

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA APPLICATIONS USE AND THE NUMBER OF REQUESTS FOR PROPOSALS IN TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, social media provides customers and businesses of modern times new ways of communication and interaction on both B2C and B2B markets. Companies in tourism have recognized the limitless opportunities for creating long-term relationships with their customers. Therefore, a large number of companies have involved the social media into their marketing strategies. In order to improve the engagement with the fans at the most influential social media - Facebook, some companies use Facebook application. Those software solutions help companies organize the contests and simultaneously collect the users' data. With the long-term tracking of users' online behaviour and the interpretation of the gathered data, the companies can boost brand awareness and improve sales.

KEYWORDS: social media, Facebook applications, contest, tourism, advertising, data collection

1 INTRODUCTION

The Internet and new technologies have changed the way people communicate, share their knowledge, experiences and spend their working and free time. Today, social media has a global influence on customer behaviour due to its characteristics: two-way communication in real time and transparency [Kesić, 2003]. Consequently, it boosts the power of customers and other market participants.

Facebook is the most influencing social media both in Croatia [Alexa, 2015] and globally. In the end of the 2015, it counts 1.44 billion users worldwide [The Statistic Portal, 2015]. Facebook applications are one of the most important communicational tools. Those software solutions are used for boosting communication with the Facebook users, increasing the reach of current and potential customers, improving the Facebook Pages' content and collecting the data about

users' behaviour. This data is afterwards used for other marketing activities such as email marketing, remarketing campaigns and custom advertising [Facebook guide, 2015].

The research aimed to determinate is there an increase in the number of users' interactions on the Facebook page in a period when social media contest is implemented on a page in form of application, in comparison with the period in which the application is not available. The research is conducted on three cases in the tourism industry for a period of six months in 2013, 2014 and 2015. which is a very long period for the digital industry. The applications observed refer to ones used for the promotion of services through the contest in tourism. Concurrently, brands benefit from the data gathered during the contests, such as users' travel habits and interests. By participating in the contest users permit usage of data available on their public Facebook profile and email address in exchange for the opportunity to be awarded at the end of the contest [Račić, 2015]. All the data is automatically stored in a database which enables easy segmentation of users according to predefined factors. For example, the users can be filtered according to their interests and demographic data. The information and contacts collected could be used for ongoing marketing activities, e.g. for special offers through email marketing campaigns in pre/post season in tourism. Online contests are also used to grab users' attention, increase the time they spend on brand's Facebook page and gain new fans e.i. potential customers in a long run [Kirman, B., et al, 2010]. The process of transforming the fans into loyal user demands careful interpretation of the data collected, usage of the email contact for custom newsletter campaigns and finally increases the users' motivation for sending the request for proposal.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper bases its conclusion on cases involved in tourism business environment -Camping Šimuni, Municipality tourist board Orebić and the anonymous company doing business in tourism. All data is provided by Croatian Advertising agency Degordian Ltd. and its social media applications named Socialpuzzle. Socialpuzzle presents the group of generic application software which automatically create a database when user approaches the application and fill in a contact form [Račić, 2015]. The data analyzed in the research was collected via statistic tools such as Facebook Insights and Socialnumbers. The common Facebook metrics observed for each case are the number of fans on the page and talking about. In addition, the number of application visits, unique users and the number of newsletter subscriptions was reviewed because they imply the users' interest for the brands' content in general. Financial metrics are not available for the public use so that they are excluded from the research.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. CASES OVERVIEW

The Facebook page Visit Orebić has used the Socialpuzzle application Runner game in 2014 and early 2015. The application is created with the aim of entertaining the users with an animated character who run through the Orebić town, avoiding obstacles, trying to reach the finish line as soon as possible. The entrance number for the users was not limited so that they could play the game as many times as they wanted. The users were motivated by awards such as free dinner in an expensive restaurant. All the results were gained organically.

