How Travel Agencies' Websites and Consumer-generated Content Useful for Planning of Graduation Trips

Josiah Tin Yan Chan
Lingnan University
Hong Kong
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ABSTRACT

The practice of Hong Kong’s university students taking graduation trips is becoming increasingly popular, and many travel agencies are interested in this market. However, they often fail in appealing to young customers, possibly due to unappealing websites and a lack of capability in using consumer-generated content. The characteristics of the students’ searching practices also place many travel agencies at a disadvantage. By conducting a qualitative focus group investigation, this study identifies a number of practical recommendations to help travel agencies improve their websites and benefit from consumer-generated content when trying to appeal to the younger generation and potentially expand their future business.

Keywords: Qualitative Analysis; Marketing Channels; Corporate Website; Consumer-generating Content; Graduate Trip; Travel Agency
INTRODUCTION

Consumers normally collect information through various channels such as advertisements, word-of-mouth, marketer-generated information from websites, comments from other consumers or from unedited comments and stories they find online in the course of their information searches (Gretzel, 2006). Websites have been important sources of such information for some time, and such sites are widely believed to be costless channels for promoting marketers’ services or products and for capturing more business opportunities (Law, 2007; Klein et al., 2004). However, consumers who gather information from online sources increasingly show greater interest in products or services that are promoted by other users, rather than information obtained from marketer-generated sources (Bickart & Schindler, 2001).

It has been widely observed that consumer-generated content through blogs, podcasts, wikis or personal comments on websites is getting more important from a marketers’ perspective, and that YouTube has been growing more influential in recent years (Susarla et al., 2012). Branding through consumer-generated content is one of the practical applications that can be more effective and cost-saving for service providers (Gretzel, 2006). However, the unedited information provided by consumers can be either beneficial or harmful to a company, because readers tend to trust the senders’ motives and credibility.
The author has observed that graduation trips by final year university students are very popular nowadays in Hong Kong. However, many industry practitioners, especially outbound travel agencies, have failed to gain a significant market share of this business through internet technology. Very few players have successfully developed marketable travel websites that fulfil consumer needs and stimulate business growth. Obviously, most travel agencies fail to use the potential of consumer-generated content to draw the attention of young consumers. In this regard, this study intends to help industry practitioners to better understand the following: 1) how members of the younger generation and in particular graduating students search for travel information to plan their graduation trips, 2) the importance and effectiveness of websites and consumer-generated content in tourism marketing and 3) how to design suitable strategies to better promote travel agency services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gursoy and McCleary (2004) stressed the importance of understanding the ways by which consumers acquire knowledge and information for making their purchase decisions. Ho and Liu (2005) confirmed that the Internet has become one of the major media for information searches, and they proposed a number of online searching styles. Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) suggested that the sequence of clicks involved in evaluating an alternative could ultimately lead consumers to particular decisions. This observation was consistent with that of Alvarez
and Asugman (2006), who suggested that consumers evaluate the credibility of information based on their attitudes and beliefs towards the sources. All of these studies indicated that online searching behaviour was both important and complicated.

The effects of internet technology on travel agencies have not been totally negative. Many studies have confirmed the potential added value of the traditional business mode. Very few people doubt the effectiveness of website promotions or other modern channels for generating additional businesses through cyberspace. The main question has been how great a contribution these channels can potentially generate. Jones’ research (2011) indicated that the selections of hotels by travellers could be partly driven by searches conducted through websites, and by the ways that consumers use the websites’ search facilities. Thus, website quality could be an influential factor in attracting business.

