

Social Media: Opening New Doors for the Domestic Tourism Industry in Albania

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Abstract: The online word is becoming every day more and more important for the tourism industry. Through different technologies, it has made the possibility to ease the way people search and decide for their own travel destination, the way they pick their accommodation and their traveling medium. In particular the online social media, as part of the online word, has created new opportunities for interaction and communication between people. Today individuals have the opportunity to share knowledge, opinions and experiences through online communication. Also their impact goes even further by influencing the behavior of other users in the process of buying. This article will be focused on the usage of Facebook social media platform, arranging a content analysis regarding the different social media tools to engage and interact. This will serve as small step in understanding how domestic business and tourism industry are using social platforms to engage more users and increase their business performance.

Keywords: social media; domestic tourism industry; online marketing

JEL Classification: M31, M15, O35

1. Introduction

Nowadays being social is a trend which is growing very fast. A major contribution has brought the continuous development of different social networks in the online world. Today, users of these networks are involved in a large variety of activities, which includes the consumption and distribution of various materials, express opinions and involvement in various discussions with other users online. (Heinonen, 2011).

Users exchange information, either seeking or sharing, by using a communication medium (Wilson, 1999). In our case, the communication medium which helped the world to make a further step in the digital society is without any doubts Social Media. The trend of social media usage is growing constantly. Data show that at

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present, only 20 percent of world's population is active on social networks all the time. A study conducted by Nielsen Corp shows, Social Media in 2010, represented nearly 25% of the time spent online by user, passing by far the gaming with 10% and e-mail with 8%. (Nielsen, 2010). This is a truth that involves as well the development of Web 2.0 tools. It is not surprise that most of the social media sites are increasing day by day their interaction with users in many different ways. These figures, helped by the usage of mobile devices, are expected to grow higher (Bell, 2012). "Every 60 seconds, over 600,000 Facebook statuses are updated, over 98,000 tweets are sent and over 600 videos are uploaded on YouTube...Businesses will focus on creating more relevant content that cannot only be shared but also add value to the brand...Lack of relevance will simply drive...away." (Maseko, 2012).

2. Literature Review

Social media has emerged as a new concept in the dictionary development of internet. If simple people would be asked in defining social media, they can give a general approach but still finds difficulties in expressing it simply. Safko & Brae (2009), follows the definition of social media in the logic of people who comes together in the online world by interacting with each other through comments, posting tweets, sharing and liking. The social world offers the possibility to be part of interactions, discussions and point the interest in topics which the traditional media tools aren't emphasizing (Picard, 2009). Most of the social media activities occur on the Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) and Consumer-to-Business (C2B) online marketing domains (Kotler, Bowen and Makens, 2010). This approach create opportunities for the market to have a wider view of the customer perceptions. All the above changes has brought new development in the marketing world as well, by emerging new concepts like Social Media Marketing.

TechTerms.com defines SMM as "marketing done through social media or social networking websites" (2010) and Brickmarketing.com as "marketing with other technological concepts and techniques to achieve specific goals..." (2012). Anyhow one important point is the fact that SMM can be defined as a new technique, but not a new world (Zimmerman and Sahlin, 2011, 11). It is a common sense that not all the key social platforms cannot be used for all the industries. Taking into consideration the differences between the industries some social media channels can result in a higher impact in some industries comparing to others. The selection of the right channels depends on the marketing strategy and the definition of the target group (Heymann - Reder, 2011). Following the decision about the right social platform for the industry, it is important to understand which are the potential strength and weaknesses presented in making marketing through the

social media. Zimmerman and Sahlin, has listed some of the main point of strength and weakness that a business may have when deciding to make Social Media Marketing.

Strengths	Weaknesses
1. Saving money on advertising	1. Not every target group is using social media channels
2. Concurrently targeting huge number of possible customers	2. Time consuming to initiate and maintain
3. Supports sale activities	3. More employees needed
4. Channels assist in building and increasing brand recognition	4. Discipline necessary
5. Business processes could be improved	5. Difficult to gather visibility
6. Profitable relationship building	6. Unsuitable for short-term usage
7. Improves search engine ranking	

Figure 1. Strength and Weaknesses of Social Media Marketing

Local social networks have started to emerge as well in Albania. Still these social media sites are in the first steps and their popularity is much lower than those of the international sites. According to the Albanian Media Institute, the most popular social site is Top.al, followed by Iliria.net, Albfriend.com and Adoli.net (2011). One fact regarding social sites is that most of the online registered user are Albanian living abroad mostly in the Western Europe and United States. This is related with the big development of internet culture in these countries. For example, Forumishqiptar.com counts only 46% of the visitor from Albania and the rest of them are abroad. The same situation is with another famous site Peshkupauje.com, where the Albanian visitors count only 41 percent of the total visitors (Albanian Media Institute, 2011).

