of social media influencer marketing

Daniel Newman describes influencer marketing as the "next golden goose" of marketing (Newman, 2015). It is, therefore, no surprise that in recent years with the development of social media, we have experienced an entirely new form of brand communication via social media: influencer marketing. Social media influencer marketing is the most important new approach to mar-

keting in a decade for those professionals at the leading edge of purchasing decision-making. Social media influencer marketing is also a term that refers to leveraging the ability of key people to support a brand and spread the word to their followers. It has been established as a highly-effective method for brands to build and engage with audiences on social media.

But, in order to clarify what influencer marketing is, an overview of the term itself is necessary, therefore several definitions and points of view currently exist. Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) defined it as "influencer marketing involves marketing products and services to those who have a sway over the things other people buy. This market influence typically stems from an individual's expertise, popularity or reputation." (p. 91). Brown and Hayes (2008) define an influencer as "a third party who significantly shapes the customer's purchasing decision, but may never be accountable for it". Keller and Berry (2003) state that influencers are activists, are well-connected, have impact, have active minds, and are trendsetters, though this set of attributes is aligned specifically to consumer markets. Social media influencer marketing by Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) is defined by as "a technique that employs social media (content created by everyday people using highly accessible and scalable technologies such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, microblogs, bookmarks, social networks, communities, wikis, and vlogs) and social influencers (everyday people who have an outsized influence on their peers by virtue of how much content they share online) to achieve an organization's marketing and business needs." (p. 189).

How are influencers changing the hotel industry?

Confirming that influencers are becoming one of the most successful ways to increase awareness about a marketing promotion (Al-Msallam and Alhaddad, 2016), the hotel industry is benefiting greatly from using influencers in marketing campaigns, particularly among younger travelers, who can be significantly influenced on where they plan their trip based on someone else's vacation social media posts and photos. Google commissioned Ipsos MediaCT, an independent marketing research company in their publication Google Travel Study "The 2014 Traveler's Road to Decision" listed travel and hotel industries as the perfect industries for influencers, showing that the Internet is the most influential when it comes to inspiring leisure travel decisions. Especially when it comes to attracting younger generations, such as millennials and gen Z'ers, to the hotel, using an influencer to promote the hotel brand and facilities can draw a high level of attention and popularity, resulting in increased revenue and better visibility (Ipsos MediaCT, 2014). Especially, millennials tend to accept the meanings from social media influencers whom they admire or consider as a resemblance to themselves (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017).

Even though at first social influencers were considered as shallow and superficial people, nowadays, influencers have acclaimed its status as a principal player in the digital marketing strategy for the hotel industry. People consider them a "more credible celebrity version", meaning they trust them. So, when a social influencer posts his vacation picture somewhere in a hotel or resort, the chances that his followers consider visiting this place are actually really high and the key, as a hotelier, is not to resist these disruptive forces, but work with them and embrace them. Influencers in the hotel industry are the new generation of reviewers who can provide a real-life experience of the hotel venue through user-generated content on social media. They reach future customers by engaging on a personal level and building durable and trustworthy relationships with their followers, hotels' potential guests.

Agha (n.d.) states that with its roots in the traditional form of word-of-mouth, influencers are now part of a lucrative digital marketing strategy that is influencing in the changing of hotel brand awareness, customer loyalty and driving direct bookings. This is because digital word of mouth is diffused significantly faster than its precursor and has the potential to reach a much larger audience. Knowing this, there's no good reason why the hotel industry could not profit from engaging influencers into their marketing strategy. Putting a well-known face to the hotels' brand, commercial, or one-time offer is something that can boost the hotel's popularity and increase the level of visibility in the online space. Nilsson and Vennberg (2016) study have shown that strong influencers can transform commercial promotions to valuable information and attract readers. But despite its apparent advantages, influencers are a wasted investment if hotels are not working with the right ones.

Which influencer is right for the hotel industry?

While the acknowledged value of using influencers in the hotel industry, selecting them to use in a campaign can prove difficult. Deciding on who to enter the partnership with in the first place has to begin with the end goal.

Know What You're Looking For - A travel marketer has to be sure in what results does he want for his campaign to achieve in order to know with what, or in this case with whom to achieve it. As with traditional marketing strategies, knowing the target audience is the key. (Alic et al., 2017). A hotel should know what types of guests typically attracts - and wants to attract. Also, a hotel should look at with whom its guests are interacting with. They need to check their shares and retweets to see who are the most active sharers. And check who the competition is targeting too. Only afterwards, the hotels have to look for influencers whose followers have similar characteristics to what you're on the lookout for.

Choosing a platform - As of 2019, the most important platforms on which hotels could employ influencers are: Instagram (89%), YouTube (70%), Facebook (45), Blogs (44%), Twitter (33%), LinkedIn (19%), Pinterest (15%), Twitch (6%), Snapchat (3%) and other (1%) (Bailis, 2019). But a hotel should choose the platform, according to what suits their target audience best. And even though, each social network platform has its own attraction to certain demographics with sex, race and income playing a large part in popularity (Biaudet, 2017), the truth is that none of them compares to Instagram. Instagram posts have become ubiquitous because they are easy to produce, approve, and publish, therefore easy to scale up. Compared to videos or longer-form content, a single photo and caption requires relatively less production cost and effort, making it a more affordable option for hotels looking to test Instagram influencer marketing (Nandagir and Philip, 2018).

Finding the influencers - At this point, the hotel should have a clear picture of what qualities their ideal influencer should have, and a full understanding of how they will impact your current (or future) target audience. One approach is to do an online search. Search for the hotel industry, the hotel itself, keyword, product, or message, and the word "blog" to find the blogs more likely to be clicked on. The same can be done with do the same with #hashtags. Hotels might search for anything that might be relevant, meaning to find the most prevalent people talking about them on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter or other platforms. Alternatively, it's always worth keeping one eye on what the competitors are doing. Hotels can also try searching directly through their own social media interaction and find influencers that are actively engaging with the hotels' content.

