Social Media – changing the communication of meeting industry professionals

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1. Introduction

"What's happening?" or "What's on your mind?" are questions people frequently ask their close friends during a conversation or a phone call. However, in social media, they present a new opportunity for business.

Dong-Hun, 2010

Indeed, it has been said that three important shifts have posed significant changes over the tourism industry – the travelling patterns of people, the marketing budgets and the expansion of social media (Guaracino, 2009), where the latter is considered to have brought along many changes to the way we conduct business and communicate about it. The media landscape has dramatically changed over the past decade, with traditional media now being supplemented by social media (Dong-Hun, 2010). Yet, this new media landscape is not very well understood in many of its aspects (Stephen & Galak, 2009). Le Pla (2010) quotes in her research Linda Coles saying "Social media isn't an event, it's a process. It's part of your life like a fitness regime. You don't go to the gym and say, 'Now I'm fit.' You've got to keep going." This analogy with the fitness regime, brings the additional question of *what* is that you want to achieve and what is the *best way* of achieving it – questions well stated throughout the academic literature on the topic of social media, yet not brining as satisfying answers as needed (Dutta, 2010; Landsbergen, 2010; Dong-Hun, 2010; Gardner *et al.,* 2010; Le Pla, 2010; Hosea, 2010; Hargrave, 2009; Parsons, 2009; Easen, no date; Sylvester, 2008).

According to a survey conducted by Sheraton Hotels & Resorts, most people consider social media as something that they could not live without, by rating it close to air and water as a must-have element in their lives. But the same survey also points out to another interesting pattern – people are not really honest with their writing in the different social media channels (Karantzavelou, 2010). This shows the vast gap still existing between them and business professionals, who are pointing that the real value of social media is precisely being personal and honest (Wastnage, 2008; Gardner *et al.*, 2010).

Outside the virtual reality of social media, meetings bring people together, and this is actually the most fundamental job that meeting professionals do. The meetings and events industry is highly social, mobile and collaborative and ideally suited for the online transformation started by the Web 2.0 – the second generation of the web bringing richer

and more efficient means of planning, collaborating, communicating and promoting events (Ball, 2006). Without Web 2.0, there would not be any social media channels existing. No matter the fact of still not fully understanding the social media and the value that it can bring along and how to measure it (Le Pla, 2010), 80 per cent of events utilize some form of social media, according to a survey done by Pinchera (2010).

Due to the limited available journal articles on the topic, and consequently the lack of peer review, this paper will aim at critically analyzing the secondary data available on the subject of social media and how it relates to business communications and further how it changes the communications landscape of meeting industry professionals.

2. Research Question

After conducting a preliminary literature review, the following research question was put forward as a central point of this paper:

"*How is social media transforming the communication of meeting industry professionals in comparison to the wider business community? The case of Meeting Professionals International (MPI).*"

The aim of this research question is to stream the analysis towards the changes that social media brings to the today's business communication, where the emphasis is on meeting industry professionals. The case study of MPI will provide an empirical example that will be aligned to existent academic sources, so that a connection between real life and academic analysis can be established. MPI was selected as a case study since it is one of the biggest international associations of meeting professionals in the world, thus encompassing members and staff from around the world and additionally representing a global and vibrant industry, for which of vital importance is and always will be an effective communication.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Objectives

The current paper is based on a thorough exploratory qualitative research design combined with observation and analysis of an empirical case. It seeks to examine the current state of social media and its use by businesses and mainly meeting industry

professionals. The paper aims at presenting and comparing the traits of social media applied in the wider businesses, and how these are incorporated and utilized by Meeting Professionals International and their members.

For reaching the objectives of this paper, the literature and the analysis of secondary sources were used to create the base of this study. The sources were carefully and critically selected, aiming at achieving maximum reliability. Thus, the most of the articles and publications for this paper stem from EBSCO Host, the university library, as well there were articles obtained from trusted industry corporations and news enterprises. Other sources were MPI's website and its magazine *One+*.

The overall literature review is presented and analyzed in conjunction with the empirical case of MPI in the body of this paper, presenting a direct discussion on the current topics concerning social media in businesses, the tourism industry and the meetings and events industry.

3.2. Research Limitations

The current paper was limited in its analysis to the selected literature. Thus, by the time this paper is completed, there can be information missing or not considered here, even though it might be recognized as information brining in new and important ideas to the topic. The current paper is based on the personal observation of the author, as a member of MPI. Yet, the member-perspective offers a rather limited understanding of the whole picture behind, as well as it relies mostly on the social media channels known and used by the author. The author was not granted access to the communications strategy of MPI, which posed yet another limitation. If the information was provided by the association, it could further the findings of this paper and additionally enrich it. Finally, limitation was presented by the short time period on hand and the allocated space that this paper had to follow.

