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USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ROMANIAN HERITAGE CONSUMPTION. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Case
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O35, O33

Abstract

Today, the high level of use and interaction of Social Media influences greatly the business environment which is thus exposed to a paradigm shift, where hierarchies fall apart and the communication and collaboration create wider and wider networks for the employees and all the partners of the organizations. All the economic sectors, including the tourism and services, are affected. In this spirit, this paper discusses the opportunities and challenges that emerge from the contemporary Social Media evolution for promoting the tourism potential of a country or region. We have noticed changes facilitated by the Web 2.0 related technologies regarding the delivery of information, and the relationship with the modern tourist. According to this information, we have come to several conclusions and recommendations in order to increase the visibility and consumption of Romanian heritage in the 2014 -2020 time horizon.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the use of Social Media is wide-extended, regular and necessary, confirming the Tim Berners-Lee's assumption, that the Web is more a social creation than a technical one. Traditionally defined as a plurality of Web applications supporting creating and exchange of user-generated content (Levin, 2013), we may see Social Media as a cultural phenomenon, enhancing interpersonal communication and changing the nature of relationship between individual and society. In this sense, Social Media influences our shopping – (Siricharoen 2012), relationships – (Radu 2012) and education – (Prensky 2001), (Cao and Hong 2011), (Necula 2012). Also, as shown in (Wolfe and Crotts 2011), (Vidru 2012), (Deiser and Newton 2013), organizational models tend to include the Social Media applications. Used properly, these applications may help overcoming the information overload, differentiate the business and provide the young generation access to relevant information at any time, from any place in their preferred medium – (Schwinger et al. 2008).

In the context of tourism seen as an information-intensive industry, Social Media tools are increasingly relevant as part of practices affecting touristic offers – (Cureteanu, Isac and Lile 2010), (Munar and Steer Jacobsen 2014). Social Media plays a significant role in many aspects of tourism, especially in information search and decision-making behaviors, tourism promotion and in focusing on best practices for interacting with consumers – (Meehan et al. 2006), (Zeng and Gerristen 2014), (Hajli and Lin 2014). The increasing consumer involvement in this area causes a major perspective shift, where the passive marketing and advertising methods (television, flyers and so on) tend to be replaced by interactive Web 2.0 tools, such as wikis, blogs, social networks, podcasting, RSS feeds – (Roque and Raposo 2012), (Reino and Hay 2014). A need for alignment of the touristic offer to the consumer needs appears in this context.

2. Problem definition

Romania has a cultural heritage of great value and attractiveness, which must be transmitted to the young generation. As described in (Negru a and Yolal 2012), for the Romanian young and highly educated people, the most important reasons which attract them to cultural tourism activities are the novelty and learning experience. Knowing this, the marketing strategies and policies should be more oriented to these characteristics and should address in an adequate manner the target group consisting of digital natives, strongly and internationally oriented to interaction, collaboration, participation and continuous exchange of opinions, suggestions and feedback.

In our opinion, one of the best ways to renew and stimulate the heritage consumption in Romania is by using projects – in order to encourage innovation, creativity, diversity of opinions and also to bring a financial support which cannot be neglected. Furthermore, project managers should not ignore Social Media. The use of instruments specific to projects might bring numerous benefits in all stages of the project and positively influence the relationship with the target group, during the entire duration of the project and even after the project is finished. The flexibility of the communication instruments specific to Social Media could be exploited by the project team in order to keep a high level of interest shown by the target group during the whole period of implementation of the project. The communication platforms used in the projects nowadays might include wiki pages which make possible the access to the relevant information as hypertext, blogs managed by the project team members so that their activities might be presented in a much more agreeable way than reports addressed to the target group, interactive calendars which present the main events in the project, newsletters, forums and chat rooms which allow the group members communicate and debate on the problems as well as satisfactions, or even YouTube channels which present the activities and the results of the project in a way which is as close to reality as possible.

In this spirit, we tried to identify the way the traditional processes regarding the interaction of tourist with the providers of cultural offers have modified as a consequence of projects implementation. We focused, in our analysis, on the use of Social Media tools in the cultural projects financed through structural funds between 2007 and 2013, in the framework of Regional Operational Programme.

