

A study on the role of social media marketing strategies adopted by top three Indian hotel brands

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ABSTRACT. Over the last few decades, information and communication technology has drastically changed, with a critical development being the emergence of social media. With the rapid growth and development of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and many more, these platforms have become quite common in almost all sectors, with the hospitality industry being no exception. These platforms have revolutionized how the industry functioned a few years back, from hotel bookings to payments to sharing the happy and frustrating moments during a vacation. With the information easily accessible with a single mouse click, social media has bridged the gap between customers and service providers. Social media has not only become an awareness platform by making information easily accessible, but it has also developed into a networking medium helping to engage with guests from anywhere at any time. Furthermore, the use of such platforms has provided an opportunity to understand the guests' needs during the various stages of the guest cycle (pre-arrival, arrival, stay, departure and post-departure) and thus, help modify the experiences achieve guest satisfaction to the fullest. To strengthen brands to increase sales, the planned use of these sites has become a part of the marketing strategy of most hotels across the globe.

The objective of this paper is an insight into the contribution of three major social media platforms, namely, Facebook, Instagram, and TripAdvisor, to establish the brand image in the minds of the customers. The paper also aims to identify the strategies adopted by three Indian hotel brands viz. Taj Hotels, Oberoi Group of Hotels and Resorts, and The Leela Palace, Hotels and Resorts stay one step ahead of their competitors.

Keywords: Social Media Platforms, Marketing, Hospitality industry, Hotels

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1 Introduction

1.1 Changing means of communication

Humans are inherently social, and the need to communicate with society was earlier limited to visiting relatives and family members or meeting in public places. But with the advent of technology, the entire concept of communication changed. The geographical distances were no longer a barrier, and economic concerns were eliminated by introducing social networking websites and applications. Soon, with the increased usage of laptops and mobile phones, these platforms became commonplace to communicate, share emotions, and exchange information with millions of people who were now a part of the global community.

Today, not only are the people actively participating on these sites but they are also addicted to social media. According to a recent survey, it was also found that the average time spent by adults is 2.5 hours per day on social media platforms.

Seizing more than 4 billion users across the globe, the opportunities offered by platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and many more are endless, making their use a necessity. From connecting with people with a single tap to utilizing the networks to expand your business by reaching your target audience, these sites are set to be the flourishing communication medium for personal and professional interactions.

1.2 Social media and its significance

Social media refers to an electronic form of communication that allows people to converse, share content and information and make connections in virtual communities. In the era of digitalization, these sites have millions of users, with Facebook having the maximum users accounting for 2.6 billion monthly active users, followed by Instagram and Twitter. Over the years, social media sites have drastically changed. From the use of these platforms being restricted to communication and interactions, these platforms evolved and have become an indispensable tool in the business world. The dependency on branding, advertising, marketing, and sales has grown tremendously. Companies have started using social media marketing to connect with the target customers, create brand awareness, and create brand identity to meet the organizational goals.

There are numerous advantages of social media marketing, such as:

- Creating brand awareness
- Identifying the target audience and their needs
- To generate and convert leads
- Improve customer experiences and satisfaction
- Engage with customers and create a brand identity and much more

1.3 Social media and the hotel industry

Social media has opened numerous opportunities for service providers and consumers in today's business world. Most businesses have started focusing on creating a solid social media identity to make the utmost use of these platforms, with the hospitality industry slowly adapting to this change. The hospitality industry is undoubtedly one of the largest industries dependent on communication and connections with existing and potential customers. Not only is it a cost-effective means to interact by actively engaging on such platforms, but guests' needs can also be identified. Accordingly, products and services can be modified, and thus, customer satisfaction can be achieved. Problems and complaints can be addressed with a single mouse click, and experiences can be shared by posting attractive pictures and videos. By creating an attractive virtual presence, awareness about the products and services can be made. Thus, it can help attract potential customers. Customers have become more powerful with the information easily accessible on these sites. It is pretty common to see guests sharing their experiences in the form of posts or comments, which can largely influence the image of a hotel and the decisions of the potential customers.

