

CREATING UGC AREAS ON OFFICIAL DESTINATION WEBSITES: IS THERE A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS? AN INSIGHT THROUGH NETNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Linda Osti

Free University of Bozen-Bolzano

An analysis of the existing literature has demonstrated the importance of word of mouth as a source of information for potential tourists and service consumers. The growth of the Internet and interactive websites has led to the creation of online communities that serve as points of reference for word of mouth and in particular for independent, personal and experiential information. Recent articles have noted the growing interest of tourism companies and destinations to include UGC areas in their official websites to provide their users with these types of information and interactivity among each others. However, so far little research has been performed on the success factors of online communities. This paper wants to create a platform for further research on the topic. If destinations want to boost visits to their websites through UGS areas and create a “buzz” through positive word of mouth, it is necessary to know the correct ingredients for success. Some of these ingredients have been discovered through a netnographic analysis of an Italian virtual mountaineering community. The analysis has shown that some of the most important issues when creating online communities are the reliability of information, the ease of finding information and creating threads and posts, the constant appearance of interesting threads and discussions, the respect for other members, the passion of all of the active users for the same topics and a certain homogeneity within the users.

Keywords: *virtual communities, netnography, electronic word of mouth, forums, information search*

INTRODUCTION

Substantial literature on tourism marketing has recently concentrated on the growing importance of the internet as a marketing tool and in



specific, in the last few years, tourism marketing research has focused on the importance of blogs and peer to peer networks in providing decisive information to tourists. The special issue of the *Journal of Vacation Marketing* on “Blogs and Virtual Communities in Tourism” (April 2008), the many articles appeared on academic tourism journals (a sample: Vermuelen & Seegers, 2008; Litvin et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2007; Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2006; Han and Mills, 2006; Wang & Fresnemaier, 2004), and the parallel sessions dedicated to Web2 marketing and related themes are an example of the growing interest of academic research on such a topic.

Past papers have focused mainly on the use of User Generated Content (UGC) areas as a form of word of mouth and the way these can be used not only to promote the service but also to perform research on image perception and target markets. This interest is a reflexion of the recent trends in the tourism industry. Schmallegger and Carson (2008) have noted the increasing number of tourism organisations launching travel blogs to create a communication platform for their visitors and the recent interest of destinations to implement blogs for tourists to share their experiences on their official websites. UGC areas have become such a popular form of information source in tourism that, as stated by Schmallegger and Carson (2008), UGC influences about US\$10 billion a year in online travel bookings and over 20% of consumers rely on UGC as a source of information when planning their trips. UGC areas are network communities taking various forms, including blogs, forums and social networks, and under a marketing perspective they can be classified as an electronic form of word of mouth. As such, their exponential growth has to be explained through the analysis of information needs and information search behaviour of service consumers and in specific tourism consumers.

INFORMATION SEARCH BY TOURISM CONSUMERS

Services are characterised by being not directly perceptible, frequently experimental and often unpredictable in their outcomes (Kotler, 2006). As such, their performance evaluation is normally possible only after purchase and consumption. This characteristic of services, such as tourism and hospitality services, increases the degree of uncertainty. Therefore, service consumers may be forced to rely on different sources of information, and use different processes to evaluate services in a more complex and distinctive way (Davis, et al., 1979; Bateson, 1977; Booms and Nyquist, 1981; Zeithaml, 1981, cited in Murray, 1991).

In regard to the sources of information utilised, the literature shows that in a riskier environment, word of mouth is the most important source of risk reduction, and has a greater impact than mass media communications, as it gives the opportunity to clarify and receive feedback (Lutz and Reilly, 1974; Arndt, 1967). The decision-making on service consumption (and specifically tourism service consumption) arises from the preference for information from other individuals, rather than from objective and impersonal sources. In fact, it has been demonstrated that the types and sources of information used, differ according to the degree of perceived risk, making personal sources the second preferred source of information after direct observation and personal trials (Locander and Hermann, 1979; Lutz and Reilly, 1974).