4. Analysis: Main Feed

4.1. The Business Talking or Reviewing the Literature

Mitra states that social media changes the way we communicate on a global level (Mitra *et al.*, 2009). Ball (2010) – a recognized meeting industry technology guru, on the other

hand says that it is affecting our lives and the society in general, but that it will not affect so much the way we conduct business, especially when it comes to the meetings and events industry. There are various opinions on the contrary of Ball's statement (Sylvester, 2008; Guaracino, 2009; Stephen & Galak, 2009), but before discussing them, a step backwards is to be taken, in order to take a look at the big picture first.

Social media is not suitable for just any business. It is referred to as a game-changing business tool (Le Pla, 2010), and its various benefits have been listed. It is believed that they are the source of what becomes a modern database, while also adding value to the end-consumer, improving education, keeping companies current and after all giving them a human voice (Gardner *et al.*, 2010). It is a good tool for obtaining meta-knowledge – combined knowledge from the various social media channels, while it provides a consumer outreach and an easy two-way conversation with customers on a global level (Mitra *et al.*, 2009). While the benefits provided seem endless, especially towards marketing and branding, most researchers and marketers cannot agree more that it is not for everyone. The fact that competitors employ these channels does not mean that everyone has to quickly embrace them as well (Hosea, 2010). A strategic approach has to be undertaken as with any other communications tool (Dutta, 2010; Bearne, 2009; Landsbergen, 2010; Gardner *et al*., 2010; Le Pla, 2010; Gitomer, 2010; Mitra *et al*., 2009; Bruns, 2010; Hosea, 2010; Sylvester, 2008; Pinchera, 2010).

There are two spheres of social media activity – personal and professional – against the target audience – private and public (Dutta, 2010). It is very important that companies realize where their voice is to be heard, in which channel, targeting which audience and how frequently it should be heard. Dutta (2010) provides a guide for best execution of a social media strategy applicable in every business sector, while Evans (2008) wrote a book on the successful execution of a social media marketing plan that would take over a few months and only an hour a day. But, as stressed above, there needs to be a reason, framed within a strategy, in order to get involved with the social media (Easen, no date). Formulating the content of the message is of prime importance and storytelling appears to be a great way of doing it (Travel Agent Central, 2009). Those, who embark on this journey, should also remember to stay open and personal, adapt to the dynamics of the community, while not exploiting it (Bruns, 2010; Sanders, 2010).

Social media channels are perceived as free or at least cheap (Parsons, 2009; Gardner *et al*., 2010). While they can minimize marketing costs, or costs connected to focus groups, one should be careful with the way social media strategies are executed so that they will not boomerang and result in more money spent on fighting fires (Mitra *et al*., 2009). Sound measurement aids such endeavors. It is not as simple as counting followers or friends (Pinchera, 2010). More complicated tools should be used, such as measuring brand awareness and valuable comments stemming from the discussions (Le Pla, 2010; Thevenot, 2007).

Challenges with this still new communications tool are apparent. Measurement tools are still very complex and not very precise, but the opportunity cannot be missed, as stated by Hosea (2010). The clarity of information and how much individuals are going to put up, with companies willing to make money out of every social medium, is also a question. But, it is certain that it is a long-term game, which is expected to result in long-term loyalty (Easen, no date). And while Ball (2010) argued that it will only change societies, the above arguments clearly show that business have already changed, and a lot, due to the new communications tool. How the meeting industry is transforming is discussed next.

4.2. The Meeting Professionals Talking or the Practical Side

Apart from Ball (2010), the general opinion of meeting professionals is that social media is to be embraced (Sylvester, 2008; Sanders 2010). More than 300 Convention and Visitor bureaus have Twitter accounts (Travel Agent Central, 2009). Yet, as with the rest of the businesses, there are some that are on the opposing side believing that staying disconnected sometimes has more benefits, especially when it comes to a speaker at a conference rejecting personal contact, because s/he has to 'Tweet' (Bradshaw, 2009).

Currently, all social media channels have been adapted to the needs of the meetings and events industry. Twitter and mobile applications are a fact, podcasts, blogs and wikis can be even considered 'old', where Facebook and LinkedIn are two of the most used channels (Ball, 2010). But, the industry has taken a step further. Realizing how important it is in this vibrant industry to stay connected, meeting industry professionals are already incorporating social media by creating individual platforms for separate conferences (Sylvester, 2008). According to three social media monitors – HowSociable.com;

SocialMention.com; Addit-o-Mattic.com – MPI is enjoying a good social presence. Where HowSociable.com rates key words as 'MPI' with 503 points of visibility in all social channels, and 'Meeting Professionals International' with 172 points, it can be said that the real score will be somewhere in between, but definitely MPI is employing most channels on a personal level (e.g. members, staff) and on company level, as it was also supported by the other two monitoring sites. The author investigated Facebook groups, which showed that the different groups were followed by 1543 to 1752 people. And as pointed above, numbers like that do not show any real results, rather the functionality, brought by the groups to the association and their members and staff, is of importance. While, this study presented a limitation in this area of the analysis, due to the lack of access to MPI's communications strategy, it is still concluded that these numbers should be at least considered as valuable representation of the current social presence of MPI and their incorporation of social media.