In the tourism context, the development of these concepts brings continued growth of new forms of sales related to the Web and platforms built on. Now more and more have a growing trend in sales via the Internet or otherwise known as e-tailing. This, in itself, provides that the tourism sales via the Internet are seen as one of the main forms of modern developments tourism industry. These developments have found a considerable burst of relying on principles and functionality offered by Web 2.0. Nowadays, some of the main challenges of online tourism platforms correlate exactly with Web 2.0 concepts. At this regard tourism industry can be seen as one of the most effective industries in using the social platforms and online world to increase their business and performance.

Tourism industry which is related with the entertainment industry, it has a high adaption rate for online tools. This adaption can be linked with the concept of sales of gossip. Sales of gossip finds application in the creation and distribution of materials that may have impact on the promotion and development of retail sales via the Internet. Marketing can be described as rumors of customer engagement in a positive or negative communication, or as the result of experience satisfying or disappointing. In this regard, gossip is a marketing communication structure from person to person, in connection with the brands, products, services, companies and organizations that have an impact on consumer purchase decision (Evans 2009).

3. Research Methodology

In order to determine the potential opportunities that arise for the development of domestic tourism, in the context of social media, as a form of small business, the implementation of this research study is presented as a viable choice. Considering lack of existing primary and secondary data, this research is proposed to be conducted through a content analysis of most known social pages used to develop the domestic tourism in Albania.

Objective and Goals of the study

The proposed research will focus to identify the best feasible ways on how we can use the Social Media to promote the Domestic tourism in Albania. Thus, the following objectives have been set.

1. Defining the user engagement in social media regarding the domestic tourism industry.
2. Identifying and evaluating the way social media can be used to promote the domestic tourism industry.
3. Providing recommendations on how small and medium enterprises should approach and manage social media to improve domestic tourism.

Sample selection

The target group regarding the study includes the customers which uses social media tools to make their decisions for domestic tourism in Albania. In accordance with the study goals, the target group will aimed to have basic information and knowledge regarding social media, domestic tourism places and English language.

Formulating the research problem

The following research questions may be used to explore the abovementioned objectives:

- Is social media a useful platform for promoting and developing the domestic tourism in Albania?

Problems and limitations

The main limitations which will be considered regarding this study includes the following fields:

- Lack of available and/or reliable data regarding the cost of domestic tourism development in Albania
- Lack of prior research studies regarding the effect of social media in domestic tourism in Albania.
- Fluency in the English language.
- Familiarity with internet and online access.

4. Content Analysis

Presently local tourism in Albania is promoted in the Social Media mostly over tour operators. The most well-known Tour Operators Fan Page stimulating local tourism are Klubi i Kampistave “Discover Albania”, “High Albania” Mountain Club, JAL Kamping and Outdoor Albania.

4.1. Camp Club “Discover Albania” - Facebook Fan Page

The official Facebook Fan Page of Klubi i Kampistave “Discover Albania” seem to be the most developed social media regarding local tourism in Albania. Currently it has more the 15,138 fans. Currently the average fan engagement is quite low with 199 people talking about this page, with a rate of 1.31% user engagement.

