

WEB 2.0 in the tourism industry: A new tourism generation and new e-business models

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During the last years, we are experiencing the mushrooming and increased use of web tools enabling Internet users to both create and distribute content (multimedia information). These tools referred to as Web 2.0 technologies-applications can be considered as the *tools of mass collaboration*, since they empower Internet users to actively participate and simultaneously collaborate with other Internet users for producing, consuming and diffusing the information and knowledge being distributed through the Internet. In other words, Web 2.0 tools do nothing more than realising and exploiting the full potential of the genuine concept and role of the Internet (i.e. the network of the networks that is created and exists for its users). The content and information generated by users of Web 2.0 technologies are having a tremendous impact not only on the profile, expectations and decision making behaviour of Internet users, but also on e-business model that businesses need to develop and/or adapt. The tourism industry is not an exception from such developments. On the contrary, as information is the lifeblood of the tourism industry the use and diffusion of Web 2.0 technologies have a substantial impact of both tourism demand and supply. Indeed, many new types of tourism cyber-intermediaries have been created that are nowadays challenging the e-business model of existing cyberintermediaries that only few years ago have been threatening the existence of intermediaries!. In this vein, the purpose of this article is to analyse the major applications of Web 2.0 technologies in the tourism and hospitality industry by presenting their impact on both demand and supply.

RSS (Really Simple Syndication)

RSS feeds allow people to subscribe to online distributions of news, blogs, podcasts, or other information. By doing so, one does not have to visit each individual website that he/she is interesting to read any new information, but rather the RSS feeds all new updated information to the users' RSS reader. RSS readers enable Internet users to consolidate and read all new information that is customised to the profile within one consolidated message. Many free RSS exist on the Internet, e.g. FeedDemon, NewsGator, Rojo, software on the website of Google, MyYahoo etc.

Impact on tourism demand

RSS feeders saves information search time for Internet users as well as have a major impact on they information is nowadays being distributed on the Internet.

Impact on tourism supply

Many tourism enterprises and suppliers have adopted and incorporated RSS feeds in their websites in order to benefit from the following issues:

- Keep a communication with their customers such as sending them Newsletters. However, RSS is an information distribution technology that is characterised as a demand pull rather than a supply push model.
- RSS helps companies enhance their Search engines Optimisation. This is because RSS helps in creating inbound links to a company's website as well as RSS can also be used for informing search engines whenever new content is uploaded on a website so that they can index it.

Blogs (or Weblogs)

Blogs are a form of an online journal (newspaper or personal diary) that is published on a website and are usually distributed through RSS and/or trackback technologies (these inform the creator of a comment that someone has "replied" and/or linked to his/her contribution). Blogs are a type of a newspaper as information published on them is presented chronological and it can be related to either a very general topic (travel in general) or a very specific topic (cycling tourism in Germany). Numerous examples of general and-or specific blogs exist in the tourism industry, such as tripadvisor.com, hotelchatter.com, igougo.com, gazetters.com (a B2B weblog for travel agents). Anyone can create a weblog by using a free software offered for free at several websites nowadays (e.g. Google) and he/she can use it for publishing text, images, links to other blogs, Webpages, audio and video files. Weblogs are becoming very important tools affecting information search since their links, content and popularity can dictate the position of a company on a search engine search. Many travellers – tourists are using weblogs as fun and-or as a way of self expression.

Impact on tourism demand

Weblogs are becoming a very important information source for international travellers for getting travel advice and suggestions of tourism suppliers. Weblogs have the power of the impartial information and the e-word-of-mouth that is diffusing online like a virus. Moreover, it is very likely that when reading and sharing one's travel experience through weblogs, this also creates the willingness to travel and visit the same destination or suppliers to other as well. Indeed, when reading users' responses to travel weblogs it is very evident to see that user generated content has a similar AIDA effect to other users as paid advertisements aim to do. Specifically, weblog's content can: 1) Attract the attention, eyeballs of other Internet users and increase traffic on a website, 2) create Interest to users who can now seek more and additional information, 3) develop someone's desire to also visit a destination and/or buy the product and 4) foster an Action (e.g. book a hotel or organise a trip to a destination). Of course, it should be noted that the power of Weblogs can also be negative, i.e. spread a bad experience of a tourist to million of online Internet users. Therefore, it is very important that tourism companies establish a corporate policy regarding by whom and how both negative as well as positive users' comments on weblogs are responded.

Impact on tourism supply

It becomes evident that tourism suppliers and destination management organisation pay attention to online weblogs in order to either exploit their power of e-word-of-mouth, conduct an easy and free online market research investigating the preferences and profile of tourists, as well as keeping an informal communication with their demand. Many search engines have risen enabling one to identify and locate the existence of weblogs. The most popular one is technorati.com, which also provides

statistics about the online activity of weblogs. The latter is very important as it indicates how popular a weblog is and what its potential influence in search engines can be.