According to a survey, it was found that 81% of people frequently or consistently read reviews before booking a hotel. Also, 80% of people believe hotels that respond to guest reviews care more about their customers. Hence, it has become essential to monitor the presence on the digital platforms and encourage the use of these sites in a strategized manner to achieve the ultimate goal of customer satisfaction.

1.4 Social media marketing (SMM) in the hotel industry:

In the era of digitalization, social media to market products and services, also known as social media marketing, has become the need of the hour. The use of social media tools and tactics to increase customer outreach has become a point of concern for the top hotel brands to stay ahead in the game.

1.5 Social media marketing strategies adopted by top 3 Indian hotel brands:

Name of Hotel Chains considered: Taj Hotels, The Oberoi Hotels and Resorts, and The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts

1.6 Identifying the guest status:

The first step in formulating a strategy for social media platforms involves identifying the customer's awareness of the brand. The customers can be categorized into Cold, Warm, Hot leads.

Cold Leads:

The guests looking for hotels but not aware of the brand or engage with the brand content come under this category. The content is divided based on demographics, interests,

duration of stay, etc. The primary step for this type of clientele is providing them with basic information about the facilities and services of the hotels via videos and photographs.

Warm Leads:

The warm leads are the audience who is well aware of the brand and engages with the brand content by liking and sharing the photograph, videos, checking websites, etc. Since the guest is at a deciding stage, the content for this category highlights the USPs (Unique Selling Points) of the brand, which differentiates the brand from the other competitors.

Hot Leads:

The audience who is only interested in a particular brand is put into this category. The warm leads are the potential leads, who once converted into customers, become hot leads. Since this is the last stage, the brands use engaging content with special offers and discounts to convert the potential guests into bookings.

1.7 Identifying the season for the campaign:

Seasonality plays a significant role in designing campaigns in the hotel industry. During the offseason, the main motto of the campaign is generally to attract more guests. Special packages and discounts are offered, usually highlighted in pictures and videos to captivate the guests. For instance, Leela offered a 33% discount on the room rate, displayed in a post on Instagram for May. On the other hand, an Early Bird Offer provided a 15% discount on room rates. Oberoi Udaivilas celebrated Chocolate week from February 18 to February 25 to attract chocolate lovers. On the other hand, during the peak season, posts with photos and videos highlighting the facilities and services of the hotel act as a point of attraction for prospective clients.

1.8 Identifying the social media platform:

Some of the common platforms used by the hotels are as follows:

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Youtube
- LinkedIn
- Trip Advisor and many more

FACEBOOK: With 2.74 billion users in 2021, Facebook has become one of the most widely used platforms among people of different age groups. Because of its user-friendly features, it has become the first choice of business promoters, offering quality

to create a personal page. A hotelier can easily design a hotel profile and showcase information. Apart from this, Facebook provides an opportunity for postpaid and unpaid (organic) advertisements. By selecting the target area and audience, one can easily connect with prospective guests. By adding the link of the other networking apps, the platform acts as a single page to access different platforms.

INSTAGRAM: With millennials and Gen Z making up a more significant part of the traveling workforce and spending more time focusing on exploration and personal growth, Instagram offers a wide variety of features to post photographs and videos to the masses. The perfect shots, attractive reels, and stories published by the elders act as a free advertising tool for hotel brands. The platform also allows the hotels to create their account and post photos and videos to share experiences, promote products, offer e-commerce facilities and engage with the customers.

YOUTUBE: It has the most significant international audience base, so strategizing the promotions can be a great marketing strategy for hotels. Over the years, with the short attention span of the viewers, videos act as an incredible engagement tool, increasing conversion rate up to 85%. Creating the right content can help in providing a virtual experience to the viewers and entice them to choose them over their competitors.

