

How to use social media to influence direct bookings

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According to the 2017 edition of the SA Social Media Landscape, by World Wide Worx and Ornico, in the next year we will see the use of as many social media platforms becoming pervasive as marketing tools. In 2016, a study on 116 major South African brands making use of social media as a marketing strategy was conducted. The research showed that 91% of these brands were using Facebook, 88% were active on Twitter, and 66% were on YouTube. LinkedIn 63%, and Instagram rapidly increasing from 42% to 62%. With all the great figures and information around social media, the next step is seeing how the tourism industry can implement effective social media strategies that can boost and influence direct bookings.

Social media platforms are an extension of the website and creates an opportunity for inviting guests and previous guests to follow the business page, to create; share posts and pictures. This is a great opportunity for creating user-generated content for people's opinions, stories, reviews, feedback or comments on the hotel or restaurant. Every piece of content which relates to your hotel or restaurant can be the start of conversation. Social media creates a platform for guests and customers to give free publicity and reputation, sharing their experiences and being a member of the hotel or restaurant establishment. The involvement of your guests and consumers also develops community-building, rewards and partnerships incentives. Allow guests to further promote the content, and because it is a powerful word-of-mouth marketing. Your guests and consumers via social media become your brand ambassadors. Tourism Australia's had a research that showed that 24% of those who see their peer group's holiday photos are inspired to go on holiday, while 11% want to go to the exact same holiday enjoyed by their friends and peers. A more transparent content creates an engaging conversation in specific target groups. Social media works well in combination with content marketing. It can be used for distributing the content, to reaching more prospects, encouraging people to talk to you. This is because online resources have become a key aspect of a consumer booking journey and implementing a strategy to constantly be part on that journey. Social media focuses on curating, it is more than creating content that shows the best parts of the hotel or spa facility. A hotel owner whom has a guest tweeting or posting on Facebook about the accommodation, has the guest advocating and marketing that hotel. Guests that come through the door become potential brand ambassadors and fans.

Social media is an effective way for guests to share online reviews. In the tourism industry it important to know what guests are saying about you and most importantly the response to those reviews. Online reviews have the influence on direct bookings. According to a survey by Fuel Travel, 83.4% of respondents said that they will not book a hotel without reading reviews first and 85% of TripAdvisor users agree that a thoughtful response to a bad review will improve their impression of a hotel. Social media is a tool to share transparent and honest reviews of the hotel which is increasingly driven by the consumer. Guests should be encouraged to post reviews and their feedback to be distributed to as many different social channels and websites as possible.

Think about the time prior social media, if someone visited your restaurant, lodge or hotel, their circle of influence and friends was relatively small. Perhaps they would make a few phone calls back home sharing their experience or bring back a handful of post cards to share upon their return. Social media has broadened that network, which is always on and experiences are shared in real time, anywhere around the world. A picture of the new dish on the menu or a tour video can be broadcasted through social media to intimate few, hundreds and even thousands of people. There's a growth in popularity of photo and video-sharing sites, all because of social media.

Social shares can also transcend to other traditional marketing channels. An establishment in the township offering local braai and hang-out facility or bicycle tour of one of South Africa's largest township gain momentum on social media and went viral, which soon a travel magazine channel covered the tourism establishment on television.

It is the time to look at an increase spend on social media advertising. At present, almost 92% of the biggest brands in

South Africa advertise on Facebook and Twitter. This year, these advertisers will increase their social media advertising budgets. This is a clear indication that advertising on these social networks is effective. There is great news for SMEs tourism owners, advertising on Facebook and Twitter is still affordable. The great advantage of social media is the different metrics to track the success of our platforms and campaigns in real time. The comments, the likes and shares do gives us an indication however the return in investment is all the information and data collected from what the consumers are saying and about the facilities, rooms, tour experience and how it can influence what is done or what can be improved.

So what does this mean for tourism businesses and the benefits thereof? Social media offers companies in the tourism sector an accessible point as the industry whom most do not have the personnel, time and money to spend on traditional marketing campaigns. Social media has made the marketing field a fair and effective opportunity to capitalise on. It has created platforms that allow you to define your target market more effectively and precisely based on demographic and geographic features. This makes it more cost-effective than mass advertising which gives you little control over who sees your brand message and who's a potential customer ready to make a booking.

Businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry do not have a choice whether to do social media, it is about how well they do it. There are many facets to social media but simply put, social media are media (from written to visual, to audio to audiovisual) that are designed to be shared. Sharing means that it is easy to comment on, it is engaging, it is easy to send, and that there are lower costs associated with viewing the media. And, because of the connected nature of the Internet, it means that sharing, commenting and viewing can all be tracked and measured. It can be used for distributing the content, to reaching more prospects, encouraging people to talk to you.

Digital evolution is inevitable, we see how it has changed our everyday living and lifestyles, and in the hospitality and tourism industry it is becoming more essential to constantly understand the online phenomenon. Social media has already become a platform for customer engagement and a reputation management channel and is among one of the best booking decision influencers. Therefore hotels and restaurants need to implement a strategy to form part of that journey consistently to gain competitive advantage.

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