



Fostering Customer Service in the Digital Age Through Social Media: An Evaluation of How Hospitality Industry Use Facebook for Public Relations Purposes

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Abstract

Public relations studies have often examined dialogue and engagement with clients and customers using social media. However, studies have not explored the dynamics of the use of social media in the hospitality industry for building a customer relationship. More importantly, studies examining the dynamics of social media use for public relations purposes in the hospitality industry in developing countries in Africa are very scanty. Studies on social media have instead, focused on developed countries while limited in scope regarding the hospitality industry. The purpose of this study is to enhance the use of social media in the hospitality industry in Ghana, by examining how Facebook is adopted among hotels in Ghana for the purpose of public relations to maintain customers and foster good communication. A content analysis of 800 posts and updates from 70 hotels in Ghana indicates that the hospitality industry is making good use of Facebook for public relations purposes. However, the use of Facebook was more in one-way informational messages rather than two-way information sharing. This result is explained and its implication for the hospitality industry for public relations and customer service.

Keywords: Customer Service, Ghana, Relationship management, hotel, social media, Facebook.

Introduction

The evolution of the Internet becomes a ubiquitous tool for discussion of political and social issues. The Internet has reshaped how government, private and nonprofit organizations render various services to clients and customers. More importantly, the Internet has improved the dialogue between service providers and customers by increasing both one-way and two-way channels of communication between a customer and a service provider in both developed and developing countries. A more recent web technology that has become popular and bridged the communication gap in diverse ways is the use of social media. The social media have opened up possibilities for online human-to-human interaction. The Social network sites (SNS) mainly emerged as a unique platform for online discourse for attending to the needs and wants of clients and customers. Because of how social media allow users to interact and collaborate with each other, the youths are more motivated to communicate online compared to the traditional websites, where people are limited to the passive viewing of contents.

Studies have found that social media has become one of the most reliable medium by which people communicate with their family, friends, colleagues, businesses, and the government (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001). The capability of social media to promote interpersonal and group cohesion offers new and unprecedented opportunities for both business owners and customers to inform and be informed (DiStasio et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Huang, 2001; Ki, & Hon, 2007; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2009; Sundar, et al., 2003; Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010; Thackeray, et al., 2013; Waters, 2009). Since the advent of SNS, blogs, wikis, folksonomies, video sharing sites, hosted services, and web applications, increased communication for service providers. It is undeniable fact that the Internet has changed how business engages in customer relationship and conduct public relations activities. For this reason, many businesses are embracing social media for various forms of activities including keeping in touch with clients and customers, communicating issues of important to employees and customers as well as advertise for products and services.

The active use of social media tools has increased the presence of businesses, particularly in the United States and other developed countries. The trend is gradually changing in developing countries, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa. Various businesses that are lagging behind the new opportunities offered by SNS are criticized as being resistant to change and lose out on customers. The technology was considered as very technical and need some special skills. However, the trend of technological lag is not the same as the use of social media. Businesses in developing countries have adopted the use of social media more quickly than it adopted other technologies like email and the use of websites (CMF) (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001).

The use of mobile telecommunications such as cell phones and tablets have further, shrink distance, making communication much easier and faster through the use of web 2.0 applications. Among the many applications, SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google Plus+, and Myspace have increased connecting with customers and fostering public relations activities. This has consequently lowered the barriers to access to information, particularly in building relationships with customers. Business owners now have the means to react immediately to issues from their customers on services and products than at any other time. Business owners also have the conduit through which customers can quickly provide their ideas for an improvement or to reform of services and goods. The new channels of

communication created by social media are fast and cheap, such that it has considerable influence on public relations building (DiStasio et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Huang, 2001; Ki, & Hon, 2007; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2009; Sundar, et al., 2003; Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010; Thackeray, et al., 2013; Waters, 2009). Several studies have identified the use of social media by for-profit and not-for-profit as both a communication tool and as a tool for building effective customer service (Jo & Yungwook, 2003; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Lovejoy, & Saxton, 2012; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007; Sung-Un, & Joon Soo, 2009). More importantly, several studies have found social media to be effective in accomplishing communication tasks that were once significantly more expensive in regard to time and money (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001).

