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Influencer Marketing in Travel and Tourism

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In the 2012 edition of this book, Volo (2012) describes a new, decentralized communication paradigm based on Web 2.0 that allows tourism marketers to directly and personally connect to customers. While this is still the case, this social media-supported marketer-consumer conversation space has become incredibly crowded. Both marketer and consumer messages might be spread or contested by other consumers or traditional media. In this complex social media-based buzz echoverse (Hewett, Rand, Rust & van Heerde, 2016), it is ever more important for brands to be able to amplify their messages. In addition, platforms like Facebook have developed their display algorithm in a way that makes it increasingly difficult for marketers to organically appear in consumers' social media feeds. At the same time, consumers are adopting ad blocking software at growing rates while also feeling ever more bombarded with information. This fuels a need for information filters and encourages the emergence of a traditional two-step flow of information (Katz, 1957), with opinion leaders pre-processing information and spreading messages to a wider, dedicated audience. These opinion leaders are trusted individuals who offer advice and exercise influence over the opinion of others. In the social media context, these opinion leaders are usually called key opinion leaders (especially in China), or simply influencers.

Influencers are individuals who have the power to affect decisions of others because of their (real or perceived) authority, knowledge, position, or relationship (Businessdictionary.com, 2017). Others have defined influencers as individuals who have an active following and can move their followers to take action (MarketingProfs.com, 2016). Keller and Fay (2016) refer to influencers as:

“everyday consumers who are substantially more likely than the average to seek out information and to share ideas, information, and recommendations with other people. They do this both through volunteering their opinions about products and services that they feel passionate about, and by being turned to for their knowledge, advice, and insights” (p. 1).

Marketers have worked with influencers for a long time. Traditionally, these influencers were celebrities and they were used in advertising to endorse products. Glover (2009) summarizes the benefits of celebrity endorsements as pertaining to capturing an audience's attention, adding credibility, increasing ad recall, achieving synergies between the product brand and the personal brand of the celebrity, as well as increasing brand recognition. She further stresses their importance for tourism marketing, suggesting that destination image and awareness can be significantly influenced through their endorsements. Indeed, the impact of these traditional celebrity endorsements in tourism advertising has been well documented (McCartney & Pinto, 2014; Van der Veen & Song, 2014; Yen & Teng, 2015).

While celebrities continue to be influential in the social media realm, social media also produced so-called grassroots influencers or micro-celebrities who were able to create a following through their engaging and relevant content. McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips (2013) refer to this ability of regular social media users to amass enough social capital to reach a mass audience as the “mega-phone effect” of social media. In contrast to mainstream celebrities who create celebrity value through exclusiveness, social media micro-celebrities establish their value through authenticity and connectedness (Jerslev, 2016). Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) describe social media influencers as working “to generate a form of “celebrity” capital by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic “personal brand” via social networks, which can subsequently be used by companies and advertisers for consumer outreach” (p. 194). Some of these social media stars end up becoming mainstream celebrities (see for example the Chinese backpacker and blogger T40C described by Shao and Gretzel, 2011). Both celebrities and micro-celebrities are increasingly used by marketers to spread messages to targeted audiences on social media; this practice is referred to as influencer marketing.

Definition of Influencer Marketing

Carter (2016: 2) describes influencer marketing as “a rapidly growing industry that attempts to promote products or increase brand awareness through content spread by social media users who are considered to be influential”. Influencemarketinghub.com (2017a) defines influencer marketing as relying on “technology - and a combination of reach, relevance and resonance - to amplify word-of-mouth, either through organic (unpaid) word-of-mouth, traditionally coming from micro-influencers, ... [or] ‘paid’ endorsements, using a combination of macro-influencers, brand advocates, and brand ambassadors” (n.p.). MarketingPros.com (2016) describes influencer marketing as involving marketers connecting with influencers to build mutually beneficial relationships. Swant (2016) suggests that influencer marketing, rather than relying on household names like traditional advertising, takes advantage of “handheld names”, who have developed a sizeable reputation and following on social media. The most important platforms on which marketers employ influencer marketing are: 1. Instagram (used by 89% of marketers engaged in influencer marketing); 2. Facebook and Twitter (both used by 70% of marketers); 3. Youtube (59%); 4. Blogs (48%); and, 5. Snapchat (45% of marketers) (Krasniak, 2016).

