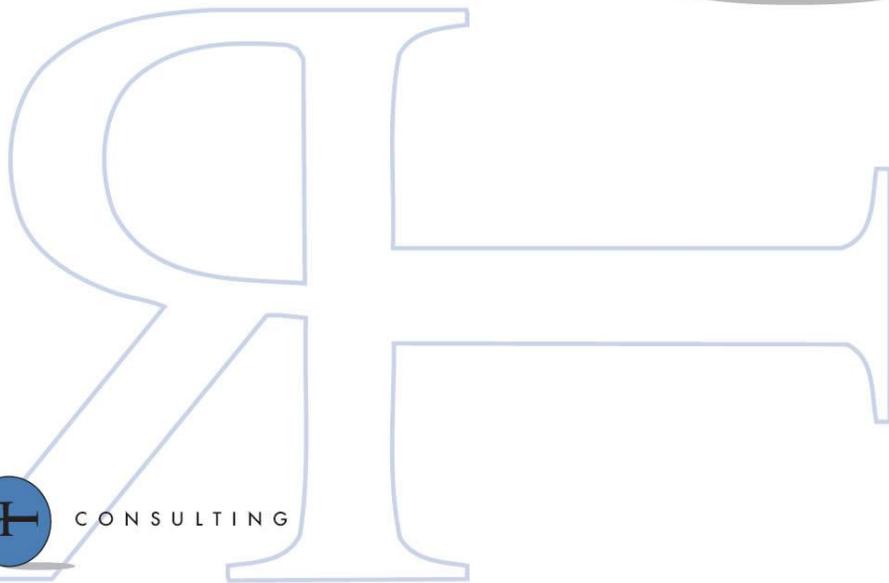


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**Social media and its relevance to the  
marketing of cities as urban tourism destinations**

*di John Heeley*

## **I social media e la loro importanza per il marketing delle destinazioni turistiche urbane**

*di John Heeley<sup>§</sup>*

*Si è tenuta lo scorso giugno, a Las Palmas, la conferenza dell'ECM dal titolo provocatorio: "I Social Media, un tema attuale. Ma sono davvero strumenti d'attrazione dei visitatori utili per gli uffici del turismo e i convention bureaux?"*

*Il presente articolo riassume i principali punti emersi nel corso dell'incontro riservato ai membri dell'associazione, di fatto, appunto, uffici del turismo e convention bureaux. Lo scopo della giornata era sia quello di confrontarsi sulle modalità con cui le organizzazioni locali stanno usando i social media sia quello di identificare le migliori pratiche all'interno e all'esterno dell'ECM network.*

*La centralità dei social media e, più in generale, di internet appare oggi più che mai determinante negli approcci e nelle scelte di politiche di comunicazione adottati dalle città per promuoversi turisticamente.*

*Solo pochi anni fa non esistevano – tra gli altri - email, blog, social network, applicazioni per cellulari ed altri strumenti, ma neanche linguaggi e competenze specifiche richiesti a chi volesse poter operare su questi canali.*

*La giornata, ricca di spunti, ha proposto diversi casi di collaborazioni tra organizzazioni orientate a trarre beneficio dalle potenzialità di questi nuovi strumenti.*

*Tra i primi quesiti e dubbi figura la reale capacità di questi strumenti di trasformare i "lookers" in veri e propri "bookers". Ma accanto a tale necessaria attenzione alla conversione in prenotazioni dei contatti acquisiti attraverso i vari strumenti disponibili è apparso opportuno riflettere anche sulle potenzialità dei social media di coinvolgere la propria audience generando effetti di altra natura.*

*Ad emergere senza alcun dubbio è l'aumento vertiginoso del ricorso, da parte delle organizzazioni responsabili della promozione turistica delle città, ai social media: si tratterà di affinare tecniche, linguaggi e soluzioni per ottimizzare gli investimenti.*

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<sup>§</sup> C.E.O. di E.C.M. – European Cities Marketing, network di 100 città europee di 32 paesi.

## **Social media and its relevance to the marketing of cities as urban tourism destinations**

by John Heeley

Last June in Las Palmas, European Cities Marketing (ECM) held a one day conference provocatively entitled “Social Media – a hot topic but does it really deliver visitors for city tourist offices and convention bureaux?”