3. Material and method

In August-September 2014, we identified the projects dedicated to tourism sustainable development and promotion of tourism co-financed through Regional Operational Programme 2007-2013. In the framework of the Priority Axis no. 5, "Sustainable development and promotion of tourism", the Major Intervention Domain 5.3 "Promoting tourism potential and creating the necessary infrastructure to increase Romania's attractiveness as a tourist destination", there were a total of 393 financed projects, from which 42 cancelled, 219 still implementing, and 129 completed. We selected 45 projects contracted and completed until 1.10.2014, whose general objective was to stimulate the heritage consumption by presenting church and monastery complexes, monuments and architectural ensembles and art, urban ensembles, historical and archaeological sites, the specific architecture of villages in the

Romanian historical provinces, woodworking, costumes, art decoration, traditional religious and ethno-cultural events, fairs and ethnographic museum exhibitions outdoor or exhibition pavilions. In this study we wanted to reveal the types of activities traditionally offered by the tourist provider which have been opened to the public by means of their websites, the form of presenting the information necessary to the public, as well as to identify the means of real-time interaction with tourists, and the level of representation of cultural objectives in Web 2.0. The list of analyzed projects is presented in **figure no. 1**.

Furthermore, we will present the main findings of the study.

4. Results and discussion

We identified a number of 38 proprietary websites developed as results of analyzed projects. The great majority of information is offered as hypertext, being accessible by means of structured menus differing from one website to the other. The information is varied and sufficient, updated and presented in an attractive manner. A good merit should also be granted to the photo galleries, with representative images of the cultural assets. The video information is offered by 56% of the websites. The live broadcasting web cams are to be found only on approximately 5% of the websites, digital interactive maps on 10% of the analysed websites.

Forms of virtual interaction with tourists on the analysed websites are:

- Forums, in 25% of cases. Unfortunately, not all forums are well maintained (3 of them are non-functional) and part of them are not updated (in the sense that there are no messages at all);
- Suggestions and complaints pages which can be filled online;
- Messaging, either directly to the site or by email (all websites offer an email address at contact).

Analysing the website of projects we have noticed they actually lack on Web 2.0 specific social networks (like Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, blogs etc.). Taking for example Facebook, one of the most popular social networking platforms and analysing the pages of those projects present on this environment, we obtained the data in **figure no. 2**.

There is a huge discrepancy between the number of potential visitors of the cultural assets and the number of "Likes" on the Facebook page of the projects. In our opinion, public administration agencies and the private direct beneficiaries of the projects should consider the openness towards the tourists also in these environments, currently more and more popular, and extremely visited especially by younger users.

The web pages belonging to the analyzed projects **have not shown other Web 2.0 services offered to users** – such as blogs, wikis, mobile applications, RSS feeds, podcasting, excepting the virtual tours, presented on 2 websites.

5. Conclusions

Following the observations gathered from the 38 project websites, we have the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. We can talk about innovation within the interaction with tourists due to the movement of heritage promotion towards the virtual environment. There is an enhanced tourists' comfort in gathering information about cultural Romanian sights, several activities can be undertaken from home, with a minimum time due to the Internet;

2. Some projects are more innovative than others, but the beneficiaries seem not to collaborate and share new marketing and advertising methods. The possible explanation probably lies in the non-competitive environment where they function. Although there have been some interesting initiatives (3D maps, virtual tours etc.), they are completely isolated. The unanimously adopted virtual promotion solutions are simple and ineffective, such as hypertext, menus and photo galleries;

3. The cultural assets promoted by projects are not visible enough on Web 2.0. We recommend that the environments of this type shall not be ignored (according to the newest estimations, Facebook includes over 7,5 millions Romanians!). In Web 2.0, the environment itself may remodel and renew the message, making it attractive in form for a certain target audience never addressed before.

The success and progress recipe to improve the relationship with tourists by means of Social Media tools include, we believe, a correct financing (which is possible in 2014-2020 time horizon and should not be missed), a sustained, coherent and steadfast management of innovation, partnerships with other similar agencies and with the public sector. The constant intensification of these parameters may lead to the increase of tangible, intangible, mobile and non-mobile cultural and spiritual heritage values consumption in Romania.

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