Information and Communication Technology infrastructure are very expensive to implement. This is due to the cost of equipment and the expertise needed to achieve it. Consequently, many smaller and medium sized businesses have not been able to implement various forms of technologies that could have otherwise addressed their challenges. For this reason, the lag of technological innovation in developing countries is prominent. However, this challenge has not deterred developing countries from taking the advantage of the benefits the social media technology offer in developed countries. As a result, social media has been widely adopted in developing countries in Africa faster than other technological innovations in the history of inventions.

The advent of social media applications like Facebook and Twitter present many research opportunities for examining how customers and the general public responds to organizational engagement efforts. Social media enables scholars and practitioners the potentials to explore both an organizations' dynamic communication activities with its customers and clients. Social media applications have not only provide the platforms to observe the near or real-time relationship between the organization and the general public but also how it improves the image of the organization in the face of many issues such as customer disappointment and feedback. Studies have shown that people use social media to do some business, meet people, express their culture or thoughts, and promote products and services (Jo & Yungwook, 2003; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Lovejoy, & Saxton, 2012; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007; Sung-Un, & Joon Soo, 2009). This study specifically seek to investigate how are hospitality industry in Ghana are using social media like Facebook to foster a public relationship with clients and customers? It is important to examine how social media, particularly, Facebook is used to promote customer service in the hospitality industry for public relation purposes in Ghana because the internet and the use of social media have proliferated across the length and breadth of Ghana. Ghana is a developing country that is fast growing in the use of social media due to the proliferation of the use of Android cell phones and devices. Therefore, understanding how social media is used to foster customer service in the digital age will help the hospitality industry and researchers to explore further avenues that social media can be used to improve the services within the hospitality industry. By examining the dynamics of social media in the hospitality industry in Ghana, this study will address the critical gap in the literature by highlighting the value of social media to managers and public relations experts in the hospitality industry on how to engage their customers in building a good customer relationship as well as for managing public relationship. This study uses a sample of 70 hotels in Ghana. A content analysis of 800 posts and updates were examined on how the hospitality industry is making good use of Facebook for public relations purposes. Through this examination, the study exemplifies the how public relations can be developed and promoted through the use of social media beyond the corners of the organization.

Online Public Relationship Management

Several studies have investigated the various ways that organizations engage their publics via new media to create and cultivate lasting relationships (Jo & Yungwook, 2003; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Lovejoy, & Saxton, 2012; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007; Sung-Un, & Joon Soo, 2009). Most of these studies have examined evidence of organizational use of the website to generate dialogue with the public with others also exploring such related areas as using the website to enhance accountability relationships to serve as a strategic communications tool to boost responsiveness to customers and stakeholders (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001). Researchers have begun to address these issues with respect to social media in this digital age (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001).. Various studies have proven valuable for enhancing the understanding of the strategies organizations pursue to strengthen their relationships with the public (DiStasio et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Huang, 2001; Ki, & Hon, 2007; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2009; Sundar, et al., 2003; Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010; Thackeray, et al., 2013; Waters, 2009). The focus of these studies are on the regulatory side of the relationship (Kent, & Taylor, 1998; Rafaeli, & Sudweeks, 1997; Saxton, & Guo, 2011; Vorvoreanu, 2009). By focusing on what organizations do, the understanding of how the public thinks or how the public feels will be neglected from the line customer relationship (Jo & Yungwook, 2003; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Lovejoy, & Saxton, 2012; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007; Sung-Un, & Joon Soo, 2009). This will in effect, make public relations and communication unable to address the actual effectiveness of organizations' public engagement efforts in their natural online settings (DiStasio et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Huang, 2001; Ki, & Hon, 2007; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2009; Sundar, et al., 2003; Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010; Thackeray, et al., 2013; Waters, 2009).

