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SMM IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY AFTER LOCKDOWN: STRATEGIES AND TOOLS FOR PROMOTING B2C MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has caused an unprecedented crisis in the travel industry. At the same time, social media is a dynamic crisis management tool. This allows addressees to "own their story" and determine how digital audiences value an organization's performance during the crisis while providing them with a powerful platform to inform their community and position themselves as influencers through timely content. The purpose of the study is to analyze the preferred strategies and tools of social media marketing in the tourism industry in B2C marketing after the restrictions due to the coronavirus epidemic. To solve the tasks set in the work, general scientific methods were used: a) theoretical: analysis of peer-reviewed scientific and analytical sources on the problem of using SMM in tourism; b) empirical: an expert survey. Experts were asked the following main questions: name and describe the tools and practices of SMM in tourism during and after the lockdown, suggest and justify the strategies of SMM in the tourism industry during and after the lockdown. The study analyzes the essence of SMM and the consequences of restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic. The need to use SMM in the current environment is determined. Based on the expert survey, the tools and practices of SMM in the field of tourism are identified, and its strategies during and after lockdown are shown and concretized. It is concluded that social media has become an integral part of travel marketing. It is proven that to overcome the negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, it is necessary to introduce new marketing strategies in SMM, involving the maximum number of social media.

INTRODUCTION

In modern conditions of the development of information technologies, the popularity of the Internet is growing more and more actively, and the number of Internet users is increasing daily. For several years of its existence, social media have become the most popular Internet sites.

Social media are various forms of online media in which people with common interests, goals, and practices engage in social interactions by creating personal profiles and sharing information and experiences. These can be full-fledged social media that allow sharing updates and photos, joining events, and performing many other activities (e.g. Facebook, VKontakte), photo sharing sites (e.g. Flickr, Photobucket), sites for creating and sharing videos (e.g. YouTube, Ustream), online communities, as well as microblogging tools that allow people to share short messages, or "updates", with others (e.g. Twitter), social tags (e.g. Digg), newsreaders (e.g. Google Reader), public internet forums, review/rating sites (e.g. TripAdvisor), blogs/moblogs, tagged sites, podcasting, wikis, and standalone websites. One of the most important functions of social media is that they provide a web application where users can easily create and publish various contents in the form of texts, photos, videos, etc. [1].

SMM (social media marketing) is one of the most successful and nonstandard ways of promoting any type of goods or services in the world today [2]. For successful operation in modern economic systems, an enterprise needs to build an effective communication strategy and constantly adjust it depending on the results. The implementation of this task is impossible without using social media. It is social media that make it possible to better understand the interests of the target audience, its needs, desires, intentions, motives, ambitions, fears, and the like. That is, based on the social media capabilities of the industrial society, a socio psychological image of a potential consumer should be formed and effective mechanisms for interaction with them should be designed [3].

The advent of internet-based social media technologies has made it possible for tourists to quickly and conveniently share their travel experiences. General social media information is considered an important source of information that can influence travel decisions for potential travelers [4]. Results showed that identification and internalization are important determinants that positively increase the actual sharing of travel experiences on social media mediated by perceived pleasure [5]. At the same time, restrictions and self-isolation, travel and event cancellations caused by the spread of the COVID-19 virus have presented tourism marketers with serious problems and uncertainties about the future of the travel and tourism industry [6].

Tourism is one of the most affected industries during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Travel agencies, airlines, museums, and tourist destinations are now suspended. Any recession could be a hard blow to the travel industry, as less disposable income always means fewer travel and leisure opportunities. This time,

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the situation is even more serious, as even those who can afford to travel cannot leave for their desired destination. Closed borders and canceled flights and events predict big losses for airlines, travel agencies, hotels, and tourist attractions. Many businesses in the tourism industry are closing, but the number of companies quitting their marketing is even more radical and surprising. Many companies have even gone silent on social media. At the same time, some travel brands are not only using social media to cope with the effects of the pandemic but also conquer the market [7].

SMM is a relatively new field of activity for modern manufacturers of goods and services, which they are actively exploring regardless of the scale and specifics of their activities. There is no single and generally accepted definition of this concept [Table 1].

Table 1: Scientific approaches to defining SMM

Definition	References
Content creation activities carried out to attract attention to the brand, expand the circle of consumers, increase the popularity of the brand	[8]
The process of getting traffic for the site, introducing marketing through social media	[9]
Activities to promote the site, attract consumers	[10]
A special Internet marketing tool that involves promoting a product, service, company, or brand through the use of social media, the content of which is created and updated by the efforts of their visitors	[11]
The goal of SMM is consumer interest, creating a positive brand image, positioning the company, for which the primary task is not to make a profit but to meet the needs of consumers, gain their trust and affection	[12]

According to researchers [13], there are two main reasons for using SMM during a pandemic: 1. People are social and do well in social groups. Due to quarantines and travel restrictions, the urge to maintain social connections has increased. As a result, the use of social media has increased significantly; 2. How brands deal with the crisis now will have a direct impact on their business in the future. Consumers look to trusted brands to keep them safe when they add value, act responsibly, and do the right thing. Companies that are now interacting with their customers and followers will not only gain recognition but be remember when the markets begin to recover.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the preferred strategies and tools of SMM in the tourism industry in B2C marketing after the restrictions due to the coronavirus epidemic.

