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DIGITAL MARKETING SYSTEM MANAGEMENT FORMEDICAL TRAVEL COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: There appears to be a need in the industry for a guide explaining how to build and benefit such a professional looking online identification as a medical travel agency. The main purpose of this article is to guide the companies on building a successfully working online reputation. **Method:** *The recommendations are made regarding to the experiences of applications made in the author's own medical travel agency as well as the consultancy services given by, and their findings.* **Findings:** *Findings of the article suggest systematical management improvements aiming increasing profitability of the investments made online. In addition, improvements in technical requirements and process communication have a high impact on customer attraction criteria.* **Practical implications:** *The results of this study can be used by the medical travel agencies either with or without professionally working marketing departments aiming to improve their online reputation. Also, as a report for those willing to follow the continuously changing trends of e-marketing in the sector of medical travel.*

INTRODUCTION

Having a successfully built online reputation provides medical travel agencies new channels to reach the customers with very high levels of return-on-investment rates. The way to perform successfully over all the e-marketing channels depends highly on understanding the system and constantly changing trends of digital world and reacting accordingly. In addition to all these, customers must be very well segmented by a professional approach so that the correct channels can be developed to reach them. Unless managed systematically, having very well looking online profiles won't allow the company to benefit digital tools efficiently and cause the company to lose competitive advantage.

According to researches and experiences, on both medical tourism market and on any other markets, it is proved that the key success of the social media management is posting relevantly and systematically, also; the content is significant, similarly to the website. Because the most likely ways that a potential customer can reach the company are over Google or social media.

This paper seeks to provide a guide for medical travel companies aiming to implement a system for increasing their online reputation. Because maintaining in a professional way increases the company's online reputation efficiently, it must be highly prioritized.

In this study it's claimed that mainly, there are 2 ways to achieve success; either by outsourcing or building an online marketing team inside the company. Both ways have pros and cons. Building a team provides the company to have a continuous development chance and to keep the continuously gained e-marketing know-how inner the company and helps to manage their gate to online world in a better and agile way. Whiles outsourcing makes it faster to get into the action directly and also easier to manage; by increasing the maintaining expenses with a rational reason.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, many improvements are going in the field of digital marketing for tourism companies, especially for the ones working in the medical field. Therefore, searches have been made with the keywords can be related with the title, and as the lack of a descriptive guide to build a system was discovered, the decision to write this paper was taken. According to the survey, the authors in [1-4] presented information about the technical side. Each page has to be adequate level of readability score and this can be measured with The Flesch readability index [FI]. Trendy methods should be applied to make necessary improvements for Search Engine Optimization [SEO], Analytics server choosing to catch up with the market requirements. In addition, server choosing should be made by taking into consideration the focal segmentation. Throughout the guide online marketing was considered as one of the most important marketing activities; therefore, most of the literature review was conducted in this field with two distinctive ways of ads and segmentation. Differences between push and pull marketing approaches are given and clarified. Data collection can be collected through a Customer Relationship Management [CRM] software, so that the segmentation can be made accordingly [5,6]. While designing the conversation processes for the online ads, the data coming from previous activities can be used [7,8]. As for all the processes in any company, if available, data should be used for decision-making processes and in digital marketing, this is mostly about building/using models leading to calculate Return on Investment [ROI] to compare the existing options [9-11]. By looking at ROI rates, inner solutions or outsourcing options should be compared, in some cases either one can be more profitable, especially in the beginning phases [12].

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ONLINE EXISTENCE

Because medical travel business focuses on reaching customers from foreign countries, traditional marketing channels are impossible to conduct with reasonable prices and in this situation, it is the best option to navigate modern marketing channels.Website optimization, User Experience Design [UX], and social media management are 3 aspects should be dealt to have a successful online existence.

Website optimization

As online existence for any kind of business starts with owning a website, designing a customer-friendly looking and functional website should be the first step for medical travel agencies and companies. Front-end design, also called as User Interface Design [UI], and the technical background are two fundamental parts of a website.

