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Airlines Web 2.0: The Challenge of Social Media

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Abstract: Over the years online marketing has grown in importance in the airline industry. This media space offers airlines numerous marketing tools, one of the most recent being social media. Social media allows airlines to interact directly with customers via various Internet platforms, and monitor customer opinions and evaluations of services. This exploratory paper studies airlines' use of social media on Facebook and Twitter for a defined period of time. The paper analyses the content of social media posted by airlines and provides a categorization of the content according to the promotional marketing mix. A netnographic method has been adopted for the examination of these social media platforms. Study findings show that there is poor strategic perspective and a lack of continuity in the use of social media. Results may aid marketing departments in their marketing and social media communication strategies, while at the same time complementing current marketing research.

Keywords: Social media, marketing, online marketing, airline marketing

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1. Introduction

Company communication with stakeholders is a necessity and can take many forms. In today's high-tech world information communication technologies (ICT) have increased the ease of and transformed the nature of communication, including that of marketing. The latest evolution and dynamics of the Internet have facilitated an Internet increasingly based on the contributions of end users. An example, of this interactive Internet is the expansion of user-generated content (UGC), which is fast becoming an integral part of companies' marketing strategy.

The phenomenon of social network sites and UGC in travel industry is not new and has been explored in several studies (World Tourism Organization 2008), for example Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) have focused on online shared videos as mediators of the travel experience. Travel has been revolutionized by information technologies, which has also permeated all functions of the airline industry (Airline Business 2008, Buhalis 2004, Buhalis 1998, Buhalis, Law 2008), however integration and exploitation of Internet platforms that rely on UGC has been inconsistent (Airline Business 2009, Field 2008, Clark 2009). The use of UGC among airlines has yet to be explored, which is the intention of this paper. This paper aims to provide a mapping of the technological mediation that UGC Internet platforms represent for airline marketing, focusing on the impacts of the use of social media for the promotional marketing mix (PMM). The paper begins by explaining the use that airlines make of social media sites and identifies common patterns of use of the platforms. The study discusses the implications of these patterns for promotional marketing strategies and it critically analyses the opportunities and challenges of this innovative technological mediation for the airline industry. The intention is to find similarities in communication using the PMM.

2. Social media and marketing promotion

Marketing is the process of satisfying customer needs, and it is continuous throughout the

product's life cycle, while being a two-way level of communication (Kotler et al. 1996). Kotler et al. (1996) broadly define marketing as a social process through which individuals fulfill their needs by creating and exchanging value with others. These are the same processes that are being transformed by social media. An empowered Internet can be understood as a social construct and as a context that facilitates the examination of the creation and evolution of social and economic structures (Markham 2004) via interconnectivity with users.

Social media describe an Internet which is "...increasingly influenced by intelligent Web services that enable users to contribute to developing, rating, collaborating and distributing Internet content and customizing Internet applications" (Vickery, Wunsch-Vincent 2007 pg. 7). It reflects a mix of different types of ICT tools, including wikis, podcasts, messaging applications or blogs (Stillman, McGrath 2008). The main characteristic of this new Internet is that enhances the collaboration and sharing of information online and it is built around social software which makes it possible for individuals to communicate and form communities using their computers (Cooke, Buckley 2008). This development is often coined Web 2.0 to signify the progression from earlier Internet applications.

Social media is also transforming the ways in which the relationship and communication with customers takes place (Airline Business 2009). A popular viewpoint among analysts of Web 2.0 maintains that the increased possibility of interaction between the users and the Internet opens a new era of participation and transparency (Qualman 2009). This development is explained as the beginning of a new digital revolution that shifts a technology based on "command-and-control" to a technology based on engaging and empowering individuals (Shih 2009, ATW 2005). This shift has profound consequences in the way businesses approach customers' needs and wants through their marketing strategies.