The digital age has changed how public relations are conducted. Public relations professionals present the face of an organization, usually to articulate its objectives and official views on issues of relevance, primarily to the stakeholders, customers or shareholders. Until recently, public relations were seen as the way an organization influence the media and maintaining relationships with stakeholders. Public relations professionals in this era were viewed as discourse workers specializing in communication and the presentation of argument and employing rhetorical strategies to achieve managerial aims. However, this trend has changed. This is partially due to the new digital age that is proliferated by

various social media tools. This has changed the dynamics and the discussions surrounding public relations in organizations.

The internet has modified the way organizations relate to stakeholders, including shareholders and customers. Now, many of the core activities of organizations are done through the internet. These essential activities include communicating financial results and business strategy, consumer/lifestyle public relations by gaining publicity for a particular product or service, managing crisis by responding to a crisis promptly. Additionally, the various online tools have also increased the internal communications within the company itself, relationship with government agencies or regulatory agencies and improving customer feedback. The use of internet in managing and coordinating public relations of an organization both internally and externally have gained considerable grounds and have widened the door for marketing the products and services of organizations (DiStasio et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Huang, 2001; Ki, & Hon, 2007; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2009; Sundar, et al., 2003; Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010; Thackeray, et al., 2013; Waters, 2009).

The Use of Social Media for Public Relations

Social media channels have become an innovative mechanism for public relations building based on studies documenting the rise of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube as strategic and tactical components of campaigns (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001).. Although many platforms now exist for implementing a social media dimension into public relations campaigns, it has taken time for these platforms to be seen as legitimate by practitioners in the field of business. As traditional web communication began to take on a more interesting, social dimension, much of the public relations industry's attention was focused on blogs. Various studies found the potential success that organizations could reap by developing a personality online and incorporating relationship strategies into their blogs (Kent, & Taylor, 1998; Rafaeli, & Sudweeks, 1997; Saxton, & Guo, 2011; Vorvoreanu, 2009). The emphases on connectivity and dialogue were found to play a crucial role in keeping stakeholders engaged with an organization during day-to-day activities and periods of crises. As stakeholders began paying more attention to the blogs and sought interaction with organizational representatives, the use of social media strategies, especially blogs, increased as they were seen as being more credible and significant for keeping audiences informed and being open and accountable to them (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001).

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and many other third-party platforms allow organizations to access data that measure the impact of outreach efforts (Kelleher, 2009; Kimmel, & Kitchen, 2013; McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Saxton et al., 2011; Waters, 2007). Reflective of blogs, social media platforms have allowed stakeholders to connect with organizations through conversations and other forms of interactivity to foster relationship growth (Kent, & Taylor, 1998; Rafaeli, & Sudweeks, 1997; Saxton, & Guo, 2011; Vorvoreanu, 2009). As agencies and public relations practitioners become more sophisticated in analyzing the impact data, the use of these channels to tap into the needs and wants of stakeholders can provide an environment conducive to promoting long-term relationships with stakeholders based on trust and transparency while balancing that goal with achieving short-term successes with campaigns and promotions.

As social media continues to move beyond simply being a tactical dimension of public relations to being part of organizations' long-term growth strategies (DiStasio et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Huang, 2001; Ki, & Hon, 2007; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2009; Sundar, et al., 2003; Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010; Thackeray, et al., 2013; Waters, 2009). Scholars found that practitioners in management roles were using social media for their careers as much as technicians (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al., 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001). These findings reiterated the growing value of social media in campaigns; public relations practitioners' usage of social media has been highly correlated with leadership indicators. These results strengthens the argument that public relations management also needs to understand the strategic relationship implications of social media (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001).

