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## **RELATIONSHIP MARKETING ON SOCIAL SOFTWARE PLATFORMS**

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### **Introduction**

Relationship marketing strategies are typically designed to gather information in order to help firms to identify and retain customers or guests. Firms organize relationship marketing programs described as “the ongoing process of engaging in cooperative and collaborative activities and programs with immediate and end-user customers to create or enhance mutual economic value at reduced cost” (Parvatiyar and Sheth 2000: 9). Examples of programs include: (1) loyalty card programs, (2) company credit cards, (3) opting in for personalized offers delivered via mailing and (4) via e-mail lists, and (5) rebate offers (Noble and Phillips 2004).

With the advent of Web 2.0, we witness a change in the form of communication. Web 2.0 technologies have caused three effects: (1) a shift in the locus of activity from the desktop to the Web, (2) a shift in the locus of value production from the firm to the consumer, and (3) a shift in the locus of power away from the firm to the consumer. Web 2.0 consists of a series of technological innovations whereby the creation of content and ideas are fostered inexpensively, which leads to user collaboration with brands, shifting the focus from organizations to consumers, individuals to communities, nodes to networks, publishing to participation, and intrusion to invitation (Berthon, Pitt, Planger and Shapiro 2012).

In this connection, managers are becoming aware of the ability of Web 2.0 to connect and reinforce the bond with their stakeholders, particularly with customers or guests.

Therefore, this chapter is intended to give an overview of the relationship marketing paradigm, its conceptualizations, driving forces and multiple consumer-brand relationships, which can be developed face-to-face and through social software platforms. The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. First, the foundation and conceptualization of relationship marketing are presented. This is followed by a theoretical argument about multiple consumer-brand relationships and social software platforms. In order to better understand the phenomenon, we conduct semi-structured interviews with 15 hotel managers with an average duration of 60 minutes and we also explore how luxury hotels are using social software platforms, particularly Facebook, as an e-tool. Finally, the chapter provides a set of directions for future research, conclusions and managerial implications

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Relationship Marketing Foundation and Conceptualization*

In the late 1980s a new paradigm emerges in marketing: relationship marketing (e.g. Grönroos 1990a; Sheth et al.1988; Webster 1992).Business practice exhorts both customer and supplier to be close and form collaborative relationships (Copulsky and Wolf 1990; Goldberg 1988). This change in focus from value exchanges to value creation relationships has led organizations to develop a more integrative approach, whereby other firms are not always competitors and rivals, but may be partners in providing value to customers.

Five main environmental and organizational forces may be considered responsible for the turning point toward relationships between producers and consumers: (1)rapid technological advancements, especially in information technology; (ii) companies' adoption of total quality programs; (iii) the growth of the service economy; (iv)the organizational development processes leading to empowerment of individuals and teams; and (v) the increase in competitive intensity leading to concern for customer retention. These forces reduce the reliance of producers, as well as consumers, on middlemen to effect the consummation and facilitation processes of relationship.

Indeed, the growth of competitiveness, more enterprises producing similar products, but above all the development of information technology, leads producers to become more knowledgeable about their consumers through sophisticated databases that capture information about each interaction with consumers.

The Total Quality Management (TQM) movement allowed organizations to provide quality products and services to customers at the lowest possible prices. In order to do so, it became necessary to involve suppliers and customers in implementing the program at all levels of the value chain. TQM also led organizations to establish and implement reward systems and develop processes to empower individuals and teams.

Therefore, retaining customers, influencing repeat purchases, fostering trust and facilitating future marketing become more and more important for all organizations. At the same time, producer organizations give more importance to the service component of their products. Regarding organizations that essentially provide services, such as the tourism industry, particularly hotels and other lodgings, these are organizations where services and the relationship with guests become a crucial point in order to provide a favourable experience (e.g., Pizam 2010; Loureiro 2014a).

Nevertheless, how can we define relationship marketing? The following three definitions, from some of the founders of this field of knowledge, give us an overall view of the meaning of relationship marketing.