UI (User Interface Design)

User Interface Design [UI] is a widely used term which means the design of a website that can be seen by the visitors. There are 3 crucial factors of having a successful UI in general; following up-to-date trends, filling the website with relevant contents according to website's purpose, and increasing the readability of the pages. As the customer behaviors are changing very frequently in today's world, following the changing strategies of keeping the attention on a website continuously is also a difficult task for website owners. By hiring an experienced staff for UI or outsourcing this service for the first step, the companies can hold the visitors longer on the website and introduce themselves better. After the attention is kept on the website, relevant content should be filled and separated to the pages appropriately to give the visitor a smooth experience. While filling the content, there are general rules should be obeyed for increasing the readability. As Llinás (et. al.) mentioned, there is a highly used index named The Flesch readability index [FI] which relates text difficulty to word and phrase length and which has its own score range from 0 to 100. It is considered that the page has adequate readability as soon as the score is higher than 60 [1]. By following the trends, filling the content in an appropriate way, and keeping an eye on the scores of readability; a successful UI can be had and the conversion rates from the website can be increased.
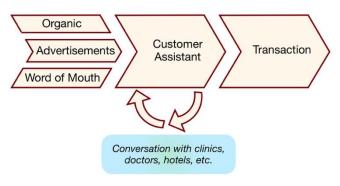
Technical background

For technical background, in addition to UI, there is also a part of a website which should be managed by the experts and cannot be reached by the customers. As the UI is a significant part for the customer experience, the technical background is also a more crucial element for a website as it keeps the website online, collects the visitor data which can be defined as potential customers, and affects the UI directly by increasing/decreasing loading time of pages. In order to track, manage, and plan the customer interactions, a Customer Relationship Management [CRM] application may be installed; by maintaining a CRM, the communication process with the customers can be improved, well-managed and in returns, the conversion rates over the interactions can be increased. To create leads to the CRM autonomously, there are 2 main ways of customer data collection: Over the website visits (organic) and over the ads given on various platforms. Google Analytics [GA] is the most famous and accurate tool for collecting data over website visits. As Podpleska (et. al.) stated, GA offers nearly every metric a website manager can need like bounce rates, average time spends on every page, and specific performances of pages [2]. The other way to collect customer data is through Facebook's official toolkit: Pixel. When it comes to the concordance of UI and technical background, it is highly recommended to conduct the server selection process with experts as the server has a huge impact on the website loading time. The importance of the server location selection can be seen on the following experiment: "We examined the differences in user browsing habits due to location and time of access using an actual proxy trace data. Our tests confirm our hypotheses that server location and time of access indeed have an effect on the heterogeneity of website requests [3]".

UX (User Experience Design)

User experience, one of the most trend terms in marketing these years, is how the information flow/action plan/cognitive process [Fig.1] is conducted. Therefore, this flow must be designed by well-experienced information architects in order to reach to a high level of find-ability as that is one of the most critical success factors. The amount of the information, and the way it is structured, which means how it is built with what type of connections, play the most significant roles. When visual design (aesthetics), UI design and communication process [Fig.1] architecture brought together by correct interaction plans, the system is abler to drive the customer to the point wanted by the company, therefore the whole organization plays a role to bring up the distinctive UX which could bring the success to a company.

Fig. 1: Chart showing the UX process.

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Customer assistant

Customer assistant is located on the point of the value chain where social attributes play the highest important role. Therefore, high level communication skills are required in order to conduct the conversation with a wide variety of people whilst demonstrating a well-prepared vocabulary with an audience-tailored language, listen effectively, offer your ideas appropriately and actively, write clearly and convincingly in order to convince the potential customers reached either organically or by ads. So that the customers can be persuaded. An ideal customer assistant should be able to perform well in any platforms of communication, messages, e-mails, phone calls or even F2F appropriately to ensure the corporate image consistency. In this point, lingual differences may cause significant problems so the company's staff should be prepared/educated in terms of these. In 2004, it was stated that to develop the profile which would provide a competitive advantage, HR is highly responsible for finding the customer support who fulfills the criteria depending on the customer profiles [13]. Hence, a customer assistant should be picked carefully enough, as the bridge between the first touch and sales moment would be under her/his responsibility. And the actions should be optimized periodically to plan improvisations.