The Camping Village Šimuni and anonymous page have used the Socialpuzzle application quiz. The second application was live in 2014 while the third was introduced in 2013. The goal of setting up those applications was to examine the users' familiarity with the brand and the destination promoted via social media. Additionally, the purposes of the contests were collecting the information about users' vacation planning and booking habits which would be taken into consideration for the strategic planning of next touristic season. The users' were inspired to run the quiz at most three times by free accommodation for a week and booking gift coupons. The results of the campaigns are shown in Table 1. Application review.

Table 1. Applications review

Facebook page	Type of application / contest used	Duration (in days)	The number of visits	The number of unique users	The number of newsletter subscription
Visit Orebić	Runner game	75*	347	45	13 (opt-in)
Camping Village Šimuni	Quiz	23**	3885	3082	3082 (opt-out)
Anonymous	Quiz	30***	8431	6506	8431 (opt-out)

Source: Degordian Ltd.

*From 11th November to 24th December 2015

**From 19th November to 11th December 2014

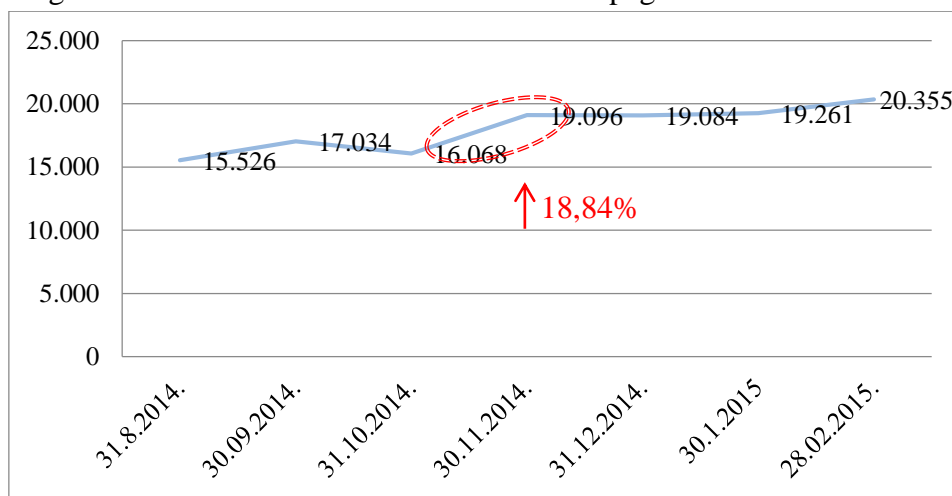
***From 8th of August to 8th September 2013

As seen in Table no. 1. the huge difference is shown in the performances between Runner game and Quizzes. This is a result of the organic communication in comparison with the results gained through using advertising campaigns of Quizzes. Further, the first application

has direct newsletter subscription form available whereas the other two used opt-out system. Opt-out was allowed according to the contest rules.

This study also confirms that the applications have increased overall communication on the Facebook page and consequently impact the increase in a number of fans. The results are illustrated for the six months in the following charts.