TWITTER: Twitter is one of the most convenient tools which allow users to engage in real-time conversations. It can be used as a customer relations tool by the hoteliers to answer guest queries and respond to complaints. By monitoring the tweets and responding to the customer needs, the device can be used to create a positive brand image in the guests' mindsets.

LINKEDIN: LinkedIn is one of the largest professional platforms which allow people from different backgrounds to connect, create networks and share ideas. Though LinkedIn is not essentially used as a marketing platform, creating a company's profile to connect with the business partners, employees and guests can help promote the brand.

TRIPADVISOR: Trip Advisor, the largest travel website, allows people to plan and book trips and hotels. The social media site will enable travelers to search, book, and compare hotel brands with the freedom to share their reviews about their stay. Being the most trusted site amongst the travelers, the considerations largely influence the decisions of the other travelers. By becoming a part of TripAdvisor, the hotels can use various strategies to promote their business like creating a solid profile with complete information, posting photos and videos, sharing positive reviews, winning TripAdvisor awards (TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence), and many more. The planned use of the site can act as a great promotional strategy for the hotel brand resulting in revenue generation.

1.9 FACEBOOK marketing strategies:

Facebook is the most common networking site used by people of 35 or above, and to reach this demographic, the first step that hotels adopt is creating an attractive Facebook page featuring the logo of the hotel, contact information, address, rating reviews, outlets, and their timings and much more. Adding the 'Book Now' tab allows the hotels to get direct bookings from the site.

Posting photographs and videos allow the brand to keep the audience updated and engaged with what's happening in the hotel. With the Facebook video ads receiving 10 to 30 percent more views than other ad formats, most hotels post videos to catch the viewers' attention.

Using the Facebook Messenger feature and comment section allows the hotel to get involved in two-way communication with the customers and solve their queries on the platform, thus improving the overall customer experience.

As part of the marketing strategy, using attractive taglines and hashtags is a common way to increase the site's viewership. For example - Leela Hotels quoted, 'Luxury is every bite. Along with the side of festive cheer on Christmas and hashtag #SignaturesByTheLeela to Oberoi starting #Seasonsofjoy campaign, allowing the viewers to make a wish, these features act as game-changers.

1.10 INSTAGRAM marketing:

Gen Z and millennials make up a large proportion of the Instagram audience, and to target this age group, Instagram offers several features for businesses to explore. With Taj hotels having 224K followers, Leela having 66.9K followers, and Oberoi Hotels having 36.6 K followers, utilizing the Instagram features is commonly seen by the hotels as part of their marketing plan.

It is pretty common to find most hotels having a dedicated business page showing their logo and name, brand description, website link, and links to their special offers. Using a business account allows the brands to check the Instagram analytics (number of followers, likes, shares, repeated views, etc.), add 'contact button' and 'order food button' (added by Leela Hotels for Takeaway Menu), add links for various other sites and share free Instagram ads.

Posting is a great way to advertise the product on Instagram. One of the essential activities of the social media marketing team is to work and share attractive posts with photographs and videos that highlight the product and services to the target audience and keep reminding them about the brand. Deciding a color theme and creating grids (posting small parts of photos at a time to make a complete image at the end) helps in grabbing the attention of the viewers and use of common hashtags for cold audiences like #hotels and precise ones like #MyOberoiExperiences for hot leads help in getting more post viewers. As a part of #My Oberoi, Oberoi Udaivilas shared the posts with the majestic domes in the hotel with the yellow Instagram theme. On the other hand, Leela Gandhinagar planned to post the images in a planned way to create a grid with the flag and ideas related to independence on Independence Day 2021. With the #DekhoApnaDesh campaign, Taj Hotels highlighted the images of various resorts and