What influential means on social media and how it can be identified is the 1-Million-Dollar question of influencer marketing. Inkybee (2016) proposes that the most important metrics of influence are: size of audience, how often they post, level of engagement and search engine optimization-based metrics. Specifically looking at bloggers, Solis (2008) lists traffic to the blog, links back to the blog, amount of subscribers to the feed and grasp of the industry as important measures that determine influence. Radey (2015), however, suggests that reach might not be as important as relevance and passion, and that real influence is not a matter of social media followers, as they can easily be amassed or even faked. Similarly, Krasniak (2016) reports that authenticity matters the most, while Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) stress alignment with the brand. De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2016) report that high numbers of followers increase popularity perceptions and likeability of an influencer but might also negatively influence perceptions of the product’s exclusivity. eMarketer (2015) finds that most influencer marketers select influencers based on their social profile, verified traffic data and demographics and that page rank and search optimization standing are less important selection criteria. What is

surprising is that influencers have become almost as important as traditional word-of-mouth from family and friends, with 56% of Twitter users reporting that they rely on recommendations from friends and 49% reporting that they rely on recommendations from influencers (Swant, 2016).

Not all influencers are equal. Marketers generally divide influencers into the following categories: 1) celebrities; 2) industry experts and thought leaders; 3) bloggers and content creators; and 4), micro-influencers (Influencermarketinghub.com, 2017b). Izea (2017a) uses size of the following to distinguish among micro- and macro-influencers, with micro-influencers having 500 to 10,000 followers. Influencermarketinghub.com (2017a) establishes yet another category, namely that of mega-influencers, with audiences of over 1 million. Current research suggests that while mega-influencers have a lot of reach, micro-influencers make up for their smaller reach through higher relevance and resonance, leading to much higher engagement rates. Morin (2016) advocates that there are also niche influencers that are focused on particular topics like gamers and mom bloggers who are focused on monetizing their social media activities while micro-influencers are often not primarily driven by monetary rewards. Identifying the right influencer for an influencer marketing campaign is therefore absolutely critical to its success.

Influencer marketing is basically marketing to influencers rather than regular consumers but has evolved to encompass specific tactics. Inkybee (2016) describes influencer marketing as involving influencer discovery, influencer outreach, design of influencer campaigns, influencer tracking/measurement and influencer relations. As indicated in the definition above, influencer marketing does not necessarily mean obtaining earned media. Izea (2017a) reports that Kylie Jenner, who has 86.2 million followers on Instagram, receives between \$100,000 to \$300,000 for a single sponsored Instagram post. Even middle-tiered influencers with 400,000 to 1.5 million followers can currently charge around \$5,000 per post (Influencermarketinghub.com, 2017c). However, a recent survey of micro-influencers (less than 5000 followers) shows that they charge on average less than \$250 per Instagram post. It should also be noted that many countries now require influencers to include disclosure statements in their posts if they received money from the brands for which they advocate.

Influencer marketing goes beyond encouraging simple endorsements or message sharing by influencers. Krasniak (2016) lists ongoing brand ambassadorship, product reviews, brand mentions, event coverage, sponsored content and affiliate links as the most important and effective influencer marketing tactics currently used by marketers. These tactics are applied to support various marketing areas. eMarketer (2015) reports that the Top 3 areas for which marketers employ influencers are content promotion, product launch and content creation, followed by other areas such as event management, corporate communications, search engine optimization and crisis management.

Importance of Influencer Marketing

Recent research suggests that influencer marketing is effective. For instance, one study indicates that 40% of respondents have purchased an item after seeing it used by an influencer on Instagram, Twitter, Vine or YouTube (Swant, 2016). The same research also found that Twitter users reported a 5.2 times increase in purchase intent when exposed to both brand and influencer tweets about the product. In accordance with these findings, MarketingDIVE (Kirkpatrick, 2016)

reports that influencer marketing campaigns have the ability to achieve 11 times more return on investment than traditional advertising.

The Top 5 reasons why marketers use influencers in their marketing are 1) improving brand advocacy; 2) expanding brand awareness; 3) reaching new targeted audiences; 4) increasing share of voice (i.e., the percentage of all online content and conversations about the brand in comparison to its competitors); and 5) improving sales conversion (Nanji, 2017b). A report by Social Media Examiner (Krasniak, 2016) adds growing concerns about the rising use of ad blocking as well as ad avoidance by consumers as a main reason.

Various recent studies cement the idea that influencer marketing has become an essential component of social media marketing for a majority of brands. For example, a survey of marketing professionals found that 60% used social influencers as part of their marketing strategies in 2016, mostly to target different or hard to reach audiences (Krasniak, 2016). Morin (2016) indicates that the market value of influencer marketing is between US \$10 and \$15 billion and will continue to grow over the next few years. Izea (2017b) reports that over a third of marketers now spend over \$500,000 a year on influencer marketing. According to Forbes.com (2016b), \$255 million are spent per month just for Instagram posts by influencers. Almost half (48%) of recently surveyed marketers expect their influencer marketing budgets to increase in 2017 (Influencermarketinghub.com, 2017a).