On the other hand, many tourism companies have also taken a pro-active by creating and incorporating weblogs on their websites. For example, Marriott has created its own weblog on its website, while Starwood has created a weblog to communicate with its Preferred Guests and enhance their loyalty through the website thelobby.com. Company initiated and moderated weblogs can offer the following benefits: solicit and gather feedback from customers, conduct free online market research, become recognised as an expert on a specific topic, communicate and update your customers.

Social – collaborative networking

Website enabling users to create their profile and invite others with similar profile to take part in their online community represent another Web 2.0 technology and model that of social networking. The most popular websites such as myspace.com and bebo.com reflect the willingness of Internet users to transform websites as a gathering place of people with similar profiles.

Impact on tourism demand

Social networking websites have a tremendous impact on how tourists nowadays create, organise and consume tourism experiences. Many tourists nowadays are prefer to have the reassurance of other users with similar profile that the trip and itinerary that they have scheduled is the best one, and other tourists want to use the Internet in order to organise a group trip at the same time online with their friends. Such tourists' demands and preferences have given rise to new e-business models for distributing and producing tourism packages.

Impact on tourism supply

Since sharing travel experiences in a social website can inspire travel, several existing and – or new types of cyberintermediaries are adopting in their e-business models social networking tools so that their users can collaborate with others and organise simultaneously a trip with their friends. For example, travelpost.com, realtravel.com, traveltogether.com are new types of travel cyberintermediaries that provides Internet users with the tool to create an online itinerary, share it and e-mail it to friends travelling with them, others can edit it and/or provide feedback, achieve a consensus and finally, enable them make the group booking. Existing cyberintermediaries, such as Yahoo Trip planner has adopted similar collaborative trip organising and booking tools, while Sheraton has re-organised and re-designed its website (which is nowadays titled as the Sheraton Belong Neighbourhood) whereby Sheraton guests can subscribe to the website, upload their experiences, comments and files, share them with others which in turn can use them for organising and booking their holiday on the Sheraton property that better matches their profile and experiences they wish to live.

Podcasting and online video

Podcasting refers to the uploading of audio and video files by users on websites. The most popular website for doing sharing such content with others is youtube.com.

Impact on tourism demand

Tourism experiences are intangible. One cannot experience, feel and try a travel experience before he/she buys and before he/she travels to a destination. As a result, the purchase risk is high and it is difficult to persuade a user for the qualities of a tourism service. Podcasting helps users take better decisions and experience in some way a travel experience before they decide to buy and consume, as audio and video files of hotels, destinations etc of other users are considered as more unbiased and not staged experience produced by the supplier that aims to promote its own product as the best one.

Impact on tourism supply

Many tourism suppliers are using Podcasting as a marketing as well as a communication tool. For example, Jumeirah hotel uploads podcasts on its website for delivering its potential customers what is happening in its properties at any minutes, and-or delivering to users the experiences of VIPs that have stayed at their property. Tate Gallery enables their visitors that have experienced their paintings and exhibition to record themselves, upload their audio-video on the Tate Gallery website, which other can later download it and use it as a mobile guide into the gallery and-or as an interpretation and marketing information of the gallery's exhibits. Orbitz.com provides podcasting of many destinations that travellers can download to their MP3 players and use them as guides while visiting the destination. In a similar way, MGM Grand Hotel Las Vegas has lauded online video on its website under the title "Maximum Vegas" in order to better illustrate to its potential guests the experience and services of its hotel and gaming resort.

Metaverses – Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG)

Metaverses are three dimensional virtual worlds whereby Internet users collaboratively play "online MMORPG games" with others. However, these platforms are wrongly perceived as "simple games" and "virtual" worlds, since most times they represent an extension to our physical day-to-day world to which users add new socio-economic and political situations. MMORPG are games that are played by numerous players (e.g. millions of users) and they could be considered as an intermediate step from 'computer' to 'ambient' era. Some of these games (e.g. World of Warcraft) develop around a theme defining the goals of the game, while other games such as Second Life encourage a free-style of playing, allowing the users to make what they want out of it. Although it is difficult to measure the size and growth of such games, it is estimated that the market for massively multiplayer online games is now worth more than \$1bn in the West world. For example, one can simply consider the size of and growth of Second Life itself. Second Life has more than 5 million users (April 2007), while about half a billion US\$ are being transacted every year on Second Life's website.