*“To establish, maintain, and enhance (usually but not necessarily long-term) relationships with customers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met. This is achieved by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises.”* (Grönroos 1990b: 138).

*“Relationship marketing refers to all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges.”* (Morgan and Hunt 1994: 22).

*“Relationship marketing is the ongoing process of engaging in cooperative and collaborative activities and programs with immediate and end-user customers to create or enhance mutual economic value at reduced cost.”* (Sheth and Parvatiyar 2000: 9).

In sum, relationship marketing is a process of exchange and mutual cooperation that has been shown to generate strong customer relationships that enhance customer loyalty and firm profits (Abdul-Muhmin 2005; Chiu, Hsieh, Li and Lee 2005; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal and Evans 2006). Gummesson (2008) alludes to total relationship marketing, meaning the connections among the networks of suppliers and customers. Therefore several assumptions are presented:

- *It is marketing based on relationships, networks and interaction.*
- *It recognizes that marketing is embedded in the total management of the selling organization's networks, the market and society.*
- *It is directed to long-term win-win relationships with individual customers.*
- *Value is created jointly between the parties involved (goods and services are created with the customers and other stakeholders, co-creation).*
- *It transcends the boundaries between specialist functions and disciplines.*
- *It is made tangible through the thirty market (30 types of relationships mentioned by Gummesson when regarding several stakeholders) mega (operate on the societal level and concern relationship to authorities, the media and so on) and nano (exist on the organizational level, that is the case of relationships between internal customers) relationships.*

#### *Multiple Consumer-brand Relationships*

Embedded in the conceptualization of relationship marketing are the inter-connections between brands and consumers. According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is a "Name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." (AMA2007). The current definition takes both the logo and legal perspectives simultaneously. The definition provided by Kapferer and Mayring (1992: 11) highlights that *"a brand is not a product, it is the product's essence, its meaning, and its direction, and it defines its identity in time and space.... Too often brands are examined through their component parts: the brand name, its logo, design, or packaging, advertising or sponsorship, or image or name recognition, or very recently, in terms of financial brand valuation. Real brand management, however, begins much earlier, with a strategy and a consistent, integrated vision, its central concept is brand identity, not brand image"*. Here intangibility emerges in the word 'essence', but also in the value system. Consumers' decisions are influenced by their cultural values. Through the brand's value system, its heritage and consumers' personal experience, consumers may or may not see a reflection of their own identity and values.

A brand is the expression of the relationship between stakeholders, particularly consumers, and a firm or product (which could be a hotel, a restaurant, a Spa or other lodgings). Indeed, a strong relationship between customers and the company may help to build a successful brand (Mckenna 1991). As Loureiro (2015: 419) points out, "brands

can live and interact through their managers and act or re-act to the consumers". Brands are regarded as having a personality like a human being. In fact, following the interdependency and attraction theories, emotional attachment may be created between human beings and animals, places, lodgings, special objects, brands (e.g., Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Price et al. 2000; Ahuvia 2005; Loureiro 2015) and even human brands or celebrities (Thomson 2006). In the field of consumer behaviour, Thomson, MacInnis, and Park (2005) identified a higher-order emotional attachment construct consisting of three factors: affection, passion, and connection. Thus, attachments reflect an emotional bond similar to love. The quality of the relationship between brands and consumers is associated with self-connection, when the consumer's inner and social self fits the identity system of a brand; the interactions leading to interdependence; trust in the brand's promises and accountability for its actions; commitment or the intention to continue the relationship, and having faith in the future of the relationship, promoting its longevity. Intimacy lies in the elaborate knowledge structures and beliefs that identify the brand as superior and irreplaceable (Wood 1982); and an overall relationship of satisfaction and strength which represents a brand's positive orientation toward the consumer (Fournier 1998).