Based on these theories the authors propose four overall broad categories that describe firms' use of social media: tone, authority, anonymity, and recipient. Tone refers to the style of language that is used in the post which can be informal or formal (Munar 2010). The informal style is a colloquial

style which tries to imitate that of friends or colleagues typically addressing participants of UGC platforms in the second person and is far from other types of more formal communication. For example, the uses of honorifics such as Mr., Mrs. or Dr. are avoided. Authority is the level of content control that is exhibited by a firm. Firms can choose to publish and promote more unofficial content, for example promote content created by customers or employees or be highly controlling of the content displayed and communicate only official content, such as those found in official promotional campaigns. An authoritative use of social media has a top-down approach, known as command-and-control, while a less authoritative use is a bottom-up perspective, coined interactivity. Anonymity describes the level of transparency of the firm's poster. Firms choose to make fans and followers aware of the identity of the employee responsible for posting on behalf of the firm or not to disclose the identity of the poster. These poles are referred to as opaque and transparent. The authors regard these three categories as complementary and having a direct relationship to one another. The final category, recipient, refers to the intended reader of the firm's posts. Although the content is displayed in a public forum, not all content posted on platforms is directed exclusively towards external users. Content sometimes concerns internal, company related aspects directed to employees. The two extremes of this category are internal versus external. These four categories are to be regarded as a continuum and not as dichotomies.

These previous categories describe the overall behavior of firms on social media platforms. However, this study's focus is on the type of use of social media within marketing promotion. Therefore, besides the previous categorization another framework is needed to analyze firms' social media content and its impact on their marketing promotion. A popular operational framework covering the field of marketing is the 4 Ps (Van Waterschoot, Van den Bulte 1992): product, price, place, and promotion. For the analysis of the data set the authors selected to utilize the promotional marketing mix, which is a specification of the promotion field of the 4Ps.

The promotion field often concerns communication; however this field is under transformation due to UGC. Mangold and Faulds (2009) highlight the impact social media is having on the promotional marketing mix and stress it should be incorporated as a hybrid element, while Chaffey

and Smith (2008) have adapted the promotional marketing mix to suit the online arena. According to Chaffey and Smith the PMM has 10 elements, however the authors of this paper have reduced this to 8 in their attempt to reflect the specifics of UGC. Three elements were removed from the promotional marketing mix: exhibitions, merchandising, and packaging. Exhibitions were deemed not relevant for transportation services, while merchandising and packaging related activities were not found in the data set. The authors added one element, social activity, to the promotional marketing mix to make it more representative of UGC platforms. This activity relates to content that is purely social in nature and has a purpose of initiating dialog or kindness. The UGC promotional mix allows researchers to classify content according to their intended purposes. The elements and their definitions are shown in table 1:

Table 1: User-generated content promotional marketing mix. Adopted from Chaffey and Smith (2008)

| UGC PMM | Definition |
|------------------|--|
| Advertising | Product description or explanation, either at airline's initiative or as a response to a question |
| Selling | Airline provides a link to purchase a product or service |
| Sales promotion | Description and/or link to specific promotions or partner companies, also may be affiliated with frequent flyer program; no selling is involved |
| Public relations | An airline's general response to a question not worded as an advertisement; providing general information; soliciting for contributions from customers; a challenge/game for customers |
| Sponsorship | Information about an airline sponsored event or initiative |
| Direct mail | Real-time or pertinent information to travelers |
| Word-of-mouth | Promoting content uploaded by other users |
| Social activity | Initiating a dialog without specific information about the company (e.g. wishing happy holidays) |

UGC can be defined as the aggregation and leveraging of users' content on the Internet. It is related to the digital transformation of objects: written text, sounds, and images (Poster 2005). Content is neither the graphical user interface, nor the commands and text given by the administrators of the site. Rather, it is created and uploaded by users of the platform, and users can be either organizations or individuals. Content can be written text, audio, or visual, however this paper investigates written text exclusively. UGC is the foundation of social media. Social media sites offer new tools that contribute to a larger complexity of socio-technical systems. These platforms can be placed on a continuum. At one extreme are sites that promote self-biographical expressions and focus on the making of virtual identities and personal profiles (e.g. Facebook or LinkedIn) and on the opposite pole those that enhance a communitarian effort and a dilution of individuality in the 'commons' focusing on a product or the content of the site (e.g. Wikipedia). This paper focuses on the former.