Creating a personal brand is also a fact in today's meetings and events industry (Sanders, 2010). The industry is fast changing and dynamic, and it can be clearly seen how many professional planners are not only representing their company, but also they are creating a clear personal brand that has its own value. MPI and many of their staff and members are also working on personal brands, which complement each other. MPI aims at providing value to their members, so their membership and association with the organization can show an additional strength to their personal brand. Hiring over social media is not a new phenomenon as well (Mitra et al., 2009; Karantzavelou, 2010). In the meetings and events industry, members of MPI were recently promoting an available position of an event planner through social media channels (e.g. organise_this: We are looking for a new event manager email charlie@organisethis.co.uk for a job description via Twitter (07.12.2010)).

The content of the message was stressed by the general business sector as of primary importance. So have meeting professionals realized. By the observation of the author over the past four months, MPI's staff mostly provides information in connection to education. The links, short messages and discussions over the various social media channels are representing either information that can be used by one's own company, or topics of high importance to the whole industry or the industry in a particular part of the world (e.g. "Keep America Meeting" represented in various groups throughout Facebook and LinkedIn). Other major topics are being dispersed over numerous sub-groups or

separate feeds, where the topic is kept consistently, by providing new updates and thoughts. But most of all the MPI representatives keep their messages with a personal tone and with a regularly high frequency in the top social media channels, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.

Another important trend in the meetings and events industry, especially under the umbrella of MPI is the strong community sense, which has been vastly strengthened with the help of social media. While meeting professionals compete for the same business due to globalization, they show immense consideration for their colleagues and also are eager to learn from one another. A very recent problem with flights going out of Barcelona to other parts of Europe, were having severe delays due to bad weather conditions, just after one of the biggest trade shows of the year, EIBTM 2010. Social media showed how compassionate and helpful meeting professionals are to one another in such tough times (e.g. @GreenA_V tweet from 05.12.2010 "Did u know that power of skype & twitter main reasons I'm leaving BCN 2night? Augmented Serendipity. @ruudwjanssen@rosa_garriga #eventprofs"). Associations such as MPI provide a good platform for making such support possible and bringing it to yet another level.

Meetings and events have to verify their return-on-investment (ROI) to the investors and meeting owners. Social media can be used to add value to investors and attendees alike (Sylvester, 2008), but their ROI is also under a question, especially when measurement tools are not yet perfected. In the meeting industry, the ROI business model has been applied in order to arrive to the percentage of return on investment from the use of social media (Pinchera, 2010). While there are no definite examples that could be found, experiments with proving the value of social media are sure to follow. As meeting professionals have to prove the value of meetings on an everyday basis (Soderberg, 2010), certainly the solution will come sooner than later, to measure and define the treasurable change that social media bring to the fast-paced meetings and events industry.

5. Conclusion and Further Research

The current paper aimed at overviewing the changes brought about by social media in the business context and further represented by the meetings and events industry. The case of MPI aimed at providing an empirical example of steps taken by one of the biggest meeting industry associations worldwide.

Social media clearly represents various benefits when not only at individual level, by satisfying social needs (Landsbergen, 2010), but also on organizational level, by reducing costs, improving the consumer outreach (Mitra *et al.*, 2009) and a providing a human voice (Gardner *et al.*, 2010). Strategy and aligning the content of the message to the corporate vision and mission are seen as viable solutions (Pinchera, 2010; Landsbergen, 2010). Targeting clearly the audience must be considered when making a decision on the content of the message (Hargrave, 2009), and finally ROI measures can help verify the use of this new communications tool (Pinchera, 2010).

While the research presented certain limitations, the author hopes that it provides a useful tool to meeting professionals who attempt on analyzing social media and devising a social media plan. More discussions and research will be needed in the measurement of the value of social media and also on the further development and alteration of social media as a communications tool.

The meeting industry has embraced yet another innovation. Now meeting professionals must focus on which traits they want to use and who will they represent – what is the best suitable way? While the borders between the various uses are still blurred, extra attention must be paid on how this new social innovation is to be adapted. A thought worth considering in today's paced real and virtual realities we all are living in, because the way we communicate has definitely changed.

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