For the record, European Cities Marketing exists to provide a platform on a pan-European basis for cities to perform better in their convention and tourism activities through the exchange of knowledge and best practice within a city marketing framework. It currently has 115 members, the vast bulk of whom are city-based tourist offices and convention bureaux. As such, ECM meets diverse needs – from peer group networking, intelligence and benchmarking, through to education, training, and personal development.

The aim of the seminar was to provide a state of the art review of how city tourism practitioners are currently using social media, and to identify best practice within and outside the ECM network. The background to this is that over the past decade and a half a

remarkable paradigm shift has occurred in city tourism.

From the mid 1990s onwards one way of seeing and making sense of it - based on print, letters, pens, overhead projectors, and heavy, unwieldy desk phones - has given way to another centered on the web and internet. Fifteen years ago there was no email, Google, iPod, generation Y, PowerPoint, Skype, user generated content, blogging, mobile phones with multimedia access and video footage, netbooks, CTR (click through rates), Facebook, Trip Advisor, viral marketing, and web 2.0. Nowadays, internet and web activity with all their attendant trappings and paraphernalia are the medium through which the art and science of city tourism is practiced.

Latterly, one aspect of the internet and web revolutions - social media – has been extensively applied to the marketing of cities as urban tourism destinations in classic ‘learning by doing’ fashion. With precious little strategy or criteria of success - city tourism organizations have over the past two

years experimented with social media: pages have been opened on Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr; YouTube presences have been fastidiously developed; websites have been overhauled to incorporate multi-media; and partnerships have been struck with Trip Advisor, Google and others.

Moreover, the seminar revealed how a handful of city marketing organizations have begun to use social media as an integral component of their mainstream marketing campaigns. In such campaigns, social media is used alongside ‘traditional’ advertising and mailing activities.

For instance, we learned from Sweden about a short break campaign undertaken this year by the Stockholm Visitors Board in conjunction with the national tourist organization (Visit Sweden) and the Scandic Hotels group.

The campaign addressed the neighbouring Norwegian and Danish markets, cleverly playing on Sweden’s ‘big brother’ reputation in these two countries; one advertising image, for instance, showed a speed boat excursion set against a stunning Stockholm backdrop with the caption: “Real Vikings come from Denmark of course, but we volunteer to act as your shipmates”.

A campaign website offered advice on things to see and do in the Swedish capital, as well as a direct bookings link to Scandic Hotels. To drive traffic to this site, a combination of advertising mediums were called into play, majoring on the use of social media, but supplemented by advertising on Google, Facebook itself, and outdoor posters. Uses of social media, for instance, included a ‘flatter chart’ on Facebook which sought out Swedes willing to act as ambassadors of their country by persuading their Danish and Norwegian friends to take advantage of the short breaks on offer.

At the seminar, we heard from another Scandinavian city tourist organization, Wonderful Copenhagen, about its use of Facebook to drive visits to its portal website, and how it is measuring the conversion rate in terms of bookings. A key message from these and other presentations was that conversion rates were not high, so that turning ‘lookers into bookers’ remained as work in progress. Indeed, the view from the Online Department of Wonderful Copenhagen was that the return on its recent investment in Facebook was primarily social as opposed to financial – a

“return on involvement” rather than a return on investment!

The reported average financial return of €0.73 from a Facebook visit was relatively insignificant, but the access to an audience with a potentially high propensity to visit the Danish capital was deemed to be extremely valuable. It represented a quick, cheap and friendly way in which the city tourist organization and its partners could communicate its key offers and messages on a more or less controlled and long-term basis.

Other presentations at the seminar focused on the communicative powers of social media. Vancouver Tourism had used this to good effect on the back of its recent hosting of the Winter Olympics, while the tourist authority in Gothenburg had used interactive news releases and other devices to maximize media coverage relating to the discovery and exhibition in that city of a new Da Vinci painting. It came as no surprise to hear that some city tourism organizations were now targeting bloggers as part of their media relations activities, and were in the process of developing integrated social media strategies. What the seminar tantalizingly hinted at was how the use of social media in these and other

ways might in the future transform the manner in which city tourist organizations communicate with their various audiences; the process becoming ‘two way’ and ‘bottom up’, as opposed to ‘one way’ and ‘top down’. As the seminar drew to a close, one couldn’t help concluding that over the next decade there will indeed be ‘a paradigm within a paradigm’ shift which will see social media coming to dominate the manner in which city tourist and marketing organizations reach and interact with their audiences.

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