Researchers have identified various criteria of website quality and of effective design in relation to the consumers’ online purchasing behaviour (Klein et al., 2004; Debicka, 2012; Liang & Lai, 2002; Law, 2007). In reality, the quality of travel websites varies mainly in terms of content and layout design (Law, 2007). Numerous studies have discerned criteria for assessing website success: download time, navigation, technical adequacy, specific content, content quality, appearance, responsiveness, availability of important features and viability of
the website owners (Cai et al., 2004; Jeong et al., 2003; Wong & Law, 2005; Wu, 2004; Nysveen et al., 2003). Several factors have been shown to affect consumers’ online purchase intentions, such as the dimensions of information quality, sensitivity, content, time, balance between product promotions and purchase motivation, customisation and marketing influence, availability of value-added service, flexibility for consumers to search and make purchases, the market structure and product complexity in the adoption of online booking, and information search behaviour (Klein et al., 2004; Lo et al., 2004; Law et al., 2004; Jeong, 2002; Chang et al., 2004; Law, 2007).

Many airlines have designed websites that aim to bypass intermediaries and distribute tickets to the end users (Klein et al., 2004). However, the customers’ initial appreciation for this convenient shopping and the high transparency of information on these websites later turned to suspicion, because the consumers were uncertain about the products and the sales channel. The online prices were not lower than those on offer by traditional travel agencies. In many cases the online information search was time consuming and even troublesome. These findings resembled those of Law and Lau (2004). Although most services could be performed on the Internet, the consumers’ needs for personal services and for help in overcoming existing technology barriers meant that traditional travel agencies were still necessary. Law et al. (2001) studied the effect of websites on traditional travel agencies in Hong Kong. The
potential threat of disintermediation did not affect travel agencies at the early stage of website development. Many practitioners believed that the Internet could provide value-added services to their consumers. Some travel agency managers believed that their website should be a marketing tool for information searches, but not a sales channel. Some practitioners did not fully use the functions of the Internet due to their limited expertise and resources, or because they simply did not realise the full potential of the Internet. In some cases, the unattractive appearances of websites, the consumers’ preferences for personal services or worries over online security were factors of concern to customers.

Bickart and Schindler (2001) believed that consumer-generated content might have greater credibility than market-generated information, because the consumers posting such content were perceived as having no interest in manipulating other consumers. The information given by consumers seemed relevant to other consumers due to their similarities in identity and in the benefits they desired. Moreover, consumers showed more empathy with the information shared by other consumers, and they felt that consumer-generated information was more persuasive.
METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study to explore the channels by which students collected travel information, and to solicit their comments on corporate websites and consumer-generated content. The aim was to enable the design of effective promotional strategies for travel agencies through various online channels.

Two focus groups were conducted in late March and early April, composed of 11 final-year students in three tertiary institutions in Hong Kong who were planning for their graduation trips. Both groups were asked to recall how they searched for travel information and to consider their online navigation experiences in the previous two months as they planned for their graduation trips. To better serve the research objectives and make contrasts between two groups, the first group was asked to surf the Internet over several days before the focus group meeting, specifically looking at the websites of three popular outbound travel agencies in Hong Kong. The second group of participants was asked to surf the Internet looking at some well-known online forums that allow consumers to post messages and at some other channels with consumer-generated content that could be used in searching for travel information. Under the assumption that only travel agency’ websites were available to the first group, and only consumer-generated content was available to the second group, the respondents were asked to plan for their graduation trips. Both groups were asked to record comments on their
experiences as users and to propose improvements for the online channels they focused on.

As this study was exploratory in nature, the questions tended to be broadly focused, without proposing any hypotheses with respect to consumer behaviour or the consumer’s decision process. The semi-structured questions in this focus group study were expected to solicit their perceptions regarding different kinds of online information sources and the influence these sources had in planning graduation trips. Purposeful sampling was adopted to ensure a sufficient supply of relevant information from the right targets. The small sample yielded in-depth understanding and insights rather than empirical generalisations.