Influencer Marketing Practices

Influencer marketing is still an emerging practice. Nanji (2017) reports that many marketers are still experimenting with influencer marketing and that only 24% have ongoing influencer programs while a mere 5% have integrated influencers across all marketing activities. One of the reasons is that measuring the return on investment of an influencer campaign remains difficult. eMarketer (2015) finds that the main challenges of influencer marketing are 1) identifying the right influencers; 2) finding the right engagement tactics; and 3) measuring the performance of an influencer campaign. Identifying the right influencers is often achieved through the use of tools like blog search engines (e.g. blekko.com and socialmention.com), while Klout, Kred and Peer Index are examples of tools that rank social media influencers based on their “social capital” and activity level.

Calculating the “return on influence” is essential for successful influencer marketing. To establish the return of investment of influencer campaigns, influencer marketers currently use QR codes, coupons, promotional codes and trackable links to be able to connect influencer activities with product purchases. They also increasingly rely on tools like Traackr and Snaplytics or content monetization platforms like rewardStyle to provide them with performance measures (Influencermarketinghub.com, 2017a). Performance measures usually implemented include audience reach, impressions, engagement, sentiment, quality of content and various measures of conversion, e.g. traffic to specific landing pages, growth in followers on brand-related social media channels or increased sales.

In practice, influencer marketing takes many forms beyond getting the influencer to spread a marketing message. For instance, marketers can send freebies/samples or invite influencers to

events. Instameets are often used by destinations or festivals to encourage influencers to create and share content (Queensland, Australia, 2014). Influencer marketing further involves marketers and influencers co-creating content, marketers featuring influencers in their branded posts, influencers being invited to host contests or giveaways, as well as having influencers take over the brand's social media channels. So-called influencer takeovers not only bring fresh content to the brand's accounts but also allow the brand to be exposed to new audiences (SocialMediaToday, 2016). Establishing ongoing relationships with influencers is often seen as key to the success of influencer marketing as this allows influencers to familiarize themselves with the brand, thus leading to more organic content.

Influencer marketing often involves working with an influencer agency. Niche, Socialyte, Viral Nation, The Amplify, Izea and Mediakix are just a few examples of agencies in this space. Some of them are platform specific (e.g. only for Instagram influencer marketing), while others have a broad portfolio of influencers. These agencies not only connect influencers with marketers or their advertising/PR agencies but also groom interested individuals into successful influencers.

A new development in the influencer marketing field is the emergence of platforms and influencer marketplaces that support both companies/agencies and influencers. Influencer marketplaces like Famebit and Octoly allow brands and agencies to post sponsorship opportunities and support collaboration between brands and creators in making branded video content and reviews (Forbes.com, 2016). Other platforms not only offer matchmaking services but also post-campaign analytics and use sophisticated machine learning algorithms to identify and track influencers (Influencermarketinghub.com, 2017d). Importantly, influencer marketplaces/platforms allow marketers to scale their influencer marketing efforts by offering central dashboards for running campaigns, tools to manager influencer relationships and secure payment functions to support transactions with influencers.

Influencer Marketing in Travel and Tourism

Influencer marketing in travel and tourism builds on the importance of word-of-mouth in the travel context (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). Tourism marketers started working with bloggers early on as blogs quickly became important information sources for travel decision makers and therefore valuable media for marketers (Lin & Huang, 2006). Tourism New Zealand's collaboration with Chinese micro-blogger Yao Chen is a prominent and well documented example of early influencer marketing in tourism, which allowed the destination to take advantage of Yao Chen's influence on Chinese travelers (Tourism New Zealand, 2012). A more recent example of influencer marketing in travel and tourism is the case of video blogger (vlogger) Jack Harries of JacksGap and Marriott co-creating travel videos, e.g. 24 hours in New Orleans, which has received almost 900,000 views on YouTube (JacksGap, 2015). Marriott has also worked with the comedian Taryn Southern to produce humorous videos that feature influencers in order to promote their Moxy Hotels brand (Influencer Orchestration Network, 2017).

Various lists of important travel influencers exist. For instance, Neoreach (2016) features Jay Alvarez, an extreme sports enthusiast with over 5 million followers on Instagram and a presence on YouTube and Snapchat as one of the most influential travel social media influencers. Adweek

(2016) lists Kate McCulley who appears as adventurousskate on Instagram and has 95,000 followers (see Figure 1) as an important niche travel blogger and influencer focusing on solo and independent travel for women. Forbes.com (2016b) lists Megan Jerrard, Ann Tran and Scott Eddy as veteran travel social media influencers. Ann Tran, for instance, has over 500,000 Twitter followers and has worked with brands like Marriott and TripAdvisor. Social Media Week (2015) compared travel social media influencers to travel brands and identified eight individuals with more influence than major brands like Kayak, Condé Nast, American Airlines and BB Travel, namely Scott Eddy, Megan Claire, Justin Carmack, Ann Tran, Yasmin, JD Andrews, Paul Jonson and Jeane Beena.