A greater emphasis on social media can now be seen in public relations literature (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001).. Various literature also provide some contextualization for the social media discussion in public relations (DiStasio et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Huang, 2001; Ki, & Hon, 2007; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2009; Sundar, et al., 2003; Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010; Thackeray, et al., 2013; Waters, 2009). In highlighting the rapid growth of discussion about social media in various disciplines like communications, public administration, information systems, business management and hospitality management, they have noted that the debate is conditioning practitioners first to jump to a socially-mediated environment for their work of building good customer relations is very high (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001).. To date, research on social media in strategic communication continues to struggle to define an actual return on investment (DiStasio et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Huang, 2001; Ki, & Hon, 2007; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2009; Sundar, et al., 2003; Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010; Thackeray, et al., 2013; Waters, 2009).

Building relationships with employees and the public have become better strengthened and fruitful over social media for building connections (Kelleher, 2009; Kimmel, & Kitchen, 2013; McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Saxton et al., 2011; Waters, 2007). Through the use of social media like Facebook and Twitter, practitioners can now hope for significant levels of interaction and engagement with stakeholders and customers (DiStasio et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton,

2014; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Huang, 2001; Ki, & Hon, 2007; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2009; Sundar, et al., 2003; Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010; Thackeray, et al., 2013; Waters, 2009).

Research Method

This study uses data from 70 hotels in Ghana. To generate the sample, we used the Ghana Tourism Authority website. Ghana Tourism Authority is the official government agency responsible for the hospitality industry in Ghana. It has all the registered hotels and travel and tours in Ghana. According to the Ghana Tourism Authority, there are 1,869 registered hotels in Ghana. Table 1 shows the distribution of registered hotels in Ghana by region.

Region	Registered Hotel
Ashanti Region	364
Brong Ahafo Region	75
Central Region	159
Eastern Region	128
Greater Accra Region	513
Northern Region	85
Upper East Region	51
Upper West Region	27
Volta Region	155
Western Region	165
Tema (Greater Accra	147
Total	1869

To get the sample from the population, 468 hotels were randomly selected to represent one-fourth of the total population. The random sampling was done in each region, by randomly selecting one-fourth of the total number of hotels in that area. After getting the sample, a search was conducted in the Facebook internal search engine as well as Google to locate the Facebook page of the hotel. Out of 468 hotels sampled, 232 cannot do not have the Facebook page. The 236 that have a Facebook page, only 70 were active. By active means, the hotel has made a post to their page for the past three months as at the time data was collected for the study in May 2015. These seventy hotels were used for the study. Greater Accra and Kumasi regions accounted for 90% of the hotels included. These hotels are mostly two stars to four-star hotels.

Next, we use WordStat to generate the analysis for the content of the pages. WordStat is a content analysis and text mining add-on module of QDA Miner. Provalis Research developed it in 1998. The latest version 7 was used for the content analysis of this study. WordStat is used for business intelligence and competitive analysis of websites, sentiment analysis, content analysis of open-ended questions, and theme extraction from social media data. It is a categorization of content using user-defined dictionaries, words or concepts. WordStat as an automated method of data retrieval has been used successfully in a variety of published public relations (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

The 70 hotels collectively posted a total of 3,024 messages over one year period between May 2014 and May 2015. The focus of this study is examined how Facebook is used to foster customer relations. The posts were coded into three broad categories: information, community building, and dialogue. The information category examines how hotels give information to prospective customers as well as current customers. Information ranges from new facilities, new promotions, new rates, new management, and direction to an event. The community building category examines posts related to keeping customers informed by convincing them to visit the hotel for another time. The community-building updates were not focused only on the organization as in information-sharing updates; instead, they may have focused on the bigger picture social issue the organization is addressing, and they may highlight the positive work done by similar competitors. This category also includes posts that share the success story of previous visitors. The dialogue category examines resolving issues related to their services and how to improve these services.