Each focus group lasted for about 60 to 70 minutes and was conducted in Cantonese in a quiet environment at a university. The data collection process was interactive in nature, as the author served as the only interviewer and sometimes prompted the participants with questions to deepen their conversations. The author requested verbal or non-verbal clarifications during the respondents’ discussions at moments when observations needed to be further verified. The respondents’ words and phrases were used as the basis of further inquiries, so that agenda of the discussion still belonged to the respondents. The author also used planned prompts after the participants’ responses to encourage continued discussions and deeper descriptions. Content analysis was adopted to identify the characteristics of the respondents’ observations.
in a systematic manner. To develop an understanding about the participants’ perceptions of different online channels and the influence these sources had on their plans for graduation trips, the author examined each respondent’s actual replies and feelings. The respondents’ conversations were interpreted with a particular focus on patterns or themes through a grounded theory analysis procedure (Strauss & Corbin 1998). This analysis allowed tacit understandings to be formed concerning systematic ideas or frameworks, without imposing any prior definitions. In other words, the key ideas were developed from the respondents’ experiences and replies, rather than from the interviewer’s hypotheses. After each group session, the author attempted to interpret the data and then reviewed his own interpretations to reach a final version of the findings.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Travel information search behaviour**

The participants’ searching behaviour proved to be irregular, as the respondents did not have a very consistent pattern in looking up travel information. Unexpectedly, both groups of respondents claimed that focusing on one type of information source (either travel agency websites or consumer-generated content sites) was insufficient to help them in planning for their graduation trips. Thus, they searched for information from many other sources, as predicted by Gretzel (2006). The participants believed that the information found on different
channels served different purposes. For instance, some of them searched for destination information from tourism boards, and others preferred to collect destination information from forums or social media, to learn about the hot spots or trends among young people. Many respondents surfed airline and hotel websites to look for official information before looking for travel agencies to compare the prices. Price comparisons and initial understandings about destinations or popular attractions were the key motivations for surfing on travel agency websites, as the participants assumed that the tour packages organised by travel agencies usually covered the most important sightseeing spots.

About half of the respondents also searched for travel information from travel portals that carried sales of hotel rooms or air tickets, as these websites usually provided comments from other consumers. Moreover, half of the respondents valued travel magazines, which regularly promoted new and trendy destinations. Two respondents claimed that they relied heavily on travel guidebooks, which were mainly written by famous travellers or bloggers. Another two participants read the free newspapers distributed around their campus or through their mobile apps, as these publications always carried some interesting travel information.

Interestingly, the respondents assumed that their likelihood of purchasing trips through travel agencies was very low, due to the nature of their desired trips, prices and compositions of participants. The respondents preferred to arrange trips by themselves, as travel agencies
could not satisfy their particular interests in terms of prices and activities. Only a few of the participants said they might purchase airline tickets through an agency if the price was attractive. Nonetheless, almost all of the respondents felt it was possible that corporate websites might affect their intentions to purchase from a travel agency or another source in the future. The participants had preconceived images or understandings about travel agencies, and their experiences of navigation on corporate websites further confirmed their beliefs. In other words, the website and online experience might not attract graduates to purchase packages for their graduation trips, but these sites could be influential for their future purchases of travel services.

Comments on travel agencies’ websites and consumer-generated content

The first group of respondents navigated the websites of three leading outbound travel agencies in Hong Kong. Their comments on these websites and other channels were not based on statistical analysis or scientific research. Instead, the respondents’ subjective opinions and experiences were directly recorded.

These participants felt that the designs of most websites were satisfactory, but there were great variations in their appearance and attractiveness. Written descriptions and photos were the most common kinds of content offered, and the participants appreciated having pop-ups that showed key information or promotional messages. Some fancy web-pages or specific online
functions required relatively longer downloading time, but still the downloading time was generally acceptable. There was one exception to this pattern, as one of the websites was sometimes difficult to access. Online booking systems were available on some of the websites. Email enquiry systems were generally available, but their efficiency in providing replies varied.