Chart 1. The growth in a number of fans on Visit Orebić page

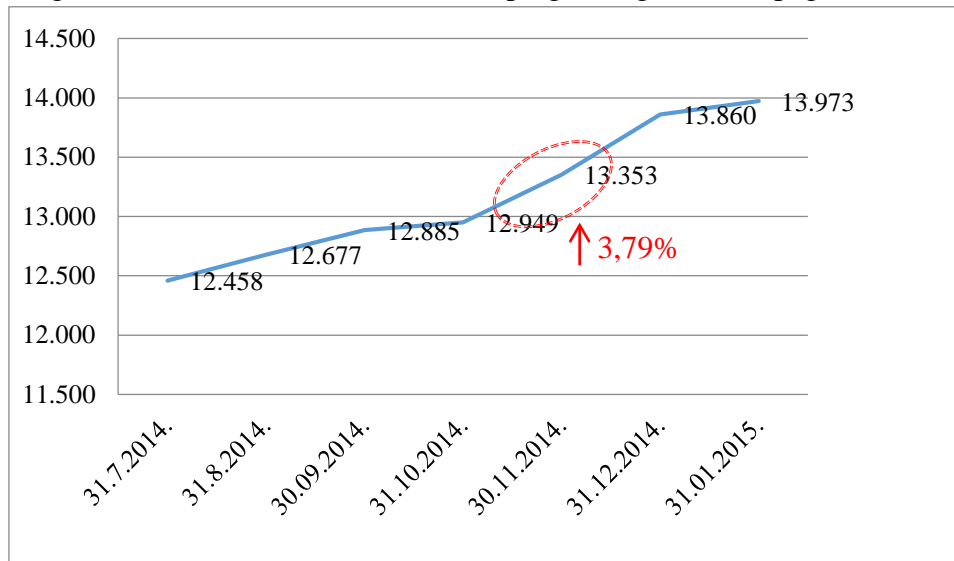


Source: Author's production according to data gathered through Socialnumbers statistic tool

In the month when the application was implemented on the Facebook page, the page has reached the highest rate of fan growth (18,84%) in a six months. That month the page gained 3028 new fans. The major rise happened in the first month which was followed by stagnation and slightly increase in February 2015.

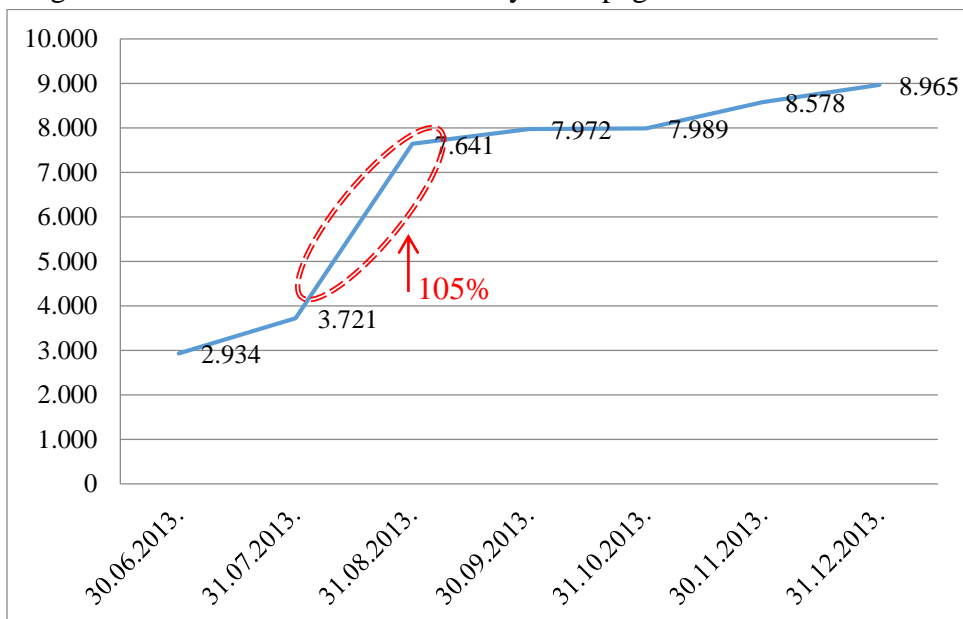
In a period of introducing the quiz contest, December 2014, the fan page Camping Village Šimuni has also gained the largest amount of fans (620) in analyzed period. The calculated growth rate was 3,79%. In comparison with Visit Orebić application, the page has gained fewer users which are a result of regular advertising and different conditions in terms of reach, engagement and Facebook algorithms in general.

Chart 2. The growth in a number of fans on Camping Village Šimuni page



Source: Author's production according to data gathered through Socialnumbers statistic tool

Chart 3. The growth in a number of fans on anonymous page



Source: Author's production according to data gathered through Socialnumbers statistic tool

The third application has equally gained the majority of new fans in the first month of organizing the contest. 812 fans were gathered in 30 days and the rising trend was kept in the following months.

