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Introduction

As the adventure tourism industry has grown, so has the number of commercial outfitters providing opportunity for more people to take part in experiences that would otherwise require years of practice and expensive equipment (McGillivray & Frew, 2007). Because adventure activities are experiences rather than tangible goods, participants tend to use social media to “capture and objectify their experiences...to reinforce personal identity and cultural distinction from others through...accrual of symbolic capital” (McGillivray & Frew, 2007, p.55).

The outfitters providing these experiences are often doing so using a single natural feature (e.g., a river), therefore it becomes hard to differentiate themselves from their competition. This presents the need for value creation among the outfitters. As a result, better insight into the importance of social media is needed to assist companies in incorporating digital tactics into strategic communication plans.

This study explores Twitter messages (tweets) surrounding Gauley Season, a five-weekend whitewater-rafting season, which takes place each fall on the Gauley River in West Virginia. The goal is to provide insight into the conversations surrounding adventure activities via social media and determine whether the constructs of value (see Table 1) are demonstrated (Wilson & Quinton, 2012). Results will aid in marketing efforts for those in the industry serving as an outline of how to effectively join and lead conversations taking place around adventure tourism activities.

| Table 1 <i>Constructs explored within Gauley Season tweets</i> | |
|---|---|
| Hard Value | |
| Market research data | Brand/sector information, co-creation ideas |
| Relationship management | Service issue resolution |
| Immediacy | Localized and or immediate offerings |
| Soft Value | |
| Reputation management and monitoring | How and whether brand/product discussed |
| Level of buzz | Conversation from promotional activity |
| Sentiment | Emotional content |
| Community building | Level of interaction and familiarity between participants |

Literature Review

The concept of value is complex and has been researched extensively within social sciences. Most recently, researchers are finding more value building opportunities within the digital realm due to the immediacy of the various communication channels (Cuthbertson, 2010; Gruzd, 2011; Klara, 2010). Twitter has been found to drive what is called hard value through direct sales (Klara, 2010) or customer service recovery, and soft value through relationship development and raising brand awareness (Greenberg, 2010).

It is for these reasons the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Who are content producers, and how do they utilize Twitter within this context?

RQ2: What constructs of value are demonstrated within the Twitter content?

Methodology

A content analysis of tweets mentioning Gauley or #Gauley from September 1, 2013 through October 26, 2013 was conducted for this study. The timeframe spans one week before the beginning of the season to one week after the last day. It was chosen due to the large number of people participating in both the activity and social media conversations in a condensed timeframe.

Topsy.com, a search engine for social posts was used to collect the data. The search engine was a licensee of the Twitter Firehose and at the time of data collection, had indexed 425 billion pieces of content (Goel, 2013). The search delivered 1,141 tweets, and after removing those not pertaining to the term Gauley in a whitewater rafting context, 692 were coded using Nvivo 10.2 software. Tweets were coded using the value constructs presented in Table 1 (Wilson & Quinton, 2012), and the Tweeter type (Table 2).

Results

It is apparent that an excitement swells each year from tweets such as “Gettin' Amped up for Fall '13 road-trip w/ @in_the_flowerrss ! Country Road, Take Me Home, West Virginia! Whitewater Rafting Gauley River” (@enjoythetrek, 2013), and that the enjoyment of the trip remains after it is over. For example, “Experiencing post gauley fest depression. #wannagoback #kayakingfestival” (@aubsbloom, 2013).

As Kuhnel and Sonnentag (2011) point out however, these positive feelings will begin to fade, usually around one month after the trip. If companies want to avoid the bucket list mentality and keep customers from checking a box and moving on, they must work quickly connect and provide value before, during, and after the trip.

Tweeter type

As shown in Table 2, there was a lack of company or brand presence on Twitter. Of the 692 tweets analyzed, roughly half of them were sent by individuals. In 2013, Gauley Season was 42 days long. The number of tweets sent by a company or a brand in this research allows for less than one tweet per day. To be successful in connecting with your audience on a platform where approximately 500 million tweets are sent per day, takes a more sophisticated strategy (Oreskovic, 2015).

| <i>Tweeter type</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
|---|------------------|
| Individual | 329 |
| Company/Brand | 64 |
| Professional (i.e. blogger, journalist) | 69 |

The current research found that when companies were tweeting it was not in a way to attract someone new to the activity, but rather in a language those who were already familiar with the area and rafters would understand such as “PSA: Neither the New nor Gauley are closed. Leaves'r turnin. Rivers'r ragin. Rocks'r sticky. Fayetteville food is hot and yummy. #NRG #WV” (@classvi_wv, 2013). If one has never taken part in Gauley Season, it would be hard to understand what it is by this tweet.