Online communities or virtual communities are one of the main elements of Web 2.0. and of its broader contribution systems. Communities can be defined as networks of interpersonal ties. Online communities are websites where user relationships develop and their main assets are a combination of user generated content and easy-to-use tools and applications. They are technological platforms with relationship tools that allow users to communicate with their network in new ways, changing the cost of interaction and of maintenance of a relationship and increasing people's network capacity (Shih 2009). Recent books have examined the impact of social media and web communities, such as Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, on both society and the market place (Qualman 2009, Weinberg 2009, Li, Bernoff 2008, Weber 2009). This paper investigates airline use of social media on two popular online communities: Facebook and Twitter. However, the method could be applied to a wide array of social media sites. The social networking sites selected for this study have distinctive rules and establish different forms of interactions among their users, they invite individuals and companies to participate in diverse ways.

Platforms

The social network of Facebook is characterized by password-protection and member-only use. Personal content has a limited circulation and it is not accessible to the broad public. This raises specific ethical issues to the use of the content of this site for research purposes. However, companies are allowed to use the network to create a profile and groups, and access to participate in group activities does not require acceptance from the group administrator. These group members are called “fans” in Facebook terminology. The social interaction that takes place in these groups is of public nature when compared to content in personal pages of individuals in this network, therefore the authors did not seek consent nor inform the participants of the observation. The site announced that it had reached 400 million members in February 2010 (Helft, Stone 2010).

The Twitter network is also characterized by password-protection and member-only use. Twitter is primarily text-based and driven by posts, referred to as “tweets,” that are 140 characters or less. Personal content can only be viewed by other members that the originator has accepted as a follower, however companies are able to create an account where followers are automatically accepted. As with Facebook, the authors did not seek consent nor inform participants of observation due to the public nature of the content. Twitter can be more conversational in nature than Facebook, and posts are often direct responses to other, unseen posts, which can distort the message; it is a kin to only hearing one person in a phone conversation. At the end of 2009 Twitter had approximately 75 million user accounts (Gaudin 2010).

3. Methods

This paper is based on the netnography method developed for online ethnographic research. Kozinets (2009, 2002, 1998) describes this methodology as an online evolution of ethnography and defines it as an application of methods of cultural anthropology to online cyber culture. It consists of the participative observation and examination of one or several virtual communities. Ethnography’s concern is mainly the study of cultural and social forms through observation of events as they unfold. It is a method that requires co-presence with the people observed under the study (Haldrup, Larsen 2010). Netnography applies this presence to the virtual world. The

researcher acts as an active member of the community and studies the processes of interactivity with the rest of the community members, the specific settings and possibilities of the architecture of the sites and the main characteristics of the content available.

The digitalization of the object of study means that it is a very specific type of cultural and social communication that can be traced by this method. It is recorded and uploaded digital content and therefore differs greatly from other types of observation of social behavior because there is a transformation of the space in which these interactions take place. In this case, there is no 'natural settings' where the social act takes place, the setting is a virtual platform of communication, which is another type of social construct based on specific technological cultures.

An important difference of netnography when compared to the ethnographic method is that it is often possible for the researcher to return to the communication studied as it is recorded, stored and displayed by these platforms. However, content may in cases be owned by the managers of the site rather than the contributors and there are cases in which data has been removed or modified by site administrators. There is a danger than past content may be changed and therefore the data used for this analysis was printed in hard copy, much like a photo of data content at a specific point in time. Additionally, there are several challenges to the method related to the nature of the Internet. The sites which lay the foundation for this analysis are developing and changing at a high speed. Additionally, the rapid change in the patterns of use, the fragmentation and massive amount of data associated to the object of analysis represents an additional challenge to the study of the Internet; however it does not make it less relevant. Netnography has a multimethod approach where historical analysis, semiotic analysis, different observation methods among others can be applied. This study uses content analysis based on participant observation.