The main characteristic of tourism services is that they are conceptualised as experiences, and therefore difficult to specify or evaluate precisely before consumption. Murray (1991) noted that this feature of services is the main reason why consumers who are willing to reduce pre-choice uncertainty are more inclined to search for information from other individuals, who have experienced the service before, directly or indirectly. Furthermore, for the same reason that tourism services, compared with goods, are more difficult to evaluate prior to initial purchase, tourists may utilise fewer information sources. However, the absolute number of information sources the consumer uses, may not be the absolute measure of the extent of information acquisition. Source credibility, relevance and consequently effectiveness is a more relevant factor in the analysis of source search and usage. The two source characteristics “credibility” and “relevance” determine “effectiveness” and reflect both the decisive influence of a source and its importance in relation to exposure. Therefore, some sources provide more meaningful information than others (Murray, 1991).

From the above concepts, Murray (1991) identified several theories related to information search and needs of service consumers; as tourism is characterised by the provision of services, these theories can be easily applied to tourism consumers:

1. Consumers choose more personal sources of information for tourism services than for goods;
2. Personal independent sources of information are more effective for tourism services than for goods;
3. Tourists have greater confidence in personal sources of information for services than for goods;

4. Tourists use direct observation and/or trial as a source of pre-purchase information less often than consumers of goods, as a holiday cannot be tried before consumption;
5. Tourists with prior experience have a greater preference for internal sources of information for evaluating services, than for evaluating goods.

It is evident that the Internet has evolved as tool to provide the most diverse amount of information on a vast number of topics, products and services; specifically, for information related to tourism services, the Internet has evolved satisfying the needs of potential tourists for personal and independent pieces of information. UGC areas are now able to provide personal information on a global scale. Additionally, the Internet is capable of overcoming the challenge faced by consumers to gather appropriate information for their specific needs. Traditional information providers cannot always know what information is needed for any individual consumer; without knowing what information is relevant, the amount of information that is potentially relevant can be very large. The internet has solved this difficulty providing consumers with interactive information systems that allow consumers to be appropriately selective in their own information search (Ariely, 2000, p. 233). It is evident that virtual communities combine the need of tourists for independent personal information and interactivity, and offer the possibility to easily select the flow and type of information to read. As stated by Mack et al. (2008) compared with other types of information, the internet contains a vast amount of information, is more interactive, can be customised, and provides tailored contents. Furthermore it offers more experiential information through videos and sound.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AS A FORM OF WORD OF MOUTH

Virtual communities have been defined by Litvin et al. (2008) as “groups of online individuals who share interests and interact with one another”. Virtual communities can take several forms, from blogs, chat rooms or social networks, to forums. All of these can be linked with one another and with other websites creating global interactive communities.

- Forums are like social gathering where attendees discuss and interact with each others. Anyone can start a thread and anyone can respond to one; for example someone can start a topic on a selected destination and anyone registered in the forum can reply posting his or her experiences including pictures and links to

videos. Forums' contents are usually divided by thread, unlike blogs, where the content is usually divided by people.

- In blogs one person, the blogger, is in control of the discussion but allows others to post questions and comments. If the discussion in forums is "many to many", in blogs it is "one to many". Blogs take the form of journals and in tourism they are often travel diaries.
- Social networks and chat rooms allow people who want to meet each other to connect by a variety of common interests. People alike and with similar interests are able to get to know each other, keep in contact and share information.

Virtual communities vary in scope and content from simple lists of resources (as for example single lists of excursions or travel tours) to complex cyber environments, and can group different features within the same site. As reported by Litvin (2008) some virtual communities have arisen spontaneously, while others have been sponsored or managed by companies: "in any case, these virtual environments represent fertile territory for the dissemination of eWOM [electronic word of mouth] and the creation of 'buzz'".