The first case study presents that activity on the Facebook site can be increased organically. In 75 days during the contest, 45 unique users have visited the application. One user has approached the application 7,1 times on average. The number of page visits had boosted page

interactions which are in positive correlation with higher placement on Facebook according to its Edge rank algorithm [Newman, 2012]. In a first month, the page has gathered 3028 new fans. In the period of 75 days, the application has gained more than 500 interactions and 13 newsletter subscriptions.

Second and third case studies have used advertising in order to attract more fans to enter the application. Camping Village Šimuni page has grabbed the attention of 3082 unique users and their email addresses in 23 days. Each user has entered the application 1,26 times on average. With the social media contest and all other factors such as regular communication with fans, the page has got 620 new fans and 550 fans' interactions. In 6 months the number of impressions and the average interaction per page post have significantly increased.

The third case study shows that the anonymous page has gained 6506 unique users and their contacts (emails addresses and phone numbers). To specify, out of all unique users each user have start quiz on average 1,29 times. In the first month of the contest, the page has gathered 812 new fans. All the users reached through Facebook posts related to the contest have made more than 1300 interactions on th page during 30 days. The number of total impressions and the interaction per post have increased accordingly.

The number of visits per application significantly differs due to different types of contests. In the Runner game contest, the number of entrance per user was not limited whereas it was limited to three in quizzes which examine users familiarity with brand e.i. destination.

3.2. DISCUSSION

Generally it can be remarked that today a great number of people willing to travel towards specific touristic locations choose online communicating and planning alternatives, being influenced by social media applications [Dina & Sabou, 2012]. Social media applications enhance the voice of consumers [Munar & Jacobsen, 2014] allowing those who share a common interest to join ideas and points of view and concurrently influence global market. On the other hand, brands who have recognized this trend benefit from gathered data which is afterward used for newsletter campaigns e.i. custom made emails for a specific segments of users [Kumar, Zhang & Luo, 2014]. Applications are available on the Facebook from the early beginning, since 2007 [Facebook, 2015]. Hence Hargittai and Thelwall have conducted the research related to Facebook users' gender. The study results suggest that women spend more time using Facebook application than men [Giannakos et al., 2012]. Much research relates to the impact of social media on the tourism industry. Kaplan and Haenlein [2010] claim that web 2.0 technology has enabled connecting people in general, which has reflected on transparency and real-time communication. Xiang and Gretzel [2010] have established that consumers have the high rate of confidence in people who use the same social media as they do. This statement could be compared with the research in 1979. made by Coher and Golden which explains that

consumers whose attitude toward a product is not defined will prefer the product which is imposed by the community they belong.

While a large number of studies discuss the factors mentioned in this research, none of the research found analyzes the impact of the applications on Facebook page fans, engagement with fans and the use of the information gained. Furthermore, some research elaborates the contest influence on users' decision making and the use of database but no research have combined those two approaches.

3.3.LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW

The presented review is not free from limitations, which should be enumerated. First, the applications covered in this research have not been embedded on pages in the same period, which means that the data could not be compared. Moreover, regarding the same metrics observed, the presented data was taken from 2013, 2014 and 2015. This is a very long period when taking into account frequently changes in Facebook algorithm regarding reach, available buying ads space, the cost of advertising and the number of growing number of features available for the marketers. Second, all contests have different duration while they were organized by separate brands and under different conditions. Third, the runner game results were gained organically whereas quizzes were promoted through the Facebook ads and the newsletter campaigns.

4 CONCLUSION

Regardless of the aforementioned limitations, the findings presented in this paper indicate that there is a positive correlation between social media application and the increase in the Facebook page interactions which present the amount of brand awareness to the Facebook audience. The awareness can not only boost interaction on a page in the short run but can also encourage users' future actions while the page is already known to greater group of people. Facebook application have enabled the marketers to implement an additional content to the page and to collect the information about consumers' interests and their online behaviour. Those data are highly valued for future offline and digital activities such as email marketing or remarketing campaigns. To conclude, the Facebook application can gather new leads, increase brand awareness, but can not directly impact consumers' behaviour such as sending the request for proposal to a certain company in tourism.

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