Data set

The data set was constructed in a four step process. First, by limiting the number of airlines according to size based on operating revenue and profit and business model type, full-service carrier (FSC) and low-cost carrier (LCC), using the 2008 rankings by Air Transport World (ATW

2009a, ATW 2009b). This ensured that only larger airlines were used in the data set.

Second, the authors searched for these airlines via their private Facebook and Twitter accounts, where they respectively became fans and followers of all the airlines selected in the initial data set. Membership was limited to the official sites of the airlines as a number of unofficial sites have been created. Occasionally airlines have created numerous official sites segmented, for example by geography or customer segments; in these cases the authors became fans or followers of the main sites of the airlines. This generated a data set of 42 airlines.

Table 2: Sample group

| | Facebook (FB) | # FB posts | # FB fans ¹ | Twitter (TW) | # TW posts | # TW followers ¹ |
|------------|----------------------|---------------|---------------------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>FSC</i> | | | | | | |
| Low | Air Canada | 9 | 12.251 | SAS | 30 | 1.490 |
| Average | Qantas | 56 | 13.462 | British Airways | 299 | 21.644 |
| High | American Airlines | 178 | 47.015 | Air New Zealand | 1252 | 11.987 |
| <i>LCC</i> | | | | | | |
| Low | Air Berlin | 15 | 5.550 | Air Berlin | 30 | 465 |
| Average | Frontier | 122 | 5.379 | Virgin America | 384 | 1.966 |
| High | AirAsia | 482 | 160.775 | Southwest | 1015 | 1.031.898 |

¹: As of 25-02-2010

Third, it was decided that the time frame of study was six months, from August 2009 to January 2010, to limit the size of the data. The number of posts in this six month time period was used to select the airlines for the study. The final step involved segmenting the airlines according to

business model type, the number posts, and platform type. The airline with the lowest, closest to the mean, and the highest number of posts was selected for further research respectively for the two business models and platforms. Japan Airlines had the lowest number of posts (1) in the 6 month time frame for FSCs on Twitter, therefore it was decided to replace the airline with SAS that had the third lowest number of posts (30) in the time frame. Table 2 shows the airlines that were chosen for the detailed study.

4. Analysis

This analysis attempts to highlight similarities among low-, average-, and high-posting airlines in relation to the use of social media. When similarities are platform specific it is indicated. Although the platforms are based on UGC, the overall tone of airline posted content leans towards formal, official, and authoritative, rather than informal. However, many social activity posts take on more of an informal tone, especially Twitter which is often cited as a platform that is more conversational in nature (Israel 2009). There is only one airline, Air Berlin, which was present in both platform analyses. Here the tone did not change across the platforms and was formal across both. A formal tone may limit the interactivity between posters, which is a defining characteristic of Web 2.0. The authority of the platforms by airlines is deemed to be command-and-control rather than interactive. Airlines have a propensity to communicate official messages rather than benefiting from the fluidity made possible via the platforms. One explanation may be the reliance on anonymous posting by airlines. All airline posters from the sample group are anonymous; fans and followers of these companies are unable to determine the name or department where the airline poster is from. Israel (2009) states that anonymous posting may lead followers to be less inclined to engage in informal and relationship-building conversations. Anonymity may explain the formal tones found among airline content on UGC platforms. There is an opportunity for strengthening and building relationships with current and potential customers, however a great deal of content focuses instead on official advertisement content.