Regarding the process behind creating and maintaining relationships, firms (such as hotels, restaurants or other lodgings) should propose the brand system value and brand identity as a form of cooperation between the different stakeholders. Communication of the brand identity can lead to an inner self and social identification with the brand by consumers or guests and to an attachment which contributes to a connection (e.g., Loureiro, Kaufmann and Vrontis 2012; Loureiro 2014a). A guest or customer tends to form connections with a restaurant, lodging or place (a brand) that become meaningful in association with their own self and/or consistent with a reference group (which could be family, friends, a professional group, sport, celebrities or brand communities). This connection can be justified and reinforced by the positive image, credibility and reputation of the brand, and also because consumers identify with celebrities, reference groups and other consumer groups who use and approve the brand (e.g., Baek et al. 2010; Brown et al. 2003).

Parallel to identification is the personal experience of potential guests when looking for a hotel or destination to visit (Loureiro 2014b) and also during the stay and afterwards. Having a positive experience can engage the guest in a process of activation leading to strong positive emotions such as delight (consumers will be more than satisfied) (e.g.,

Oliver et al. 1997; Loureiro 2010). Strong emotions can create a close link with the lodging or destination that keeps the two partners affectively committed.

A committed consumer is more likely to want to continue the relationship with the brand and will be more likely to speak favourably about it (e.g., Loureiro, Kaufmann and Vrontis 2012), forgive mistakes, promote the brand to others, pay a premium price and make sacrifices (e.g., Loureiro 2011). All this engagement process could be mediated and influenced by several variables such as personality traits, lifestyle, self-esteem, value system, gender, age or a country's social culture.

Nevertheless, non-identification with the hotel, destination or product supplied, dysfunctional communication (unfavourable word-of mouth using social networking and blogs), breaches of ethics, antagonistic anti-brand relations waged for reasons of politics, values, politics or transgression (e.g., Johnson, Matear and Thomson 2011; Kozinets and Handelman 2004) can plague companies and have harmful effects. Negative inter-connections contribute to developing bad consumer-brand relationships, or even avoiding a relationship. Previous studies highlight that negative emotions tend to be more valuable and remembered better than positive ones in an adaptive sense, and so avoiding danger is more critical for survival than seeking pleasure (e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer and Vohs 2001; Thompson et al. 2006).

### *Social Software Platforms*

Virtual communities are social relationship aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people embark on long public discussions and create webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold 1994; 2000). Fernback and Thompson (1995) regard virtual communities as social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified place with set boundaries (e.g., a conference or chat line), which is symbolically delineated by topics of interest. Virtual communities are groups of people with common interests and shared goals, who use computer-mediated communication technology as the basis of communication instead of face-to-face, that is, groups of people who engage in many-to-many online interactions (Williams and Cothrel 2000; Blanchard and Markus 2004).

Miller, Frances and Lin (2009) summarize these definitions by suggesting that such communities operate in a wide range of Internet forums, including markets and auction sites, electronic bulletin boards, list servers, social networking sites (SNS), blog hosts or sites, gaming communities and shared-interest websites (online brand community).

Boyd and Ellison (2007) state that SNSs (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Hi5, Netlog, Twitter, YouTube, TripAdvisor) allow individuals to build a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, to interact and share connections with other users on a list and to view and navigate their lists of connections and those made by others within the system. Since the creation of Facebook in 2006, a very popular SNS, social networks have quickly become a platform in which citizens feel comfortable interacting with each other. They have not only become a sociological phenomenon, but also a marketing opportunity that firms want to be part of.