Impact on tourism demand

Tourists and travellers participate in such games either for fun and-or for ways of expression of oneself and for task – accomplishment satisfaction. For example, many people dream and try to become and excel on a profession that they could not achieve in the real life, try to design a new product and service hoping that somebody that is looking for new talents will find and recruit them.

Impact on tourism supply

Many tourism and travel related companies have already created their representative offices and headquarters in Second Life. Embassies and Tourism Authorities of many countries have created their offices conducting marketing and promotions, famous Islands have created their Second Life virtual islands, Hyatt used Second Life for consulting architects and their guests on how to improve their hotel design and architecture, while Second Life users created and designed the first Aloft hotel which in real life will open and operate in 2008. The use of Second Life for market research and exploitation of users for generating and testing new product ideas and new advertisement campaigns is huge, e.g. Toyota first tested the campaign of its new brand Scion on Second Life and then broadcasted widely in real life. Other companies, e.g. CNN, are recruiting and identifying new talents (e.g. journalists) in Second Life.

Tagging

Tagging represents a new way for categorising information. Users tag a piece of content (e.g. an audio, a picture, a word) with a meaning (a word or phrase) and then this information is categorised in categories based on this meaning. Tagging can be used for saving and sorting ones content as well as sharing with others. For example, one can save its favourites websites in deli.cious.com, tag website with some meaning based on which they are sorted in categories, while others can use these users' generated categories of favourites and tags for identifying appropriate websites. In this vein, tagging has a great effect on how search engines identify and present information results in keyword searches to users.

Impact on tourism demand

More and more users are using collaborative tools for identifying and sorting content. The new economic situation that is being created is called folsconomy, since user define how to sort information which in turn defines how others search and find information. For some, tagging helps and boosts the creation of the semantic web (Web 3.0) whereby web content and search is directly related to its meaning for the users.

Impact on tourism suppliers

Several websites offer the capability for users to sort, share and categorise content based on tagging, e.g. flickr.com (for pictures sorting and sharing), travbuddy.com (for travel experiences sharing). Because of the folsconomy power of such websites many companies nowadays include and consider them when designing their search engine optimisation strategy. For example, Thomson's website provides an affiliate link to deli.cious.com so that its users can tag and sort its website through this technology.

Mash – ups

Mash ups describe the seamlessly combination of two or more different sources of content and-or software for creating a new value added service to users. For example, based on a project amongst Google Earth, Carnegie Mellon University, NASA, the Pennsylvania Tourism Office and the National Civil War Museum, virtual tourists would have the chance to view Pennsylvania's Civil War trails online. In traintimes.org.uk one can see on real time where trains are located and when they will arrive at destinations, since the website combines information from Google maps, and information from the British rail website about train time tables, delays etc.

Impact on tourism demand

Tourists more and more demand and expect to combine and cross check information from different sources so that they can better and easier make a holistic decision. For example, tourists may not be able to clearly understand where a hotel may be located when the description of the hotel writes that is located on the beach. And what is the difference if the hotel is located at the beach, near the beach, along the beach etc ? Tourists easily get confused from different descriptions found in different websites. On the contrary, mash up websites, e.g. earthbooker.com, tripmojo.com, enable users to see where exactly a hotel is located (sometimes even locate the exact orientation and view of a room) and then decide whether to book a room at this hotel. Many mash ups are enriching their services with Google maps and other related geographical information.

Impact on tourism suppliers

Apart from the rise of new cyberintermediaries such as the ones described before, many tourism suppliers enrich their website content with maps. Moreover, many companies leave their software as an Open API so that users can create limitless combinations of their services. For example, backstage.bbc.co.uk is the services whereby users can take content of BBC structure it and present it the way they prefer. Enabling user innovation is another way that companies aim to exploit on users creativity instead of investigating only on R&D.

Wikis

Wikis are technologies that enable users to add, delete, and in general edit the content of a website. As a result such websites are developed collaboratively through their users. The most popular is the wikipedia.com website, an online encyclopaedia that is created and continually updated by its users. In tourism wikitravel.org represents the effort of Internet users to collaboratively create and continuously update an online global travel guide. Visitors', creators' and content sizes at wikitravel.org are mushrooming.

In conclusion, Internet users and travellers are nowadays empowered to create and distribute in their own way the content and the channels through which they wish to distribute it. Web 2.0 technologies enable Internet users to become the co-producers, the co-designers, the co-marketers and the co-distributors of tourism experiences and services as well as the co-entrepreneurs of new e-business models. The business implications (threats but also opportunities) that are created for tourism and hospitality enterprises are tremendous. However, Web 2.0 is here to stay and unless a firm realises its potential and try to exploit it, unfortunately it will not manage to survive.