

Let's Be Social at 30,000 Feet!

This exploratory article maps airline use of social-media platforms. Four categories are suggested to describe firms' overall behavior on social-media platforms. The authors categorize the content that 12 airlines post on two well-known social-media platforms using the Promotional Marketing Mix framework. Airlines are categorized as full-service or low-cost carriers and by their number of posts. The results show that there is a



wide variety of use among all types of carriers, and that airlines should formulate clear, inclusive marketing strategies for their social-media presence to improve cohesion.

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Introduction

Information communication technologies (ICT) are perpetually transforming the nature of communication and marketing of which the Internet has become an integral part, and its dynamics have expanded to incorporate the end-user as a co-producer. This interactive Internet relies on user-generated content (UGC), which is fast becoming an important part of companies' communication and marketing strategies. Travel industry use of ICT has been explored by others (World Tourism Organization 2008, Tussyadiah, Fesenmaier 2009) and within the airline industry (Buhalis, Law 2008, Buhalis 1998, Buhalis 2004). Airline use of UGC has also been identified and discussed in popular literature from various perspectives, including loyalty (Airline Business 2009) and brand and customer awareness (Field 2008, Clark 2009). However, academic research in the field investigating overall airline use and behavior of UGC is lacking, something that this exploratory paper addresses. This paper maps airline use of UGC on the popular Facebook and Twitter platforms, within the realm of marketing, via reliance on the Promotional Marketing Mix (PMM). These platforms were chosen for their large number of users, nearly 500 and 200 million users respectively, and their presence in previous research on their marketplace and societal impacts (Qualman 2009, Weinberg 2009, Li and Bernoff 2008, Weber 2009). This paper begins by identifying four general categories that describe how companies behave on social-media platforms, followed by describing common patterns of use of social-media platforms among full-service and low-cost carriers by analyzing the content that airlines post. The paper reflects on these implications from a management perspective.

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). This broad definition regards marketing as a social process that relies on fulfillment of individual needs through creating and exchanging value with others. Such a definition of marketing complements the principles of social media. Social media describes Internet tools that are influenced by services that allow users to contribute to the development, rating, collaboration, customization, and distribution of Internet content (Vickery, Wunsch-Vincent 2007, Cooke, Buckley 2008). Internet tools can include wikis, podcasts, messaging applications or blogs (Stillman, McGrath 2008). Social media and UGC supports the processes and fulfillment of needs through a two-way level of communication; marketing and the Internet can be regarded as social constructs via interconnectivity with users (Markham 2004). This new level of interaction and participation among users is opening up a new era of transparency (Qualman 2009). There is a shift from the traditional, technology-based "command-and-control" era to an era of "empowerment among individuals" (Shih 2009). This shift will lead to fundamental changes in how businesses approach customers, and their needs and wants through marketing.



Social media is a catalyst for this shift in empowerment, and based on content analysis on airline social-media sites, and in an attempt to classify social-media behavior, the authors identified four overall broad categories that describe how firms behave on social media platforms: authority, tone, anonymity, and recipient. Authority refers to the level of content control that is exhibited by a firm. Firms may elect to promote unofficial content, for ex-

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)

ample, content created by users, such as customers, employees, or other stakeholders, or official content in the form of official promotional content. An authoritative use of social media has a top-down approach, referred to as command-and-control, while a less authoritative use is a bottom-up perspective, coined interactivity. Tone refers to the style of language that is used in the content, which can be either informal or formal (Munar 2010). The informal style is a colloquial style that imitates that of friends or colleagues. Anonymity refers to the firm's elected transparency of the firm's poster. Firms may elect to make users aware of the personal identity of the firm's poster or choose anonymity. These dichotomies are referred to as transparency or opaque. These three categories are complementary and can have a direct relationship to one another. The final category, recipient, refers to the intended reader of a firm's posts. Content is often displayed in a public forum on a social-media platform, however, content is not always intended exclusively for external users. Content may sometimes be related to internal, company-related issues directed at employees. The poles of this category are referred to as internal and external. External users should be understood as a broad category; it encompasses past customers, current flyers, potential buyers, the general public, etc. These four categories are described as dichotomous, however, they are to be regarded as a continuum.



While the previous four categories can be used to describe a firm's overall behavior on social-media platforms, this research studies the various forms of airline marketing behavior by analyzing and categorizing the content posted by airlines. A well-known framework within the field of marketing is the 4 Ps (Van Waterschoot, Van den Bulte 1992): product, price, place, and promotion. This classification was too broad and the authors elected to utilize a specification of the 4Ps, the promotional marketing mix (PMM). Past research (Mangold, Faulds 2009, Chaffey, Smith 2008) highlights that social media and UGC is transforming the field of marketing and promotion. Chaffey and Smith (2008) have applied the PMM to the online field with 10 elements. The authors of this paper have reduced

these elements to eight to better suit the specifics of social media and UGC by removing three elements and adding one to the original specification. Table 1 shows these elements with a brief definition.



Methods

This paper relies on the netnographic method developed for online ethnographic research by Kozinets (2009, 2002, 1998). This method relies upon participative observation and examination of online communities; the researcher acts as an active member and studies interactivity with the rest of the user community. Often, the researcher is obligated to make their presence and purpose of study known to the community. However, the authors modified this method slightly as this paper researches content in a public forum and the authors elected not to upload content or interact in other ways within the communities.