their offerings in a series of posts. Instagram stories are a great marketing tool for most hotels, with more than 500 million users engaging with stories each day and suffering from FOMO (fear of missing out). The top hotel brands use stories to promote events like food fests, festivity offers, announcements, or giving a peek of the 'behind the scenes in a hotel. Reposting the stories of the guests and bloggers on the hotel page is a common way to make them feel special. By adding polls, hashtags, locations, or questions, hotels try to engage and understand guests' needs. With Oberoi Marrakech putting photos of the breakfast and introducing a poll to select teams between Royal Suite and Private Vila, Taj Front Bhopal utilized the feature to share the Breakfast Brunch offer with the link to open the menu. At the same time, Leela Gurgaon added a story with a countdown to join the Mexican night Rubicon bar. Instagram also allows the users to add story highlights, which the users can always see at any time. Oberoi Udaivials, on their page, have provided a glimpse of their F&B service with photos and videos of delicious delicacies from different cuisines.

For the food lovers, this was the story of a globe trotter, Mr. Bharat Joyent, but it also shared to announce new dishes in the menu inspired by him and his story. Many hotels have started the highlight tab to announce various awards and recognitions. After the COVID 19, Leela stepped into the Take – away and home-delivery world with the 'Food Delivery Highlight' showing the photographs of dishes and providing a direct Swiggy link to order the food. They also announced their 'Suraksha' program focusing on the safety of guests' well-being. Instagram Reels are 15-second video clips designed to engage with users virtually. Most hotels use this feature to share guests' experiences and festival wishes. Leela Goa used this feature to showcase the initiative taken by the employees and guests of planting trees on World Environment Day. Taj shared the reels with the experiences of various bloggers.

1.11 Marketing on TRIPADVISOR:

TripAdvisor is the largest travel platform, with 463 million travelers using the site to plan their trips and make bookings, making it one of the most critical platforms for hoteliers. Nearly every hotel is a part of the community. Creating an attractive TripAdvisor page with name and logo, contact information, address, e-mail address, hotel website link, and description is the first step taken by hotels listed with Trip Advisor. Adding the hotel description with emphasis on room types, room features, property amenities, and distance from various landmarks in the city allows the hotel to be listed when the guest is searching for a particular type of room in a specific town. Once the target audience is identified, most of the social media marketing teams work on identifying the search terms that the audience uses in the search bar. Using these keywords in the descriptions lets the hotels appear on top in the Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs). This process of optimizing and improving the rankings of a hotel on search engines is called Search Engine Optimization (SEO). The outline, design, content, and especially photographs and video overviews significantly affect the hotel booking conversion rate. Thus, most hotel brands add numerous images and permit the prospective guests to take a virtual voyage through the hotel, read all accessible data, study visitor reviews, appraisals, etc. Thus, allowing the guests to pick the best option to make a booking. Since

80% of travelers read TripAdvisor reviews before making bookings, hotels' leading strategy is to take TripAdvisor rankings seriously. Taking the customer feedback about their stay, understanding the customer concerns, and addressing them, allows the hotel brand to stand out from its competitors and thus, contributing to the overall guest experience. Post-stay engagement e-mail feature by trip advisor, sent by the hotels to the guests after departure, is a great way to stay connected with the guests.

2 Research objective

To study the impact of social media on the travel decisions of frequent travelers and to provide insight into the usage of social media by the Indian hospitality industry.

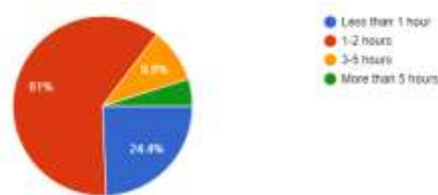
3 Methodology

The data was collected from frequent travelers, who prefer to stay in the Indian luxury brands like Taj Hotels, Oberoi Group of Hotels and Resorts, and The Leela Palace, Hotels and Resorts.

A detailed study from various journals, textbooks, reports, and e-books has allowed the successful compilation and completion.

4 Survey: Unveiling the influence of social media on hotel bookings

Q.1. How much time do you spend on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn) daily?