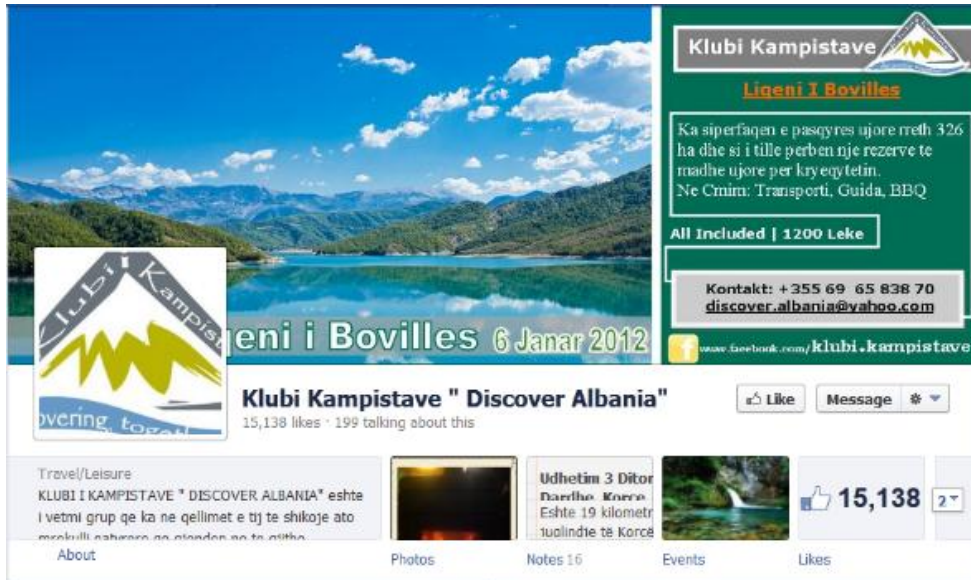


Figure 2. Camp Club “Discover Albania” - Facebook Fan Page

Currently this page is promoting mostly local places from the south of Albania, mostly in the City of Korça. From a quick view of the events in their page, it seems the main used social media tools are posting promotion regarding the upcoming trips and different photos for the events they managed to do in the past. In some cases this Fan Page is using as well different publications made in the newspaper or TV filming of the places in order to create a closer feeling to the customer. One negative point of the page is related with the content posting. They are posting the same event many times in different day...without making any change to the layout or the information. The main tabs shown apart Photos, includes total number of fans, events organized and notes regarding different details.

4.2. “High Albania” Mountain Club - Facebook Fan Page

The official Facebook Fan Page of High Albania Mountain Club is ranked as the second most developed social media page promoting local tourism in Albania. Currently it has 6,782 fans. The average fan engagement is quite low with 116 people talking about this page, with a rate of 1.71% user engagement.

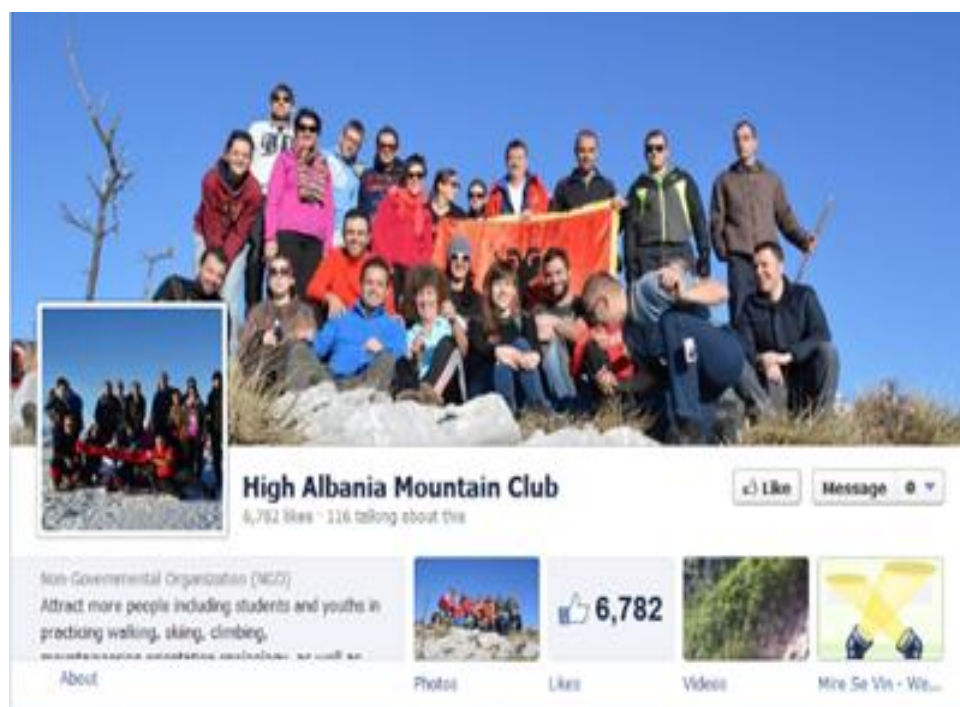


Figure 3. “High Albania” Mountain Club - Facebook Fan Page

This fan page is mostly promoting weekly activities in local places mostly nearby the capital city of Albania, Tirana. One interesting usage of this social media tools is related with the connection of the website. Mostly what are they doing now is that all the trips and events are presented in the official website and they are posting a link in Facebook. In brand awareness point of view it could a good approach, but it seems that user engagement is quite low.