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Past research has shown the importance of word of mouth as a source of information for potential tourists planning a trip (see Morgan et al., 2003; Crick, 2003; O'Neill et al., 2002; Shanka, et al., 2002; Crofts and Erdmanmn, 2000). Researchers have also demonstrated the efficiency of virtual communities as a form of word of mouth and recent articles have discussed the current trend of tourism companies and destinations to include an interactive virtual community through the creation of blogs and forums on their official websites (see Schmallegger and Carson, 2008; Litvin et al., 2008; Flavian and Guinaliu, 2005). Most of the existing work focuses on the use of blogs as information sources, the segmentation of their users, and the use of virtual communities for marketing purposes. Although the increasing growth of communities sponsored, managed or owned by tourism companies and destinations little research has been done so far to understand the factors that make travel and trip virtual communities successful.

This research paper aims to provide an insight into the success factors of trip forums. In specific, the analysis focuses on Italian virtual communities and their attached forums related to mountain adventure trips.

The results of such research provides destination and tourism companies managers with useful information on how to create successful forums to be included on their official websites, which in turn will provide continuous visits to the site, marketing information, and possible brand loyalty. The virtual community taken into consideration is On-Ice: a meeting point for thousands of users who discuss about past trips and destinations, and search for ideas and information for their next mountain trip or excursion.

The most famous Italian virtual communities on mountain adventure sports are Planet Mountain, On-Ice, Camp to Camp, and Fourivia. They all include a forum and have posts on itineraries, trip destinations, photo galleries, users' reports on trips.

Planet Mountain can be considered the historic virtual community on mountain adventure sports. It experienced a rapid growth in the past years involving users from all over Italy, not only from the alpine regions. Many professional alpinists were part of this community, lots of mountain enthusiasts but also people who did not have much to do with mountains but liked the idea of been part of that community were members. On the forum it was possible to find a lot of technical topics but also lots of "bar chats" which had little to do with mountains. Around 2 years ago there was a split of the moderators of the community, which brought part of the users on another forum (Fuorivia). Now Planet Mountain is much smaller but still followed by mountain enthusiasts and still contains both technical contents and "bar chats".

Fuorivia is the community grown after the split of Planet Mountain. Technical topics are interesting but it is hard to distinguish them among the many "bar chats".

Camp to Camp is a wider community and offers an interactive guide with itineraries from all over the world, a forum for discussion on mountain sports, a data base of news and articles on mountains and mountaineering, photo gallery, and information on associations supporting the community. Camp to camp is offered in French, Italian, English, German, Spanish and Catalan, with most of the posts in French and Italian.

On-Ice is a smaller community; it is regionally characterised with the majority of users from the central part of northern Italy. Most of the users are mountain enthusiasts and therefore the content is highly related to mountain sports and adventure. Little room is left to "bar topics" not related to mountains and sport.

For this research, the author performed an analysis of this latter virtual community. On its forum, a thread was posted with the title "dying forums... what is happening?". In total the thread created 103 posts from

25 users and recorded 3593 visits. Some of the users mentioned that fact that they are also users of more than one forum (mainly On-Ice, Planet Mountain and Camp to Camp) and provided a good insight on the reality of the wider network community of mountain enthusiasts.

Conducting research on cyberspace by analysing journal stories is not new (Fong & Burton, 2008; Tsai & Huang, 2007; Woodside et al., 2007; Fuller et al., 2007). Kozinets (2002) calls this type of research “netnography”. He developed “netnography” as an online marketing research technique providing consumer insights. It is the adaption of ethnography to the study of online communities maintaining a more naturalistic and unobtrusive method than focus groups or interviews (Kozinets, 2002). With 103 independent posts from 25 users the author was able to analyse users opinions and interactivity behind the screen and participants were not biased by the research purpose. The content analysis was performed manually and without a pre-ordered objective of categorisation, allowing the narrative to unfold in the search for reflections about factors for success. To familiarise with the content and style of the forum a first thorough reading of the forum and of its four most popular threads was performed.

RESULTS

The opening post of the thread was shortly highlighting the recent loss of interest of online users towards the competing mountain forums and their trend of less and less threads posted by their users, while On-Ice exploded by increasing its share of online mountaineers in such a short space of time. The thread finished by stating the importance of understanding the reason for this phenomenon.