Data Set

The data set was constructed in a four-step process. First, the airlines for study were ranked according to size based on operating revenue and business model type: full-service carriers (FSC) and low-cost carriers (LCC). Rankings by Air Transport World (2009a, 2009b) were used. 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. This generated a data set of 42 airlines. Third, the time frame of study was limited from August 2009 to January 2010. The number of posts for the 42 airlines in this six-month time frame was counted. 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.



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

Table 3: Facebook and Twitter PMM

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

Analysis

This analysis attempts to highlight similarities among low, average, and high-posting airlines in relation to the use of social media. The authors read, categorized, and discussed the content posted by the 12 airlines in the six-month time period. The overall categories to describe a firm’s behavior on social media platforms are: command-and-control, formal, and anonymous, with various recipients. The overall tone of airline-posted content leans towards formal, official, and authoritative, although posts categorized as social activity take on a more informal tone, especially on Twitter (Israel 2009). High formality risks limiting user interactivity, a defining characteristic of Web 2.0. This may be explained by a high propensity to rely on anonymous firm posters. Israel (2009) states that anonymous posting may lead users to be less inclined to engage in informal and relationship-building, on-line conversations. Some social-media content is directed towards employees. For example, Virgin America communicated to employees via its Twitter account concerning donations (VirginAmerica 2010). The type of content may enhance a customer’s perception of an airline, however, there is a threat of diluting important information with too much content. Some airlines have addressed this issue by establishing multiple accounts on social-media platforms for specific content.



The majority of content on social-media platforms is advertising-related, although Twitter shows greater disparity. Advertising is often static content that merely makes statements regarding new products, services, or destinations. This type of advertisement fails to exploit interactivity and co-development with customers, a key facet of Web 2.0. This type of advertising is characteristic of command-and-control use of ICT tools. Although advertising is prolific on social-media platforms, airlines are not connecting users with online distribution tools; there is limited integration

among social-media platforms, advertising, and selling. In addition, there is limited customer segmentation recognizing customers that are present on social-media platforms. For example, SAS’ post about, “...reopening the Oslo-Malaga route, as well as the Oslo-bardufoss route. Lower costs makes it possible for us to increase frequencies to a number of destinations from Oslo, including Las Palmas, Alicante, Bodø, and Alta. Merry Christmas!” (SAS, 2009).

Conversational, social content is more represented on Twitter than Facebook. Such content can allow users to feel a greater connection to an airline, and facilitate building and strengthening a relationship and loyalty, such as, “Thank you, Max. We’re glad to have you on board. Have a great flight!” (British Airways, 2010). However, anonymity of the airline poster may challenge relationship-building. This form of content conflicts with the command-and-control category that airlines favor. Airlines have also found use for social-media platforms for disseminating time-sensitive information, classified as direct mail in the PMM. Examples of time disruption events include weather delays, changes to travel-required documents, incidents and accidents, etcetera. However, airlines are inconsistent in their use. Some airlines elect to post negative events, delays for example, while other airlines may also post positive content, for example, no disruptions on a certain day. While negative information may be useful to some passengers, positive information may help to build rapport and a positive image among all passengers. Tables 3 shows the distribution for Facebook and Twitter posts categorized by the PMM.

Discussion



Use of social-media platforms, UGC, and Web 2.0 are a growing phenomenon among firms, including airlines. Currently, there is a disparity among the types of use, which airlines should address by developing clear strategies for their presence on social-media platforms. While Facebook is used primarily for advertising, there is a lack of integration with distribution tools. For example, while new destinations or sales may be advertised on Facebook many posts lack a simple link to bring the reader to a site to complete a purchase. In other words, there is room for airlines to capitalize on their posts and turn readers into buyers. Twitter, on the other hand, is a platform used extensively for social activity, however, airlines are still exploring their desired style and overall direction. Airline users of social-media platforms would benefit from creating clear strategies and key performance indicators for their social-media presence complemented with analytical metrics to measure performance. Airline content tends to be formal and authoritative, which can conflict with the overall characteristics of UGC, social-media platforms, and interactivity. Airlines can risk creating desert sites with few users if their content and use of social media is not captivating. While use of social media and user numbers grow, the issue of scalability may become a concern. Some airlines are selective in what posts they respond to and use social media platforms to push information one-way, others are prolific posters and respond to nearly every user comment. Active use of the platform can help to build and strengthen a relationship, however, it can lead to scalability issues in the future. One concern may be an inability for airlines to be as active and personal on social media sites should their users double in numbers. Posts by airlines on Twitter were especially personal and directed to specific users. Such interactivity with a growing number of followers may require significant investment in personnel and other resources by airlines, which may be challenging to calculate a return on investment. Airlines will benefit from having a clear strategy for their social-media presence and use. Having an integrated

and dedicated social-media position within the airline, rather than delegating duties ad hoc, such as to the marketing or sales department, is one of the authors' recommendations. Finally, there is limited interconnectivity found among airlines. While some airlines are present on various social-media platforms, for example, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, etcetera, there are few airlines that are successful at having a clear strategy for each platform with beneficial interconnectivity. It is precisely this cross-linking among social-media platforms that allows airlines to exploit the benefits of UGC platforms and may allow airlines to designate platforms to various PMM categories. While the individual PMM categories are relevant to one or more social-media platforms airlines risk diluting their messages if they try to include all types of content in one platform; specialization of content to relevant platforms or accounts would be a better use of resources. For example, time sensitive or personal content should be focused on Twitter, while more general content may benefit from a presence on Facebook. The use of social-media platforms among airlines is still in its infancy, and the field will, in no doubt, benefit from maturity in the field.



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