Facebook can have a real impact on the four stages of the purchasing decision processes that follow recognition of need: the search for information, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and subsequent evaluation. With the appropriate applications, firms can also create a system on Facebook that allows business transaction to be finalized without referring to the firm's own website or a physical store. In this sense, "f-commerce" (Facebook commerce) or "s-commerce" (social commerce) complements e-commerce. Through such an exchange of opinions and ideas in online spaces, known as "e-WoM" (online word-of-mouth), consumers and the firm co-create the brand's image together. Although studies on consumers' online brand relationships are still scarce, previous studies started to analyse how consumers are engaging and collaborating with firms, using social software platforms. For instance, Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides (2011) examine how firms operating in business-to-business markets use and perceive social networks, how effective they find them, and the main barriers they encounter in this area. Muntinga, Moorman and Smit (2011) analyse consumers' online brand-related activities and their consequences for firms. Another study shows that social support and website quality (meaning the tourist's overall judgment of a website's excellence and superiority) positively influence the user's intention to use s-commerce and to continue using a social networking site. These effects are found to be mediated by the quality of the relationship between the user and social networking (Liang, Ho, Li and Turban 2011). In the tourism context, Loureiro (2014b) tests the mediated effect of emotions (pleasure, arousal and dominance) between website quality and attitude and intentions to visit. Although there is no standard method of evaluating websites, and no standard website attributes or features that can be integrated into website evaluation in tourism and hospitality, Loureiro (2014b) reviewed the components of website quality that were identified in prior studies and published in tourism and hospitality journals. She found that the aspects of visual appeal, information (content), ease of use and interactive features



(Han and Mills 2006; Park et al. 2007) are among the most consistently employed and appropriate to the context of destination websites (island website quality).

The study points out that a well-designed, uncluttered structure, appropriate multimedia features and colours, easily used navigational cues, interactive features and well-balanced information will make potential tourists feel in control and autonomous. Positive emotions felt when browsing a website contribute significantly to willingness to visit the destination and recommend it to others.

In this connection, social software platforms allow tourists greater involvement in the selection and decision-making process, as well as in co-creating products. Through online word-of-mouth, consumers become the protagonists of brand communication, not only in their role as disseminators of information but also as generators of new ideas and promoters of either fidelity or even rejection of some of those brands.

### **Insights from Luxury Hotels**

The purpose of the case study is to explore the co-creation of hospitality experiences and the use of social software platforms by luxury hotels. Thus, the aims of this exploratory study are to: (i) capture enhancers and tools used in luxury hotels to co-create hospitality experiences with guests; (ii) explore how luxury hotels use social software platforms, particularly Facebook, as an e-tool.

### *Methodology*

Regarding the methodology employed, the first step was the hotel selection process; the second step considered contact with managers and holding the interviews; and the last step was the analysis of websites and Facebook pages. The selection of hotels starts in booking.com. This website has about 250,000 registered hotels in 177 countries and allows a search for hotels by region and theme. For the purpose of this study, hotels in Portugal with luxury as their main concept (5-star rating) were selected.

After searching through the online platform, a list of 100 Portuguese hotels was formed. From this total, 20 located in Lisbon were randomly selected to contact and check the information appearing on the website. Each interview began by explaining the purpose of the research and the request to record, following the semi-structured questions, according to Gubrium and Holstein (2001) and Johnson (2001). The average length of each interview was 60 minutes. The main specific questions asked were: In this hotel what are the core features of the relationship with guests to co-create a favourable hospitality

experience? What tools do you employ to achieve this favourable relationship? After 15 interviews no new or relevant information emerged, that is, saturation was achieved (Saumure and Given 2008). Participants are between 35 and 50 years old and have 5–15 years of experience in their position.

Regarding data treatment, we followed McCracken's (1988) process and started with an impressionistic reading of transcriptions and identification of recurrent enhancers and tools employed. The second level of interpretation involved cross-person analysis in order to discover patterns among individuals that could help structure an understanding of the elements behind the core features of the hospitality relationship experience. Concerning the hotels' Facebook pages, we carried out content analysis for a period of one year, analysing Likes, Posts and Comments.

### **3.2 Findings**

Our analysis yielded five core enhancers to create an environment to arouse customers' experience in luxury five-star hotels: (1) Personalized service, (2) Brand image, (3) Service quality, (4) Contact with guest and (5) Adapted services.

(1) *Personalized service*. Treat guests as unique; hotels are aware of individual needs and wishes, which should be reflected in hotels' services. Mentioned as the main enhancer of customer experience, a personalized service is a major step towards creating memorable experiences. Know the name, profile and particular tastes and interests of guests

(2) *Brand image*. To enhance customers' experiences, manager and staff are concerned with making a connection with guests even before their arrival; in this way brand image is important not only to transmit to customers the hotel's identity and individual character, but also to reach the hotel's target.