Customer regaining strategies

Customer regaining strategies of medical travel agencies should be supported by CRM software in order to keep the track of communication with customers and apply optimization strategies to the UX where necessary. Highest benefit of keeping such track is indeed owning valuable customer data to carry out conversion optimizations. For better conversion optimizations, indeed trendy digital solutions can be used, especially for digital marketing staff who are not highly experienced. In addition, timing strategy is one of the main components of what affects the success of regaining customers. As Thomas, Blattberg, and Fox found, the amount of time spent between first touch and conversion activity is reversed U-shaped; which means that in short and long terms the likelihood of success at reacquisition is lower whiles acting in mid-term (correct timing) means more chance of success [7]. Secondly, it is made easier by design tools specifically for optimization, which allows to configure the designs purposefully, assign them among the users and measure the results by keeping records afterwards [8]. In a nutshell, benefitting such kind of software solutions by the help of an experienced team would affect the company's speed of growth significantly.

Social media management

In today's world of marketing, social media is a must for any business willing exist online; not only to stand out in its field, but also not to have a bad image in the customers' mind. Also, through its usage, a wider audience can be reached either by ads or non-promoted content which is designed accordingly to the relevant customers' segments. Having a vigorous existence on all the major platforms, from LinkedIn to Facebook and more, is almost an obligation for any company willing to increase online reputation to reach the marketing goals by creating a way to engage with the customer more interactive than ever. For so, after planning the customer segmentation, which channels to use should be planned and frequency, content, design, etc. must be planned according to the targets and the corporate language aimed to achieved.

Content planning

In social media management, content planning is what comes right after segmentation, as it is what is seen on the customer's side. From the frequency to the fonts used, any detail of content management is important in terms of matching the customer's demand. However, it should be kept in mind that to me up with a game-breaker-level campaign with astronomic ROI rates, is mostly an eccentric/unexpected campaign which becomes viral by attracting attention of the audience. It is stated by Rababah that most of the SEO models nowadays, neglect the local and cultural characteristics of the audiences [4]. Therefore,

these mistakes should not be made and all the attributes of the content should be in harmony with the audience's demand.

Brand image

Brand image for companies existing solely online is how the company's appearance remains in the customer's mind, therefore consumer behavior/expectation must be taken into consideration well so that the action plan for the brand image can be created accordingly. Besides the content production/design, posting frequency also matters while developing the brand image. As stated by Frick, an experienced team of people who has enough information about who the target audience is and what they need, can develop a strategically designed website by the help of design experts to meet the needs of business and digital marketing [5]. Besides those, the language used within the communication channels of the company should be structured as consumers tend to valuate corporate language more and more nowadays.

REACHING TO CUSTOMERS

Reaching to customers is a long process starting from a lead and ending up with a conversion; which means achieving the goal [Fig. 2]. The main purpose of existing online is firstly to receive leads, and then to convert the leads into sales. While reaching to customers, online ads and getting organic leads are 2 main topics to focus on.

Fig. 2: Lead flow of the customers. (Source: https://fitsmallbusiness.com/lead-generation-ideas/)

Ads

Online Ads, online marketing or internet-based advertising, web advertising or digital advertising; all of are standing for the ads which would drive leads through various channels online by conveying the marketing subject to the potential customers. For medical travel agencies willing to have a good reputation online, SEO and social media features work much more efficiently when supported via investments within various channels of ads. Online ads may become game-changers when used appropriately, however, it takes time to adjust and get experienced. Therefore, to approach strategically, it may be beneficial to get consultation or work with a professional while beginning.

Segmentation

One of the highest crucial and most difficult actions in e-marketing strategy planning for digital advertisements is segmentation, as it is to category customers who has similar characteristics in specific ways useable within marketing, such as; age, location, gender, wealth, interests and spending habits. These categories must be planned by keeping an eye on the features offered by the tools of digital marketing. (E.g. a campaign aiming to sell cheap dental implants should be looking for less-wealthy patients, therefore not only the keywords in Google can be aimed related but also the locations focal searches are made can be purposeful. After matching the segment specifications with demographic/behavioral characteristics, next step is to plan the content and placement of the ads. As that is how the company appears on the customer's screen. Furthermore, it was once stated that the search of advertising managers for the perfect design which decreases the costs and increases the ROI rates is highly crucial [9].Therefore, marketing departments today seek for the viral ads which would attract the attention of potential customers with very low or no costs.