Choosing the influencers - With millions of influencers to choose from, how could possibly the hotels select the right ones? Spencer-Harper (2018), suggests 3 key factors to ensure that hotels choose the right influencers: relevancy, engagement and authenticity. Putting the 3 key factors together, first it means working with influencers whose content and style is relevant to the hotel brand, and whose followers are likely to be the hotel target market. Second it means working with influencers who have loyal fans and score above a 2% engagement ratio. And, finally, it means working with influencers who have genuine, authentic audiences and aren't faking it.

Why use social media influencers? Key benefits for the hotel industry

Monitoring social media brings results, and people may already be talking. It's a hotel's responsibility to find the influencers that align well with their audience. Influencer marketing represents a bold, productive development, while using the power of social media to cut through the noise and getting messages to the right guest. Influencers do exactly that, targeting the guests that matter most and connecting them with the hotels. So, when people, like, comment or share a message on a hotel page, the message will also appear on their own pages and become visible to their friends. Thus, the number of likes, comments and shares are viewed as measures of WOM induced by a social media message (Leung et al., 2015). This paper has shown how influencers are outperforming traditional marketing in many ways. Since more and more hotels recognize its benefits, this progressive form of marketing is on the rise. Below, the authors compiled a list of the top benefits of using social media influencers that illustrate its effectiveness in the hotel industry:

The personal touch - There are no big-name marketing companies behind the words these influencers use to post about products. A social media influencer is seen in the eyes of their followers as someone approachable, natural and real. The informal tone of their content and friendly tone of communication on their profiles makes them feel close and authentic and that makes it a massive source of their appeal (Alic et al., 2017).

People trust them - Influencers are normal people. They aren't millionaire celebrities, or part of the royal family. People spend a lot of time on social media, and influencers are seen as the most trustworthy marketing method. Influencer marketing is seen as credible, likeable and authentic, because people follow the influencers by their own will to get inspiration (Biaudet, 2017).

No hidden agendas - Followers recognize influencers who get paid up to a million dollars per post aren't necessarily the best metric for authenticity. They tend to value social influencers who speak honestly, authentically and without a hidden agenda, because followers know that influencers are everyday folks, complete with class schedules, student loans and day jobs who write what they want, when they want— that is both powerful and empowering.

No politics - Social media influencers help build direct relationships with its key consumers. Over its online conversation, no one else is controlling content beside the direct voice of an influencer. Nobody with a secret agenda is telling influencers what they need to write about. The truly transparent conversations happen through the two-way conversation that is established for the product via social media (Booth and Matic, 2011) are the reason why followers have the genuine trust in the influencers.

Target marketing made easier - According to Matthews (2013) consumers are more likely to trust recommendations from a third party (ex. influencers) rather than a brand itself. The

influencer can be thought of as a friend connecting a brand with their target consumers. The influencer does not only bring their own followers, but they also bring the followers network. A brand should choose the platform and influencer according to what suits their target audience best. When identifying the right influencer for a company it is important to know that the name chosen has influence over buying decisions. One has to be specific about which products or service line are under consideration, and the segment being targeted (Brown and Hayes, 2008).

Cost Effective - An interesting insight is that influencer marketing is a relatively cost-effective way to generate brand content that can be reused. It feedbacks into the company content calendars going forward. If they've got a really nice content that has been created by an influencer, then the company can repurpose that and use it in a campaign going forward (Hobson, 2016).

Conclusion

Since hospitality has pioneered into the digital transformation of travel purchase decisions, guests have totally changed the way they book hotels, turning to social media to discover and ultimately purchase their next holiday. The influence of social media on a hotel performance and reputation is indisputable. Being active in this environment has given hospitality the opportunity to share information about the hotel more effectively and to better understand the guests and all interest groups, giving them a stronger, closer and a more transparent relationship with them. But as a result, for hotels adapting to the way guests want to engage with them, the rise of influencers has happened. Seen as non-traditional means of advertising, has exactly help influencers to change the hotel industry and offer guests authentic experiences and advice when making holiday purchase decisions. Influencers are able into tapping into the subconscious of the guests, and putting the hotel brand in the forefront of their minds, provoking emotion and desire just by posting pictures of the hotel. So, the hotel industry can benefit a great deal by collaborating with social media influencers, because influencers can generate stunning content, drive bookings and accomplish many other marketing goals. They also infuse every post with their unique perspective and their brand voice that later will add variety to the hotels' content. Small details transform a post into a vivid aspiration. Still, finding and choosing the right influencers to deliver this to the hotel is important, because an influencer is more than a person who has a lot of social media followers. In general, the cornerstone for the hotel needs to be that the hotel's target audience and theirs are the same. Also, choosing an influencer to work with, initially becomes a representative of the hotel. Although, much more time goes on to finding and choosing the right influencer, if the hotel put in the work to find the right one, initiating an influencer partnership can add tremendous value. This paper aims to show that partnering with an influencer can be a cost-effective form of high-quality content with built in distribution. It is highly measurable and can be targeted to very specific audiences to capture high-quality leads and engagement. This simply done through the right influencers, where the hotel's content is placed in front of guests that are already interested in the hotel's niche. Hotels don't have to spend additional funds on testing and finding their audience - the influencer has already fostered it on social media. Creating that quality, authentic content with a personal touch from the influencers alongside the fact that will resonate more with an audience, it will also aim to feel a real connection and trust to the hotel.

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