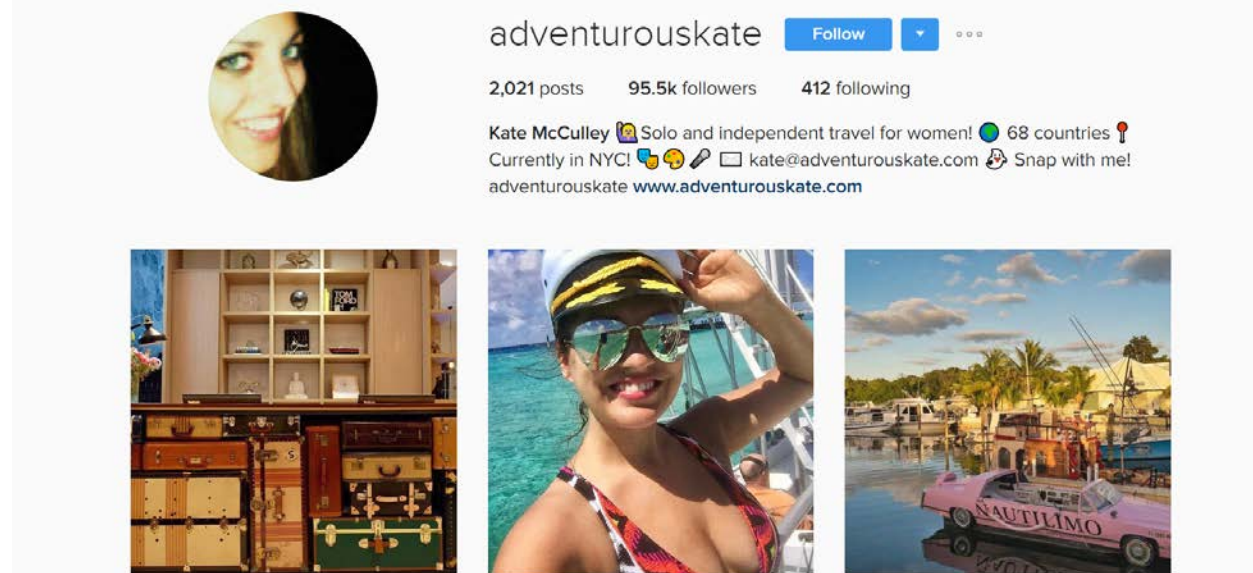


Figure 1. Kate McCulley's Instagram Profile

Traackr (2016), a platform offering tools for influencer relationship management, lists various successful travel-related influencer marketing campaigns. For instance, it describes a campaign by TripIt that involves hosting a monthly interactive #TripItChat session on Twitter in which different influencers offer travel tips for a variety of travel topics. Bloglovin' Influence (2016) provides five successful examples of influencer campaigns by travel brands: 1. Making travel guides with Airbnb and Aspyn Ovard; 2) Finding travel essentials with Proctor & Gamble and Jennifer Chiu; 3) Crossing industries with Moët and Chandon and Collage Vintage; 4) Travel reviews with Celebrity Cruises and World of Wanderlust; and, 5) Viral packing guides with Biaggi Luggage and Rachel Grant. All five examples illustrate the way in which travel influencers lend authenticity to travel brands, help create engaging contents and provide access to specific audiences.

Conclusion

In the age of social media, consumers move from being fans to being producers of promotional content for brands, and from occasional endorsers to micro-celebrity-seeking social media influencers (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Some of these micro- and meso-celebrities have

managed to amass a dedicated following that is eager to receive their recommendations. Marketers can take advantage of these influencers and their ability to reach large/targeted audiences with engaging contents by building mutually beneficial relationships with social media influencers that align with their brands. When done right, such influencer marketing strategies can lead to much better returns on investment than the use of branded content or straight-forward advertising.

Travel marketers have recognized the great potential of message amplification and targeting afforded by travel social media influencers. The promise of travel perks as well as the ability to associate one's personal brand with desirable travel and tourism brands makes travel and tourism an attractive target industry for influencers. One challenge that both travel marketers and influencers face is how to communicate authenticity when influencers are compensated for their endorsements/contents.

An interesting trend in influencer marketing is the emergence of an influencer marketing industry with increased levels of professionalization among influencers, new forms of intermediaries facilitating exchange processes and new technological tools being developed to support the various aspects of influencer marketing. Both make influencer marketing easier and more trackable. Staying informed of the latest influencer marketing trends thus becomes paramount for travel and tourism marketers.

Despite its prominence and practical significance, there is a lack of research that investigates the travel and tourism influencer marketing phenomenon. Important questions of how to conceptualize influence and how to formulate effective influencer campaigns consequently remain unanswered. How consumers perceive travel and tourism social media influencers and what drives the persuasiveness of influencer messages are additional questions that should be investigated in order to inform the theory and practice of social media marketing.

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