Ad strategy

Like any other marketing campaign, internet-based ads can be categorized into two as push and pull. Search engine ads are to target customers seeking your type of a company, therefore ads given in are considered as pull ads; whiles Social Media ads are to push the message to a relevant audience to attract the attention of people who can be turned into potential customers. To increase the ROI rates of pull ads, focus should basically be on correct placement with correct design of interface (audiovisual content, text, buttons, etc.) to introduce your company/product as best as possible. For push marketing, having a laser-focused audience is the most crucial thing which can increase the ROI rates. As mentioned in 2014, Web 2.0 is thought as to pull marketing, in which the customer is located in the center, unlike the push marketing, where the brand/product has the focus on. Within push marketing, marketing departments aim to serve their products through mass communication channels such as social media. However, as this is a one-way, non-interactive mechanism of communication unless it allows the company's CRM collect customer data. In contrast, this is indeed a non-interactive kind of communication. Whiles in pull type of marketing the products are expected to be pulled by the customers at their own will [6].

Organic

Organic leads have differences from ads such as; breakeven point, as investments for organic leads have next to zero return rates whiles paid ads start bringing results much earlier. Mainly, there are 3 channels for the organic lead, search engine optimization, word of mouth marketing and search engine optimization. When the sources of leads are compared, SEO drives the customers with the highest lead-to-customer close rates. To begin making process of building a strategy for creating organic leads, the order is mostly as follows, get to know about the audience, explain the leads, identify the keywords aimed, observe results.

SEO (Search Engine Optimization)

As most of the lead from organic way comes through search engines, website owners better follow the search engine rules by doing Search Engine Optimization [SEO] in order to come out on the first pages and to get more organic lead. While producing contents for the website, there are some basic conditions can boost the website's SEO score such as adding keywords related to the topic and including backlinks. With a robust communication process between the content producers and website designer, SEO score of the pages can be increased significantly. Constantly, search engines, especially Google, are increasing both the number and the complexity of the regulations should be obeyed. To protect the current place or to be seen on a higher place on the search engines, it is highly recommended that the website should be checked and improved in terms of SEO periodically by an expert.

MANAGERIAL PLAN

It is the most crucial part to manage all the processes regularly and accurately to achieve the highest return rates and decrease the human capital & ads costs. Results should be monitored and converted into quantitative data in order to interpret to create business specific models. By creating models, it is made easier to measure many other kinds of data which contributes managerial planning and decision-making processes, for so, models similar to [Fig.3] should be found/created. To achieve an outstanding online identity for medical travel companies, budget distribution and organizational plan are 2 factors should be worked on.

Budget distribution

Budget distribution of digital marketing is highly dependent on the quantitative data having been collected. It takes 1-3 weeks to collect short-term results to evaluate new ideas of campaigns. However, in mid-long term, focusing only on the customer acquisition costs would make the company end up making wrong estimations as each campaign has its own audience with different return rates. To illustrate more, costs-per-click rates may be relatively higher in a location containing wealthier customers, however those customers would probably be more profitable. Therefore, a model similar to [Fig.3]can be developed/used where the existing ROI models don't satisfy the need. Besides the profit rates, it is also important which sources of information are used. Stated by Weischedel, "high priorities are assigned to the most common tasks customers perform, the most popular pages or the pages that generate the most sales" [10].
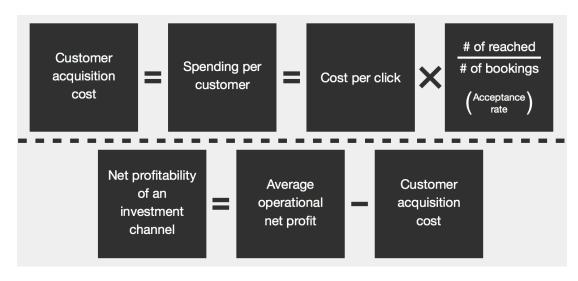
Fig. 3: An example of a model for campaign evaluation.