Hard value

The only hard value construct demonstrated was that of immediacy. Tweets such as “Perfect weather is forecasted for this weekend! Get here for the opening weekend of Gauley Season if you can... <http://ow.ly/i/33zYA>” (@raftinginfo, 2013) were used as promotional tools for time sensitive offers, but there was no evidence of the use Twitter as a relationship management tool or asking for co-creating product ideas.

Soft value

Soft value constructs were the most prevalent, the results of which can be found in Table 3. Each construct is discussed below.

Sentiment. The sentiment toward Gauley Season and rafting was overwhelmingly positive, for example “High water weekend in WV at Gauley Fest was dooooope. I seriously love living! #GodIsGood #enjoycreation” (@headed4thedeep, 2013).

Sharing positive opinions about a product or experience creates connections between consumers such as “@cactisaltine highly suggest. This was my 8th time. It’s a blast. We took whole company last fall. Suggest the gauley over the new” (@nicksequin, 2013), and also between consumers and brands (Wilson & Quinton, 2012) “@ACEadventures How does the Gauley look for next weekend? Stoked! @BrentDeac @btkuhn” (@robbiefalls, 2013).

Community building. In previous research, McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified four characteristics that create a sense of community: belonging, influencing, supporting and sharing. The tweets found in this research revealed this sense of community around rafting where even when intimidated, the tweeter turned to the support of the group, for example, “The Gauley is the number 4 ranked white water in the US....whew tomorrow is going to be rough” (@basedbuddhist).

There were also instances using the platform in search of likeminded people such as “anybody wanna go whitewater rafting on the upper gauley in the future?” (@jpeters120, 2013).

| Table 3 | |
|--------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Soft value construct</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
| <u>Sentiment</u> | 224 |
| Positive | 205 |
| Negative | 19 |
| <u>Community building</u> | 127 |
| Person to person | 75 |
| Person to brand | 21 |
| Brand to person | 31 |
| <u>Level of buzz</u> | 106 |
| <u>Reputational management</u> | 381 |
| Mention of brand | 46 |
| Mention of product | 335 |

Level of buzz. The level of interest certain topics or tweets garner from the audience should also be of interest to those in the industry. The level of buzz can be enhanced through retweets, which allow for a single tweet to be seen by a broader audience. Creating engaging content worth spreading is therefore important for cost effective strategies. In the current research tweets were only retweeted about 15% of the time.

Reputation management. Of the soft value constructs explored in this research, this one presents the most room for improvement for companies and brands. Tweets coded for mentioning the product specifically referenced whitewater rafting, Upper Gauley, Lower Gauley, or Gauley River, all of which represent experiences sold by the outfitters. The majority of people who take part in Gauley Season use a commercial rafting company, and in 2013, 22,239 people took a commercial trip down the Gauley River (West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, 2013).

The results of this research suggest however, that the product itself is the focus of social media messages rather than the companies guiding the customers down the river. For example, “White water rafting on upper Gauley River, rock climbing, and camping until Sunday. Let’s hope I make it back in one piece” (@actuarygangsta, 2013), or “Had an awesome day rafting the upper Gauley river this morning! <http://t.co/v2LPpGCxsp>” (@andersonbowen29, 2013). In order to achieve affective electronic word of mouth (eWOM), it is important the company or brand accompanies the positive attachment to the activity (Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013).

Conclusion and discussion

This research serves as a building block for establishing value creating digital strategies within the adventure tourism industry. Research in other industries has shown Twitter to be an important value building tool, and in an industry where multiple companies offer experiences using the same natural feature, it is important to understand how to set your company apart. An increasingly efficient way to connect with consumers and showcase the way in which your company or brand can enhance their lives is through calculated digital efforts. Most companies are becoming aware of this, but as this research shows, are still not clear as to what it entails.

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