The objectives of the study:

- identify tools and practices of SMM in the tourism sector during and after lockdown;
- describe the strategies of SMM in the tourism industry during and after lockdown.

The hypothesis of the study: to overcome the negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, it is necessary to introduce new marketing strategies in SMM, involving the maximum number of social media.

METHODS

To solve the objectives of the study, general scientific methods were used:

a) **Theoretical:** an analysis of peer-reviewed scientific and analytical sources on the issue of telemedicine implementation; b) **Empirical:** an expert survey. The experts were asked the following main questions: name and describe tools and practices of SMM in tourism during and after lockdown, suggest and justify the strategies of SMM in the tourism industry during and after lockdown. At the first stage, the available scientific and analytical sources on the problem of using SMM in tourism were studied. Based on the study of sources, the relevance of studying the features of SMM in the field of tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic and after it was determined. An analysis of scientific approaches to the definition of SMM was carried out. At the second stage of the study, communication with experts was carried out online. The survey was conducted in Russian on October 1, 2020.

Expert survey: description of the data collection procedure

The survey was attended by experts (28 people) – managers and employees of travel companies with at least 7 years of experience in the tourism industry. All survey participants were warned about the purpose of the survey and that the organizers of the study planned to publish its results in a generalized form. The selection of experts for participation in the online survey was based on publications (at least three) in peer-reviewed journals. The experts were asked to voluntarily fill out a semi-formalized questionnaire with questions aimed at determining the tools and practices of SMM in tourism, SMM strategies in tourism before and after the lockdown, as well as recommendations on the aspects of activities that the tourism business should focus on at present.

Data processing stage: At the stage of data processing, the experts' answers were systematized and arranged in a tabular form, taking into account the number of expert references.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SMM tools

The experts pointed out that all travel brands and organizations need to understand that they must continue to attract their customer base, both during the entire period of quarantine and self-isolation and after their completion. Consumers need to feel that the travel business is offering them something truly new to make them want to experience it. Rethinking marketing strategies, in the long run, is critical to staying connected with consumers. According to one of the experts (Nikolai K., head of a travel company, 15 years of experience), this is also "a great time to use social media to support local travel brands and develop their businesses. At this time, it is also necessary to be a reliable source of information for consumers. Being careful with social media posts helps avoid spreading misinformation during the pandemic". The experts identified the main social media, tools, and practices that will help improve their presence on social media and which, in their opinion, should be given special attention when implementing SMM [Table 2].

Table 2: Tools and practices of SMM in tourism

No	Social media	%*	Tools and practices
1	Facebook, VKontakte	85.7%	Creating a page and filling it with content, news, photos, and videos. Promoting/organizing events, creating special offers, adding apps to attract customer reviews, or creating an app to make online booking easier. Regular updates with photos, video clips, blog posts, and information about tours or activities can keep customers interested and help potential tourists learn more about the travel offer. Experts recommend publishing a maximum of twice a day, seven days a week, from 10 AM to 3 PM
2	Twitter	78.6%	Publication of messages/news, the attraction of experts in the field of tourism, bloggers, and people who are interested in travel. Making it easier to find with Twitter's search functions by compiling a list of keywords that best describe the business and industry and using hashtags to accompany tweets. For example, #travel, #kayaking, and #[destination] can help attract followers
3	YouTube	75%	Creating a YouTube channel, uploading videos, and giving them audiovisual meaning to engage an audience. Sharing YouTube videos can increase loyalty, inspire potential customers to learn more about a company, and make it easier to link to videos on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms
4	Instagram	67.9%	Downloading the best photos and short clips and permission to share. The ability to include company information in multiple sentences in the bio along with a direct link to the website or booking page. Tagging photos with relevant destination hashtags using keywords like tours and industry
5	Foursquare	57.1%	Allowing users to post information to their social media from their mobile phones
6	Tripadvisor	53.6%	Introducing the company to the online travel community and promoting the brand through visitor comments. Customer feedback can help manage reputation and increase sales

Note: compiled based on the expert survey; * percentage of expert mentions

Analysis of SMM strategies

According to experts, to maximize the potential of social media, the following SMM strategies should be followed both during and after lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic [Table 3].

Table 3: SMM strategies

No	SMM strategies	%*
1	Stay active on social media and be aware of the difficult situation	92.6%
2	Collect user-generated content and use it to connect with the audience	78.6%
3	Increase engagement and social media presence with comment-based giveaways	71.4%
4	Increase consumer engagement through gamification	53.6%
5	Inspire customers with discount codes and suggest directions	50%

Note: compiled based on the expert survey; * percentage of expert mentions

Let us consider the proposed strategies in more detail.