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Organizational plan

Organizational plan is the structure of an organization which defines the relationships between employees, positions, jobs, and responsibilities. Managing the organizational planning process should start by identifying the needs and the things to be improved. After that, the decision between inner team/department and outsourcing the services should be made according to the criteria will be given next.

Inner team/Department

First and the most preferred option is hiring a team. By having an inner team/department, companies may have the pros of conducting a better communication process and having the chance of responding nimbly. The experience level and the size of the team should be selected by the current place of the company in the market in terms of the market share and the demand volume. In case the company is barely growing and does not have a big portion of the market and current demand, it may be a better idea to hire a small team and support them with 3rd party digital solutions as the human capital cost may be much higher than an app's periodic payments. A regular 3rd party app can provide detailed keyword researches, SEO auditions, ads strategy analyses, competition analyses, and much more. Also, by starting at this point, companies will have the chance of upgrading the team to a bigger and more experienced one without bearing the higher cost risk. On the other hand, if the company has a larger market share than an ordinary company in the focal market, hiring a highly experienced team is a better option as a bigger company has different customer segment and bigger demand size/variety. As a consequence of increased complexity, campaigns become harder to manage and the performance of a 3rd party app's outcome decreases dramatically.

Outsourcing

Similar with most industries, outsourcing the digital marketing in medical travel has pros and cons [Fig.4] such as having lesser control and data besides achieving professionalism and having less problems to solve. Especially for the medical travel agencies in the start-up phase, which are taking their first steps to digital marketing, outsourcing can be the option with the highest ROI. As it was exemplified 20 years ago, "An automotive company, for example, chose to outsource 100% of its digital marketing activities to its advertising agency. Its rationale was to treat digital marketing as completely separate from its in-house activities since there were no permanent staff with skills in that area, and that it was important to get some experience quickly." [12]. For some, investing in outsourcing digital ads may look like wasting the budget unnecessarily. However, when ROI rates of the options are compared; working with a professional agency may be more beneficial for the company especially in short to mid term. Therefore, the ROI rates and pros & cons [Fig.4] should be taken into consideration not only by looking at the conversion rates of the ads; instead, to evaluate the decision-making possibilities better, a more flexible ROI calculation must be made in order to come up with a model to decide better on small investments [11].However, in some cases, if an inner team of experienced people can be formed, probably in long-term this would bring not only a higher ROI, but also more ideas how to use the alternative techniques brought by digital marketing technologies.

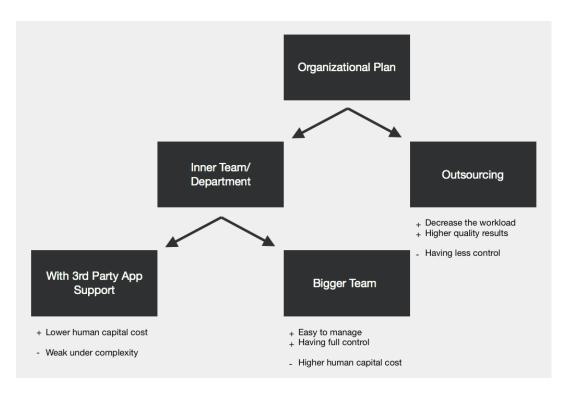Guest Editor: Prof. Dr. Haticie Camgöz Akdag

Fig. 4: Organizational plan options with pros & cons.
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CONCLUSION

The study provides a step-by-step guide for medical travel agencies in the start-up phase willing to increase their online reputation. Within the information, examples and charts provided, the study will assist the managers of such companies or their founders: entrepreneurs. According to the researches and experiences included above, requirements of a well-planned online existence strategy in the medical tourism sector or any other markets are matched with the optimal solutions. All these were covered within 3 separate titles; "Online Existence", "Reaching to Customers" and "Managerial Plan". Hence, medical travel agencies willing to be known online should plan their strategy well by designing the user experience depending on the business style they have and take the necessary steps by looking at so.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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