(3) *Service quality*. In luxury hotels, service quality is extremely important and has to be among the core enhancers offered. Excellence, perfection and special attention to detail are characteristics that have to be presented in what the hotel offers.

(4) *Contact with guests*. Personal contact with guests promotes a good environment to develop the customer experience. A close relationship with customers helps in getting quick feedback from them about the hotel experience and allows customers' wishes and complaints to be heard, which is indispensable in arousing memorable experiences.

(5) *Adapted services*. It is important to adapt services to provide customers with the "something more" factor and to surprise them. Managers and staff have to understand

customers, to adapt services focusing on each hotel target, which could be a way to differentiate.

Moreover, managers also mention some tools used in luxury hotels which contribute to co-creating hospitality relationship experiences: (1) gastronomy, (2) decoration, (3) spa and wellness, (4) staff and (5) social media.

(1) *Gastronomy*. Related to food and beverage services, gastronomy is the preferred tool used by hotels to engage customers through taste, smells and vision.

(2) *Decoration (atmospheric cues)*. An important tool in the aesthetical composition of the hotel; decoration is related to design, sophistication and hotel image.

(3) *Spa and Wellness*. Including spa and wellness services, massage, hairdresser and gym, they are mentioned as important tools that hotel managers use to relax and change customer's mood.

(4) *Staff*: Staff should be aligned with the hotel's identity and values and should always be ready to attend customers. A crucial point in engaging with and involving guests is a good connection between staff and guests.

(5) *Social media*. Online social media (like Facebook or other more professional versions) are tools hotels are investing in. As a place to interact with customers, social media allow managers to be in touch with customers, before and after their stay; being also a place to know more about the client and obtain quick feedback about services.

Based on our content analysis of the hotels' Facebook pages, we can point out that:

(1) Potential guests tend to look first at the number of Likes and then search for information about the hotel (such as room size, room service, decoration, photos);

(2) Hotel managers tend to post announcements, events, advertising, and links shared by other users;

(3) On the side of hotel managers, there is no coherent and consistent communication policy regarding Facebook and webpages, that is, posts and photos are not checked, renewed or revised regularly, and questions asked by guests and potential guests are not always answered.

Here, emotional ties (stimulating guests' feelings and changing their mood) and sensorial appeal (engaging guests' senses and emphasizing the aesthetical aspect) are core aspects, which together with engagement and participation in social software platforms, contribute to a favourable hospitality relationship experience.

## **Conclusions, managerial implications and further research**

Relationship marketing has been at the core of research in recent years. Although some efforts to understand relationship experiences in tourism have been made in previous research, little has been added to tourism theory considering a marketing approach, and mainly, the business (hotel) perspective as part of the process of co-creating hospitality relationship experiences with guests.

Based on the findings, we may highlight that the crucial point is to build a relationship which guests to engage and connect them to the organization (managers and staff) (see Figure 1). The interactions between guests and hotel staff allow managers to be alert to their customers' wishes and needs and differentiate the offer, involving guests' subjective and emotional aspects. Building and maintaining online engagement, through the website SNS pages, is essential to be closer to guests and co-create experiences with them. Top managers in hotels should be aware that to engage guests five points are crucial: (1) assess guests' needs and interests; (2) develop rules of engagement online and offline, and ensure that staff understand them; (3) identify the right managers for the online and offline relationship process; (4) establish an internal and external process to promote the relationship with guests, and finally (5) train staff and deploy the process.

#### **INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

Particularly in the case of engagement through social Software platform communities, the managers dealing with these platforms should(1) continuously read and consider the content in such platforms, that is, the on-going narrative (stories) which inspires, informs and connects; (2) have a deep understanding of how participants within the community engage and the tools they use to do so; (3)connect members of the community in mutually beneficial ways; (4) sustain efforts over time, ensuring the community is healthy and productive; (5) promote the collaborative efforts of participants who share and co-create the relationship experience(the hotel manager delegated to deal with these online communities should boost participation and interaction). Thus, managing social software platforms demands great effort, not only to stimulate participation, post photos and information about the hotel, but also to provide answers to questions, solve problems and be a source of knowledge in order to help other managers and staff to continuously improve the service provided to guests.