The replies to this post gave an insight into the phenomenon, with comments on what is liked and disliked on mountain forums by their users and what is sought after when logging in. Some of the main concepts that became evident as successful factors of an online forum on mountain adventure sport, trips and excursions include:

1. The simplicity of browsing and creation of new threads;
2. Reliability of the information;
3. Contribution of new threads by all users;
4. Territoriality and homogeneity;
5. Creating a community that is not only virtual, but also real.

The simplicity of browsing the site and in specific the forum has been one of the first issues to be raised. Logging online and browsing the site

has revealed to have two main purposes: finding information and keeping connected. If the search for information is complicated and the necessary information are not reached easily the user will than move to another site. Similarly, if inserting new threads are not created in a simple and fast way, users will be less motivated to start a thread. One user noted that the decline of Camp to Camp started with the redesign of the site in the attempt to make it more complete, but which also made it more complicated. Another user states that he was a user of Skirando [forum of the site Camp to Camp] which was the best forum before it was redesigned, but redesigning the forum was like braking the toy, and the forum is now dying.

The issue of *reliability of information* has been discussed by most of the members. They stated that what they want is to find reliable information. What happens in some forums is that topics are started and than users are just transforming the topic in a simple reason for connecting (sometimes even including insults) without providing useful information on the topic or on the destination. One of the users states that on some forums, mountain topics is only a reason to get lost in a chat that has nothing to do with alpinism. Others concur that some forums are visited, but they are merely chat rooms rather than a meeting point for discussion on mountain topics; anything is discussed, and often the threads become low range chats. Users of the On-Ice consider the site successful since threads are discussed and not transformed into low range chats, consequently users looking for information are sure they will be satisfied.

However on this topic one users disagrees and says that chats are needed and discussion based only on serious topics does not offer long life to the community. The user insists on the need for some kind of “glue” that keeps users together and this can be chats. He refers to “real” meetings with friends from the Italian Mountaineering Association: “After the climb we all go to the pub for a beer, a discussion of the climb, the mountain and technical issues, but we also chat and joke on everyday life”. For him the chats and the jokes are the necessary bond for online communities too. From there a long discussion started on the advantage and disadvantage of including everyday chats and jokes in the forum.

The reliability of information lead the participants of the forum to move the discussion onto the different types of users accessing the site. It was agreed by the participants that a forum needs reliable information, however the users did not agree whether everyday life chats and jokes need to be part of the forum or not. The discussion went on to the issue related to users that are part of the community although they rarely do posts related to

mountains. On this issue some users complained about the fact that in other communities users do tend to lose respect for each other and create posts that are offensive. Most successful forums result to be attended by friendly and well-mannered people; a sense of friendship and sharing spirit is evident throughout successful forums and this is what makes them different from other forums.

While discussing the issue of users visiting the forum but not participating in any of the topics and users that participate but never contribute with useful information, a participant of the discussion categorised users according to their behaviour. He classified users that read regularly the forum to find information on possible excursions - but then after a great trip are not taking any time to write a report - as "leeches". From there a long discussion started on the so-called "leeches" and another user pointed out the necessity of "leaders" or "beacons" who, as he states, "they keep the forum alive". "Leeches" are not seen favourably by most of the participants to the discussion, however one user states: "it has been said with disregard that people do posts because of a showing-off need: but that is the reason why the site is working! The wish that we have to communicate enthusiasm is human, and if a site gives you the opportunity to satisfy this need it becomes successful. [...] The ones that act as spectators (they shouldn't be called "leeches" as they have been defined) are in reality a fundamental ingredient, because if there would be no audience nobody would post!!".

From the discussion it is obvious that a vital factor for the survival of a forum is the ongoing creation of new interesting threads by different members of the community and that there is the need to let leaders (or beacon-users) to emerge, however there is also a need for spectators (or leeches) as some of the leaders are motivated to create threads and post only if they know that they will be read and answered.