While much of the content of the UGC platforms is directed towards customers, it does appear that some content is directed towards internal employees. In other words, a public platform is

used to disseminate internal information. For example, Virgin America's (2010) post, "Thanks to all VX teammates for helping raise funds for Haiti- we're matching you: [http://:bit.ly/HelpUnite](http://bit.ly/HelpUnite)." This Twitter post is directed towards internal airline employees with a link to an internal fundraising initiative, however it is shown publically to customers as well. Although, the airline has nearly 80 000 followers (as of May 2010), it is not known how many are company employees. Many times posted content is to recognize an employee's unique achievements within the company or beyond, recognition of an employee-of-the-month, or similar gesture. This type of content can enhance customer perception of an airline and allow for customer recognition of an airline's internal culture. However, there is a threat that such content may dilute other important information or overload fans and followers with too much content that they lose interest all together. Air New Zealand has approached this challenge on Twitter by establishing numerous accounts that are specific in nature, for example AirNZ_Deals for special promotions. When appropriate other accounts link to AirNZ_Deals thereby reducing the risk of information saturation on one account.

It is found that airline use of UGC platforms is advertising focused. Nearly half of the content on Facebook lies within this category, and both business models advertise to a large extent via the platform. Twitter, on the other hand, shows greater disparity. Advertising is frequently in the form of static content; messages are often merely statements regarding new products or destinations. This type of advertisement fails to exploit the interactivity and development with customers, as evident by the authoritative characteristic of command-and-control rather than customer interactivity (Shih 2009).

Selling is a feature of an airline's presence on UGC platforms, more so on Facebook than Twitter, however not the most important. Among the entire Facebook sample this type of content is ranked fourth, while it is second to third among the LCC sample. Selling posts contain a direct link to purchase travel, however there appear to be limited synergies between advertising and selling. There is limited integration between the UGC platform, advertising, and online sales channels. With such a strong focus on advertising in general airlines are failing to drive sales via the UGC platforms. In addition, there is limited customer segmentation in relation to social media users and

sales. Few selling posts are directed at UGC platform users exclusively. Airlines adhere to traditional selling tools, and as in the case of advertisement, command-and-control is evident. UGC platforms allow airlines to customize and turn a sale into a relationship (Crisp 2006), however this is happening to a limited extent.

While advertising and selling are apparent on the UGC platforms information dissemination via social activity and public relations are represented, especially via Twitter. Social activity is content that is not directly related to the provision of air service. It is conversational content that can be used to elicit a response from fans or followers or relationship-building. For example, Southwest's Twitter post, "Can anyone spot the @Southwestair HDQ twins in this pic? I see them every night when I leave work! <http://twitpic.com/fdy1h>" (Southwestair 2009). This post links to a picture of two cats outside a building. Such content may allow followers of Southwest to feel a closer connection to the airline and the poster, and can help build a relationship and loyalty with the company. Anonymous airline posters may have difficulty in creating such relationships as followers can be challenged to relate to unknown posters. This type of content, the cornerstone of UGC platforms, conflicts with the general command-and-control characteristic followed by airlines.

Many airlines utilize both platforms for disseminating time-sensitive information. This type of content is classified as direct mail in the PMM as it is similar to the content in a mail list. In the event of unforeseen circumstances or relevant, time-sensitive information airlines have utilized both UGC platforms to distribute information to a large number of fans and followers. Examples of events include weather delays, changes to relevant visa requirements for particular destinations, information regarding incidents and accidents, and pertinent flight status changes. However, there is inconsistency in the use of platforms for direct mail. Some airlines only report pertinent, negative information, such as a wide spread weather delays, while other airlines disseminate positive information, such as a report that there were no daily delays system wide. The negative information may be useful to only relevant passengers, while the positive information can help to reinforce a positive image of the carrier among all passengers.

Tables 3 shows the distribution for Facebook and Twitter posts categorized by the PMM.