Results

The selected hotels represent a cross-section of the hotels in the hospitality industry in Ghana. Descriptive statistics indicates 98% of the hotels included in the study can be found in the big cities, mainly Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi, Sunyani, Tamale, Ho, Cape Coast and Koforidua. This in a way, due to the nature of the online activity as most of the smaller hotels in the towns were not actively engaged in social media activities.

The focus of this study is not to the organization itself but on the use of Facebook to build a customer relationship. The study uses three broad categories, mainly, information, community building, and dialogue. Each of the 3,024 messages was assigned one of the codes. The WordStat automatically does the analysis based on the inputs (code). WordStat removed 121 notes that it could assign any of the codes to. These words were not related to any of the main categories: information, community building, and dialogue. Consequently, the results or the analysis was based on 2,903 messages from the 70 sampled hotels in the study.

The research question in this study was to examine how social media is used the digital age to foster customer relationship? The analysis, based on the three main categories: information, community building, and dialogue show that 56% of the communication on Facebook by hostels in Ghana was mainly to share information with customers and stakeholders. The information that largely dominated the Facebook posts include information on the promotion, new facilities available, and saying goodbye to some particular clients who are primarily group visitors in the diaspora. Additionally, the information posts were geared towards people living outside Ghana. Specific names were mentioned in

some of the posts regarding group tourists. Seventy percent of the positions in the information category were for promotion purposes.

The analysis also reveals that 31% of the messages were customer building. This client building was mainly sharing the success comments, stories, pleasant words from visitors who have enjoyed the stay in the hotels. For the customer building category, 93% were success stories shared with customers and stakeholders. The dialogue group was made up of only 13% of the total messages analyzed in the study. The dialogue group was centered on explaining issues related to electricity challenges, water challenges, and transportation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The proliferation of social media, such as the Facebook and Twitter, is ushering in a new era of possibilities for organizations to engage with and be responsive to the public and other key stakeholders. Although scholars have started to investigate how organizations are using social media to engage their clients and customers, they have not examined how the new trend is fairing in developing countries in Africa. Fortunately, evaluating the effectiveness and outcomes of online engagement is a task for which social media applications are much better suited than the traditional websites. Using data on the Facebook utilization of the 70 hotels in Ghana, this study found that hotels are more likely to engage with customers when they need to give them information, community-building, and dialogue based on some poor services that the customer might have encountered.

The findings from this study have several important practical and theoretical implications. The results confirm a strong, yet largely untested, suggestion of much of the previous empirical work in developed countries (Avery et al., 2010; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Breckenridge, 2012; Briones, et al., 2011; Curtis, et al, 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, et al., 2008; Sweetser, & Kelleher, 2011; Taylor, & Kent, 2010; Taylor, et al., 2001; (DiStasio et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Huang, 2001; Ki, & Hon, 2007; Seltzer, & Mitrook, 2009; Sundar, et al., 2003; Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010; Thackeray, et al., 2013; Waters, 2009). The Ghanaian hospitality industry is making use of social media for three main purposes: information, community building, and dialogue. The messages in these categories promote interactivity to address customer needs build a strong customer relationship. Based on these findings, hotels will share information about clients who make good comments about their services. This information will be shared to confirm the quality of their services as well as bring new customers or previously disgruntled customers.

This study, though one of the first that examines the use of social media and Facebook in particular in a developing country like that, the study builds on several previous studies conducted on public relations and customer services (Kent, & Taylor, 1998; Rafaeli, & Sudweeks, 1997; Saxton, & Guo, 2011; Vorvoreanu, 2009). This study presents a methodology that examines how social media can facilitate customer relationship.

Among the limitations of this study is the ability to test with regression and examine the significant differences between the type of messages posted and how customers response to these messages. Future studies can examine the relationship between the hotel category and the type of messages post, the number of clients on the Facebook page and the response of the customers as well as the relationship between the location of the hotel and type of customers they address the messages.

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