One website displayed information with ‘the latest updating date’, and so the respondents assumed that the information was accurate and up-to-date. However, when a respondent made phone calls to verify the accuracy of the information online, it was discovered that some prices were no longer valid and the itinerary was amended. Similar problems were identified by another respondent, as some ‘popular tours’ were always available with very similar descriptions and information. Thus, the respondent was puzzled over whether the display was still updated long after it had been posted online.

Due to the intangibility of travel services, the travel agencies’ brands and reputations were critical in affecting the consumers’ choices. Thus, most agencies tried to highlight their outstanding performances by displaying the prizes, social recognitions or statements of consumer appreciation that they had received. However, one respondent expressed concern over the authenticity and comprehensiveness of consumer opinions displayed on the website.
One website allowed tour members to express opinions online, but all of the comments available expressed appreciation for the outstanding service or the happy experience of joining the tours. As the display was not in real time, the respondent suspected that the information was screened by the agency.

In most cases, the information on websites was clearly presented. Most websites were able to provide information in an understandable way, and the users could find the information they wanted in a user-friendly manner. Chinese was believed to be the major language used for serving the consumers in town, but English and simplified Chinese versions were also available on some websites that catered to different markets. Most respondents felt that the websites were designed as marketing tools, and their main purpose was to provide information. Thus, the websites’ sales or online reservation services were not well accepted. This observation matched that of Law et al. (2001). The agency websites provided wide variety and usually offered a wealth of information to stimulate the consumers’ interest in their companies’ travel products. However, some respondents expressed concerns about the overloading of information, which implied that the information provided was too rich, and the consumers might get confused or tired in looking for relevant information.

One respondent recalled his experience of navigating in an agency members’ column. He
hoped to enjoy membership privileges or cash discounts when joining a guided tour, and was thus motivated to go through a lengthy membership registration process. Unfortunately, he was disappointed to find that the members’ column provided very little additional information, and the exclusive benefits were not much different from those offered to non-members. His level of satisfaction was further lowered when he discovered that the benefits were bound with unfriendly restrictions.

The second focus group was assigned to view a number blogs, discussion forums and social media platforms that carried consumer-generated content. These participants looked at forums, social platforms or hotel and air ticket-selling platforms that allowed consumers to input comments. They also visited some blogs written by famous travellers, writers or anonymous travellers who were simply sharing their experiences. These participants commented that the information from these user-generated channels was up-to-date, trendy and fit the tastes of young people. Most importantly, the participants believed that the consumer-generated information they saw was unbiased and non-commercial, and could thus provide fair and helpful references.

The respondents considered the reputations of content providers to be important, and so they found the views of some famous writers, travel bloggers, or even artists to be extremely
influential. The participants commonly felt that the attractions and restaurants recommended by such sources were must-go attractions of their trips, although some of them were concerned about the affordability of recommended luxury restaurants. The respondents also treasured the sharing of views on forums or social media platforms. The opinions offered there were widely diverse, but the participants believed that such information truly reflected the quality and worthiness of certain attractions or restaurants. Only two of the respondents questioned the credibility of the consumer-generated content, in cases where the comments were extremely positive or extremely negative. However, these participants still tended to trust and follow the recommendations if they seemed reasonable. The credibility of the user comments was not doubted at all when the content provider disclosed the commenters’ identities or showed their faces. In those cases, the respondents assumed that the comments represented real experiences of other travellers, who would get no benefit from cheating other travellers.

Some respondents were impressed by the platforms’ nice pictures, with interesting notes on the attractions, close-up images of the delicious foods, or overviews of the attraction spots, which were appealing and practical for both planning and actually visiting those spots. In general the content on these consumer-generated forums or blogs was significantly more appealing to the participants than the wordy reports that were offered in travel agency
websites. The visual effects of the user-generated contents played a significant role in drawing the readers’ attention.