According to the experts, while self-isolated people are far more likely to spend more time on social media; the latter should be the starting point for any travel business. It is important to stay connected with one's followers and be aware of the current situation.

Here is an example of an Instagram post posted to the official Visit California account. A beautiful photograph of Kings Canyon National Park is accompanied by a short text that successfully strengthens the relationship between the brand and its followers: "While we can only appreciate our beautiful state's parks from afar this year, we hope you can take solace in the fact that they'll be here waiting for us when the time is right" [14].

User-generated content is also known as the most authentic content travel brands can share [15]. This is still true both during the ongoing pandemic and after it ends. In this connection, according to one of the experts (Daria O., head of a travel company, 10 years of experience), "you need to encourage your subscribers in social media to share images, videos, or texts that can then be published on your pages. User-generated content increases customer loyalty and trust and creates an emotional attachment to the brand".

For example, the Museum of the City of New York asked its subscribers on social media to share photos taken after the adoption of protective measures, "documenting personal experience during this difficult time". The campaign was approved by the audience, with over 2,700 photos posted to date [16]. Another use case for user-generated content is Lonely Planet, a popular travel guide publisher. The brand invited its audience to join the "Scavenger Hunt", where members share photos of old souvenirs, first passports, hiking boots, and more. This is a great way to engage with followers and maintain brand presence and awareness on social media. Many people joined the challenge as they wanted to share photos of their travel memories and also be featured on the Lonely Planet website [17].

As one of the respondents (Stanislav N., travel agency employee, 8 years of experience) notes, "one needs to focus on sharing unique and interesting user-generated content that subscribers will want to share on their social media. This could be a video of chefs preparing food for a food tour, something as simple as a photo gallery with a preview of upcoming tours this season, or a short article on what to expect in a particular area this tourist season". Posting this type of content that visitors end up sharing on their own is direct marketing in action on social media that will help retain loyal followers for a long time [18].

The experts believed that giving out gifts on social media is the easiest way to increase presence and engagement, including during self-isolation. Depending on the type of business, there are many different prizes to offer in social media lotteries:

- free entrance tickets to museums, theaters, exhibitions, or amusement parks;
- discount coupons for holiday packages and airplane tickets;
- free holiday packages and airplane tickets;
- travel accessories [19].

Here's an example from The Journey Bound, a personalized travel planning company. The company invited its audience to join their Instagram feed based on comments. Members have joined the promotion for the chance to win a 50% discount on The Journey Bound's next trip planning services when it's safe to travel again. The requirements for the participants were simple: the organizers asked them to subscribe to their account, mention three friends in the comments section, and explain where they would like to go [20].
Brand games, according to experts, are another form of interactive promotion on social media. Brand gamification allows companies to work on social media brand awareness and lead generation [21].

How should the tourism business operate?

The tourism business should focus on the following aspects:

a) Use minigames to inform the audience. There is no doubt that after the restrictions are lifted, people will want to go on a tour. However, it is quite predictable that many places will continue to take protective measures. Responsible tourism will take on a new meaning as tourism destinations become more hygienically safe than before. To make travelers know how to behave, one can add brand minigames.

b) Build brand awareness through gamification. Brand games are great not only for informing but also for entertaining the online audience. Today, people are spending more time on computers and video games due to COVID-19 restrictions. This is why incorporating a brand minigame into the marketing strategy will be successful. For example, vacation rental company Plum Guide launched an online Easter egg hunt as part of its Easter campaign, offering its audience the chance to win a £200 loan from Plum Guide. In addition to building brand trust and loyalty, they expanded their mailing list and increased brand awareness.

CONCLUSION

Implementation of effective marketing communication campaigns on social media is an important factor in the successful promotion of a tourism enterprise, brand, or offer on the market, aimed at expanding the target audience and developing, improving, and protecting the reputation of the travel agency through the formation of consumer loyalty to the enterprise. Social media have become an integral part of travel marketing. This new way of communicating with customers has revolutionized the industry and largely replaced traditional customer communication and interaction. Now, not only industry experts post their reviews on travel-related websites and channels, but ordinary Internet users also rate destinations, create content, write reviews, share experiences, post their videos and photos, and more. Social media are valuable tools for travel companies as they can help promote services at a lower cost, grab the attention of users, and, above all, create buzz around brands, services, or travel destinations. As the results of the expert survey showed, the most promising strategies for SMM in the field of tourism are currently being active on social networks and aware of the complexity of the situation; collecting user-generated content and using it to connect with the audience; increasing engagement and presence on social media through giveaways based on comments; increasing consumer engagement through gamification; motivating customers with discount codes and proposing new tourist destinations. The results have confirmed the hypothesis of the study that to overcome the negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, it is necessary to introduce new marketing strategies in SMM, with the involvement of the maximum number of social media.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
There is no conflict of interest.

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