Another difference is related with the cover page. High Albania is the only fan page which is placing a group photo in the cover page in comparison with the other famous social media fan pages for local tourism.

4.3. JAL Kamping - Facebook Fan Page

Jal Kamping Facebook Fan Page is ranked as the third most famous fan page regarding local tourism in Albania. This is a very interesting page because shows the effect of the seasonality of the local tourism places in the social media.



Figure 4. JAL Kamping - Facebook Fan Page

Jal Kamping is a Facebook Fan Page for a local place near the seaside with most of its tourism activity during the summer period. The total fans this page counts now it is 5,204 fans and talking about this is 3 people.

The user engagement shows clearly the motivation of the business owners which depends by the seasonality of the business. The Fan Page tabs include as well one different option in comparison with the other fan pages. The “suggest to friends” tab is a very useful tool to increase the number of people liking the page. This tool can be used by the actual fans to invite their friend to like the page as well.

4.4. Outdoor Albania - Facebook Fan Page

The last famous Facebook Fan Page promoting local tourism in Albania is Outdoor Albania. The fan page seems to be well organized in terms of information. The number of total fans is 5,119 fans and talking about this include 101 people. Tabs contain information regarding the possible tours which can be organized in local places in Albania, a blog and events. Posting activity is not frequent and the posting interval in some cases is quite near each other.

The content of posting is quite updated with the season, by showing professional pictures of the winter local places and winter sports which can be done in these places. An important point of the fan page is the fact that all the local places are promoted with specific local tours.



Figure 5. Outdoor Albania - Facebook Fan Page

5. Research Findings

Social Media approach in Albania is still in the first phases but growing very fast. Albanian populations has increased its presence in the social media platforms. According to Social Bakers, Albania has 1,120,640 users in the Facebook platform. Facebook penetration in Albania is 37.52% comparing with the 77.72% number of active internet users in Albania (Social Bakers, 2012).

It seems that currently the most know domestic tourism developers are the tour operator organized in groups and usually on weekend basis. From the content analysis it is seen that most of the posts are related to the tourism activity they promote. The aim is sharing information regarding the place, traveling details and pricing.

Usually a big part of their customers are coming even by these social platform, where they are engaging with the tour organizers by asking question about the places, what kind of outfit they should wear or the timing of starting the journey. At the end tour organizer are using this social platforms to present their journey, different images of the people who took part and funny moments they were involved in the tour.

6. Conclusions

Online word has become a new tool for the development of the tourism industry in Albania. Currently through different technological platforms tourism has created the possibility to easily manage all the travel and destination information just through one click even for the Albanian market. Social media has brought an additional advantage to the tourism industry. Tools like “check in”, “talking about this”, “viral reach”, “retweet” and “hangout” can be of great benefit to Albanian domestic tourism business. These tools should serve as a first hook for domestic tourism business to start dealing with technology. Engagement in shortcoming will lead to what today in the world represent Social CRM. Albanian domestic tourism business will start interact and understand their customer needs. Social CRM development includes the creation of special communities for Albanian domestic tourism places online. Usually communities are perceived as a source of information from the general users, despite the fact that it can be part of company website. Normally community posting should be related with domestic tourism situations and perceptions. This can be used as a very nice guide for all the people who seek to travel to these local destination. Anyhow there are a lot of effects to be considered before opening a community page regarding a local business and mostly it can related different topics like frequency of posting, content of the material, business disposal to open a dialog with interested customers and in which ways community can be promoted. The following steps would create the basic needs for knowledge management and associated technology services. Information about customer perceptions and reviews about their experience are main incentive factors for small business owners to accept technology in their business.

Currently domestic tourism industry in Albania, has developed in terms of social media through different tour organizer which have opened pages for promoting

different tourism location and making them accessible for the customer through different packages. This step can be used as a great incentive in the future development of local platforms or social media access which can increase the engagement of the users.

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