Despite the rigor of the method applied in this research, we can point out some limitations regarding not only our study but also what we did not find in the literature. These can also be suggestions for future avenues of research. First, the scarce literature relating to customer experience, customer engagement and the use of social software platforms in

the tourism industry, and less specifically, regarding hospitality. This gap in the literature also reflects limitations in specific models to sustain guests' relationship experience and the use of social software platforms applied to the hospitality industry. Secondly, the reduced sample size could be also considered a limitation. A larger sample, including other countries and a deeper analysis, in order to consider cultural aspects, could be interesting for future research. Finally, the difficulty in getting positive feedback from managers to be part of the research and schedule meetings should also be mentioned.

Regarding future empirical research, some suggestions may be made:

- (1) Investigate the drivers of anti-branding attitude, who are the initiators, leaders and organizers of the bloggers or other viral mechanisms of anti-branding movements; what are the new attitudes and behaviours?
- (2) Use mixed techniques to go further towards understanding the engagement and interconnection relationship between guests and hotels, considering both personal contact and social software platforms.
- (3) Future studies can explore user profiles (age, gender, income or social status, personality traits, self-esteem) to analyse how different user profiles influence offline and online experience perceptions, emotional feelings, behavioural intentions and actual use. For instance, extroversion involves characteristics like talkativeness, assertiveness and risk-taking and this type of guest could appreciate more interaction with website managers or prefer not to use the website to book hotels or other lodgings.

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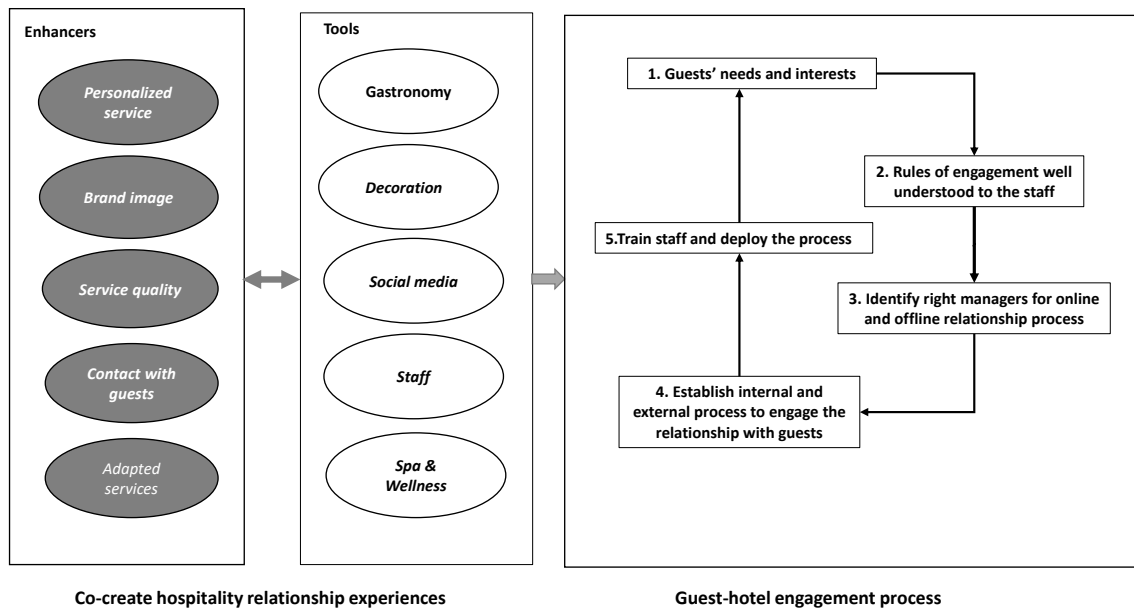
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Figure 1. Hospitality relationship experiences as drivers of guest-hotel engagement



Source: authors' elaboration

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