



MAKING INFORMED TRAVEL CHOICES

The role of user-generated content

Travel planning and booking on the web are among the most popular online activities and online travel sales are growing at an explosive rate. More than 200 million travel-related searches are now carried out on the internet each month (Bray, 2007), and about 95% of internet users rely on information from the web as part of their travel information search (Plog research cited in Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006, p810).

A significant driver of this huge growth is the evolution of the web and the way it's now being used.

This next stage of the web's development, commonly called 'Web 2.0', refers to the tools and processes that allow anyone to create digital content and collaborate with others without needing the skills of a computer programmer.

Much of this takes place through web-based communities and hosted services, such as social-networking sites, wikis and blogs. Millions of people use social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook every day.

The travel industry is a major beneficiary of this trend and the term 'Travel 2.0' is often used for the application of Web 2.0 to online travel.

Sharing and collaboration

User-generated content (UGC) is the basis for information sharing and collaboration on the net and is increasingly relied upon by potential holiday makers when planning and booking trips online.

In addition to commercial information, a conventional holiday booking website may offer UGC such as reviews, tips and images of holiday destinations supplied and edited by travellers.

A 2007 survey conducted by Tourism NSW, Australian Regional Tourism Research Centre and Victoria University *The Influence of User-Generated Content on Tourist Travel Behaviour* showed that tourism operators and destination marketing organisations cannot afford to ignore the growing popularity of websites using UGC.

Despite the fact that UGC gives marketers less control over the messages consumers receive about their products, the research showed that brands that exploited two-way communication through UGC sites would be more successful than those which relied solely on one way marketing.

Additional sources of information

Of the survey respondents 46% indicated they had visited some form of UGC site and 88% of non-UGC users would find a UGC site useful in the future.

Of existing UGC users, 78% searched for destination information, 77% searched for accommodation options and 46% searched for other travel related services.

They saw UGC sites as 'additional sources of information' and 73% agreed it was preferable to read consumer reviews about a hotel than rely on a hotel's description of itself.

These additional sources of information help facilitate travel planning by giving consumers ideas about what to do at a destination and enabling them to evaluate alternatives, thus increasing confidence in decision making and reducing risk of uncertainty.

Just over half of the respondents indicated they would make a final choice about booking a trip due to the influence of UGC and 28% used UGC sites after they had already chosen their destinations and were seeking accommodation options.

The majority of survey respondents found UGC travel sites through Google (76%), by accident when looking for travel information (45%), followed by recommendations of family and friends (32%).

When it came to trusting online travel information sources, users and non-users of UGC rated State tourism websites the most trustworthy at 91%, followed by travel agents' websites at 71%, then information from commercial operators or accommodation providers at 61%.

Business benefits of UGC

Despite concerns about travel-related UGC such as contributor anonymity, subjectivity of opinions, and honesty and accuracy of content, UGC offers significant business benefits.

The consumer review of UGC sites showed they provide relevant and up-to-date consumer feedback on products and services.

They increase consumer loyalty to websites that contain UGC due to the ongoing development of content and dialogue on key issues.

UGC sites increase the likelihood of consumers having a good opinion of a business and enhance cross selling opportunities for different products or services.

In addition they have an enhanced ability to convert consumers from 'observers' to 'purchasers' due to their trustworthiness of consumer reviews – increases of conversion of up to 10% have been reported.

Recommendations

Ensure websites using UGC are easily found through search engines, particularly using keyword searches.

Ensure content is honest, transparent and allows the viewer to see who is responsible for the content provided. Users are astute enough to know when travel operators and other tourism organisations are attempting to manipulate content.

UGC websites need to be designed so they are:

- easy to learn
- allow tasks to be easily remembered
- are insightful
- promote efficient use of web space.

A summary of the survey is available [here](#).