**Practical implications for travel agencies**

The corporate websites generally failed to gain the young participants’ attention or trust, and these sites were thus unlikely to produce successful business deals with young people seeking graduation trips. However, these websites did serve the important function of building up a corporate image, which could potentially lead to future business. The respondents also considered that travel agency websites were useful for providing basic information about destinations and popular tourist attractions during the trip-planning stage, although these young customers might not find the travel products on offer very appealing.

The participants observed that travel agencies were commonly unable to use consumer-generated content to promote their products or services. The agencies used some spokespeople in introducing their services, but the participants’ perceptions were that such presentations were generally very commercial and were unpersuasive in many cases. Most of the consumer-generated content focused on airlines, hotels, attractions and restaurants, but comments on travel agencies were very rare. In other words, travel agencies were not very capable in using of this effective tool to promote themselves. A few respondents proposed that
travel agencies should use consumer-generated content to make themselves better known and more competitive, especially towards the younger generation.

The respondents suggested several techniques for making use of consumer-generated content in promotions. They considered photos as the top priority to draw readers’ attention, and urged that the travel agencies needed to ensure that all photos shown were real and accessible in the trip. Also, one respondent made an interesting point that the photos uploaded on forums or in other consumer-generating content should not be too professional. If the photos were always up to professional standards, she might question the originality and authenticity of that information.

The respondents generally perceived that videos or microfilms had great appeal on online channels. These respondents were interested to know and see more about insider tips or personal comments on peoples’ trip experiences. In this regard, two respondents suggested that travel agencies should produce videos, similar to the travelogues broadcast on TV. One respondent also suggested supplementing the information on attractions with easy-to-follow recommendations for itinerary planning. However, some respondents clearly stated that such information did not necessarily relate to the business of travel agencies. One participant reported watching travelogues on TV and appreciating the programmes, but in many cases not
realising which travel agency had sponsored the travelogue. This observation implied that many consumers simply valued free information from all possible sources, but were not concerned about the brand of the information provider. Thus, the travel agencies should more regularly display their logos or create icons to promote their identities.

**LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Although many travel agencies have learned from experience and significantly improved their websites with respect to the scope of functions, information retrieval and convenience of doing transactions, there are still serious issues that may irritate many users. The websites are positioned as marketing tools, with a main purpose of delivering information. Thus, the recency and accuracy of information available online is critical. Other attributes such as downloading time, overall appearance and ease of information searches are also considered important from the users’ perspective, although the quality of these features varies greatly among the websites of different travel agencies.

The author admits that the findings of this study are brief and preliminary concerning the development of marketable websites, as the respondents were university students aged around 22, who had limited business experience and a relatively narrow range of viewpoints. Moreover, the respondents were unable to actually use all of the booking procedures, and so
the potential functions of the websites were not fully explored. Clearly the results are
certainly not generalisable to all young people, beyond those represented in this study. With
the above-mentioned limitations in mind, the author considers this study to be a brief,
exploratory effort that can serve to arouse interest in reviewing the website performance of
outbound travel agencies in Hong Kong and to generate greater concern for the influence of
consumer-generated content.

Despite these limitations, this study makes a valuable contribution towards understanding
how young people (and particularly the graduates of tertiary institutions in Hong Kong)
search for travel information and plan their graduation trips. The observations offered here
may provide insights that enable industry practitioners to better attract this segment of the
tourism market, or other groups of tourism customers.

This study provides several important insights, namely that consumer-generated content plays
a crucial role in young peoples’ purchasing decisions, and that corporate website promotions,
no matter how good they are, cannot compete with user-generated content in closing business
deals. Moreover, the respondents clearly indicated that their website surfing experience
influenced their perceptions of travel agencies and their future purchasing decisions, so that
corporate websites are crucial for image building, and their effects on customers can be
long-lasting. The nature of the trips offered and the degree of user participation may affect the consumers’ motivation to purchase through a travel agency. Thus, travel agencies may consider seeking a broader appeal and putting less effort into attracting specific types of business segments (such as students taking graduation trips in this case).
REFERENCES