Table 3: Facebook and Twitter PMM

| | Advertising | Selling | Sales promotion | Public relations | Sponsorship | Direct mail | Word-of-mouth | Social activity |
|-----------------------|-------------|---------|-----------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|
| <i>Facebook</i> | | | | | | | | |
| FSC low | 67% | 11% | 0% | 11% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 11% |
| FSC average | 48% | 4% | 2% | 38% | 0% | 0% | 9% | 0% |
| FSC high | 29% | 14% | 10% | 16% | 19% | 10% | 0% | 2% |
| LCC low | 43% | 21% | 7% | 29% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| LCC average | 44% | 24% | 3% | 18% | 5% | 4% | 0% | 3% |
| LCC high | 43% | 9% | 0% | 18% | 3% | 24% | 0% | 3% |
| Sample total | 41% | 12% | 3% | 19% | 6% | 16% | 1% | 2% |
| <i>Twitter</i> | | | | | | | | |
| FSC low | 27% | 14% | 5% | 55% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| FSC average | 10% | 7% | 3% | 35% | 0% | 27% | 2% | 16% |
| FSC high ¹ | 7% | 7% | 0% | 21% | 2% | 0% | 0% | 62% |
| LCC low | 42% | 19% | 3% | 19% | 0% | 6% | 0% | 10% |
| LCC average | 15% | 3% | 8% | 28% | 0% | 10% | 9% | 27% |
| LCC high ² | 16% | 2% | 1% | 38% | 4% | 4% | 8% | 28% |
| Sample total | 14% | 4% | 3% | 32% | 2% | 9% | 5% | 31% |

The majority of the content posted on the platforms is positive. While the Facebook data was filtered to only show the airline posts, the Twitter platform allows the airline poster to “re-tweet,” or forward, content by others. This too is generally positive in nature. However, “re-tweeting” allows airlines to post content that is seldom seen marketed by airlines. For example, a reference to the skill of flight crew at Air New Zealand, “RT @MrReasonable Got to marvel at the skills of the pilots of @flyairnz getting those planes down in this weather” (flyairnz 2009).

4. Discussion

User-generated content is a growing phenomenon on the Internet and Web 2.0 and numerous airlines have chosen to adopt this in their promotional marketing mix. Overall, the analyses show that there is a lack of continuity in use of UGC platforms. Airlines would benefit from developing clear strategies for their presence on the platforms. Overall use of Facebook appears to be advertising focused, while Twitter is used for social activity. However, there is inconsistency in this use as some airlines are prolific advertisers on Twitter.

Airline use of the platforms seems to be highly diverse and exploratory in nature which raises additional issues. First, airlines and their promotional marketing mix content tends to be conservative and formal, however this can conflict with the overall characteristics of UGC. If airlines wish to adopt and benefit from their UGC platform presence airlines need to evaluate their level of formality and authority. Interactivity with UGC platforms users appears to be stifled by formal structures. Second, the amount of posting activity varies among airlines. Some airline posters appear to respond to nearly all posts concerning the airline, especially on Twitter. This can benefit relationship building, especially with social activity posts. However, scalability may be a future concern. The highest number of average monthly posts was 209 for an airline. This level of activity can be expected to grow with the popularity of UGC platforms, which may strain airline resources as they strive to keep pace. Third, there are few examples of airlines capitalizing on the interconnectivity of UGC platforms, which is its main asset. There are few posts cross-linking to complementing UGC platforms, such as Facebook posts referring to Twitter content, airline blogs, airline YouTube channels, and vice versa. It is precisely this cross-linking that allows airlines to exploit the benefits of UGC platforms and may allow airlines to designate platforms to various PMM categories.

Use of the promotional marketing mix as a theory framework has some limitations. Much of the content posted on UGC platforms does not populate numerous PMM categories, but appears to rather serve a sole purpose. For example, advertising posts seldom have a link to selling. However, there are posts that can occupy two or more PMM categories. A “re-tweet” is a form of word-of-

mouth, and which may, for example, also serve the purpose of social activity and advertising. This challenges the use of this type of theoretical framework for the analysis of Web 2.0 marketing. The study of marketing and social media is still at its infancy stage; there is a challenge of applying theoretical frameworks from the analog era to the digital era. To avoid an oversimplification of a complex topic further development of marketing theoretical frameworks should be considered.

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