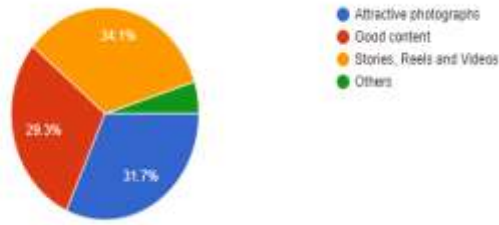
— More than half of the respondents are active on social media sites for 1-2 hours.

Q.2. What is your favorite social networking site?



58.5% of travelers use Instagram, followed by 24.4% using Facebook.

Q3. Amongst the latest promotional methods, what attracts you the most?



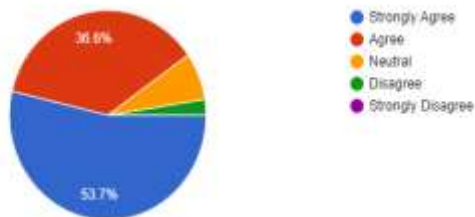
— An almost equal number of respondents find images and videos, reels, and stories attractive.

Q4. I often visit the hotel websites before making bookings.



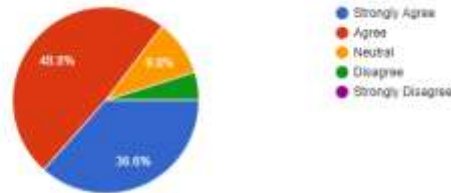
— The majority of the travelers visit the official hotel sites before finalizing the hotel for their stay.

Q.5. I read the customer reviews before finalizing my hotel bookings.



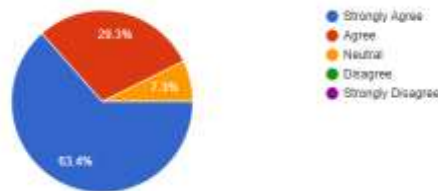
— A little more than half (53.3%) of the travelers refer to customer reviews.

Q.6. Hotel and travel images largely influence my travel decisions.



— 48.8% of the travelers agree that virtual promotional cues (images) influence their final decisions.

Q.7. Before booking hotel rooms, I compare the hotel room rates on portals like Tripadvisor, Booking.com, etc.



— The majority of the respondents compare the rates before selecting the hotel for stay.

5 Conclusion

Accept and adapt to the change: With people spending a large chunk of their spare time on social media, the use of the platforms by Indian hotel brands has become the need of the hour. Though they are still lagging in the race of virtual presence, the early adopters of new social media marketing tools are gaining the upper hand over their competitors. Thus, it has become essential to understand the pulse of social media marketing as it helps to maximize customer satisfaction.

Outline a social media marketing strategy: With the rapid growth in technology, actively participating on social media platforms can prove highly profitable for hoteliers. Creating a plan with clear identification of an audience, their choices, and a platform for marketing can help achieve the organizational goals.

Planning the seasonality: The hospitality industry, being a highly seasonal industry, demands strategies to be designed and modified based on low, mid-season, and peak seasons. The content should be planned based on the time of year.

Identification of social media sites: Understanding the age group and their needs can help decide the right platform for marketing and advertising. For example, LinkedIn can be a great place to connect with business networks, whereas Tripadvisor can help one engage with travel lovers.

Posting videos and reels: It's rightly said, 'Actions speak louder than words. In the world of social media, video is worth millions of words. Videos tend to keep the viewer engaged, and there are more chances of the videos getting shared and liked and thus, should be included in the social media marketing strategy.

Engage with customers: Using social media tools to create human connection can improve guest relations and, thus, positive feedback and reviews. The hotel brands can maintain a positive relationship with the guests by taking feedback, overall experience polls, posting guest stories, tagging, and messaging them.

Review and modify the strategies: Regular analysis of the social media strategy can help identify what the hotel lacks and where it is excelling. The direct indicators can be the positive and negative reviews of the guests which should be addressed, and accordingly, the strategy should be modified.

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