Territoriality is a topic that has been discussed and that, in a sense, contrasts with the existence of the internet, which is defined as the global network. Territoriality has been related to the geographical location of users, the homogeneity of lifestyle, and leads to the next issue, which is the need to create a community that is not only virtual but also real. The fact that most of the members of the community live in nearby regions appears to be a success factor. The community is described as more than a virtual community: due to the proximity of a lot of the members, gatherings and group trips are sometimes organised. One user states: "here [on the On-Ice forum] group trips are organised on a Friday evening in two hours for the next morning and up to 10-15 people participate". Another user states: "a

forum where you can exchange information, get to know places that you cannot find on books, but especially where you can't get to meet in person people with the same passion of yours and with whom you might share small and big alpine and life experiences, well, then this means that the forum works very well”.

The issue of geographic proximity is therefore a vital ingredient in the success of the forum. The fact that its members are sometimes able to practice together their passion for mountains seems to be a stronger “glue” and bond than everyday chats and jokes, to this point one user states: “people need to live in a real world”.

After the debate on everyday chats and jokes was left open, the discussion on geographic proximity leads to a resolution of the problem. Users agree on the fact that most of the members come from north-central Italy makes them share the same lifestyle: working more than 8 hours a day and being out of home for at least 10 hours a day leaves little time for chats and jokes. This type of member logs into the forum to find reliable information and does not want to waste time on jokes and chats. Also, a lot of posts relate to excursions and destinations in the area, providing useful information for potential week-end trips. So, the homogeneity of origin and lifestyle appears to be another success factor of the community. However, it was noted by some members that the homogeneity is also needed in the level of passion for mountaineering and the level of mountaineering activities practiced. This issue is very well represented by the following comment: “climbs that are often reported on this community are climbs that we all dream of or we have planned to do; they are the climbs of the average mountaineer. And when one member reports on a climb there is immediate interest. When you read about climbs that are very hard, you think within yourself: nice, good, excellent, but at the end, because you have never experienced that dimension, you remain a bit detached. On the contrary, a climb of a person that you consider equal to you involves you even more”.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of the existing literature has demonstrated the importance of word of mouth as a source of information for potential tourists and service consumers. The growth of the Internet and interactive websites has led to the creation of online communities that serve as points of reference for word of mouth and in particular for independent, personal and experiential information. Recent articles have noted the growing interest of

tourism companies and destinations to include UGC areas in their official websites to provide their users with these types of information and interactivity among each others. However, so far little research has been performed on the success factors of online communities. This paper wants to create a platform for further research on the topic. If destinations want to boost visits to their websites and create a “buzz” through positive word of mouth, it is necessary to know the correct ingredients for success. Some of these ingredients have been discovered through a netnographic analysis of an Italian virtual mountaineering community. This community, as many other mountaineering community, is a point of reference for information on potential excursions and destinations and represents the needs of many travel communities.

The analysis has shown that some of the most important issues when creating online communities are the reliability of information, the ease of finding information and creating threads and posts, the constant appearance of interesting threads and discussions, the respect for other members, the passion of all of the active users for the same topics (mountaineering for example, or a certain destination or a brand) and a certain homogeneity within the users: reading about a trip that will never be undertaken and that has never been dreamed of will leave a form of detachment in the reader. Interestingly, the possibility for the virtual community to become also a real community has been recognised to be a success factor. Although the internet is renowned for overcoming geographical barriers, in the analysis of the community taken into consideration the possibility to meet and share experiences has a substantial importance. This can be reconducted to previous research done on travel guidebooks (Osti, 2007). Also to users of Lonely Planet travel guidebooks it is important to be able to mix and meet with alike travellers, and visiting certain destinations or staying in certain hostels implies the possibility to become a member of a certain “real” community of travellers.

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Linda Osti

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Linda Osti (Linda.Osti@unibz.it) is an Assistant Professor at the Free University of Bolzano, member of TOMTE (Competence Centre in Tourism Management and Tourism Economics), School of Economics and Management, Brunico (BZ), Italy.