

Attracting User Social Media Engagement: A Study of Three Budget Airlines Facebook Pages

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Abstract

The role of social media has changed from information delivery to distribution channels. Budget airlines have used their Facebook pages to delivery promotional materials connect new customers, invite user engagement, and information distribution. One of the main purposes of wall posts is to invite user involvement. The results in this study indicated users interested on commenting wall posts which were “fresh”, that means posts published within two days. In order to increase user engagement, airlines should keep publishing new wall posts so as to encourage users to “like” or “share” these information with their network. The company responses were not significant, only five, 14 and 17 responses were found for Air Asia, Easy Jet and Jet Blue respectively. The outcome of the study questions the role and suitability of social media tools for marketing purpose in the airline business especially in relation to other segments within tourism industry.

Keywords: Facebook, user involvement, user engagement, airline, social media

1 Introduction

The use of social media and Web 2.0 is frequently called as one of the “mega trends” within the tourism and hospitality industry (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010, p. 179) while this new form of application in information and communication technology (ICT) is changing the communication flow between businesses, business to consumer and consumer to consumer significantly (Au 2010, Jones & Yu, 2010; Kasavana et al., 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011,).

Having a closer look, over 30% of the UK leisure travelers choose their accommodation on basis of social media sites like Tripadvisor or Facebook (Koumelis, 2011), while across the Atlantic in the United States roundabout 40 million shoppers use social media in their shopping experience (Renshaw, 2010). According to the European Travel Commission (2012), “Facebook is the traveller's social network of choice, with 29% using this platform for holiday inspiration, ahead of TripAdvisor (14%), Twitter (6%) and Pinterest (4%).” and is the largest cyber community, accommodating 11.5% of global population (Internet World Stats, 2012).

By analyzing the development of ICT in the industry, researchers proved that social media seem to be useful to intensify and match customer relations because of the

possibility of in-depth penetration with individualized and relevant content (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Kotler et al., 2006; Booz & Co., 2007). Dellarocas (2003) has point out that industry now has tools at their hands to understand and react to the needs of consumers better than ever. Varying levels of adoption do not only exist for the size of the firm but also extends to the industry type (Evans et al., 2000, Schegg et al., 2008). Mistilis et al. (2004) suggest that while airlines are early adopters, hotels are particularly slow in their uptake of new technologies. But in reality social media sites of airlines lack over these of hotels: it's all about accommodation.

This purpose of this study was to have a closer look on the use of social media in the tourism sector, focusing on the airline industry and their use of Facebook. The authors believe this question is of relevance because social media is not equally used the same way within the whole industry: some sectors like hospitality are more suitable to social media applications than other sectors for instance like transportation providers such as airlines in general and low-cost airlines in particular. The objectives of this paper are at first examine the overall use of social media within low cost airline sectors, and then how low cost airline reacts engage and influence users. Finally, it is of interest to know how low cost airline integrate social media with their business model.

2 Research Background

Prior studies discuss that social media plays an important role in tourism, not only for consumers hunting for travel information and decent trip insights but also for the supply side in terms of a new marketing tool (Chan & Denizci Guillet, 2011; Arlt & Thraenhart, 2011; Huang, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010). In a brief review, this research background sums up the recent work done on social media applications in tourism focusing on publications of the past two years. These studies were segmented according to the 4 P's of marketing proposed by McCarthy (1960), product, price, place (distribution) and promotion.

There were limited studies analyzed the application of social media tools that support or provide hard selling tourism products. Studies related to recent research cover only hospitality sector but not airlines (Chan & Denizci Guillet, 2011, Noone et al., 2011). Besides, many prior studies examined internal processes and management functions (Huang, 2011; Inversini & Cantoni, 2011; Isacson & Gretzel, 2011; Lee & Wicks, 2010; Leung et al., 2011; Li & Wang, 2011; Liburd et al., 2011; Pantelidis, 2010; Sigala, 2011; Stringam & Gerdes, 2010; and Stankov et al., 2010), and several scholars analyzed how social media tools are used for promotional purposes (Chan & Denizci Guillet, 2011; Huang, 2011; Huang, Yung, and Yang, 2011; Inversini & Cantoni, 2011; Leung et al., 2011; Kasavana et al., 2010; and Munar, 2010). When looking at the sectoral focus, majorities were again used hospitality as subject of analysis, and the remaining covered the tourism sector in general. None of them focused on the airline sector. As mentioned before, social media seems suitable for intensifying customer contact (communication). Several studies analyzed the use of social media in terms of their application on customer contact, market research and relationship management but none of them were focused on "promotion" (Chan & Denizci Guillet, 2011; Kasavana et al., 2010; Kim & Hardin, 2010; Pantelidis, 2010; Sánchez-Franco et al., 2010; and Sigala, 2011). Moreover, the effect of social media

tools on pricing in tourism, and use of social media for distribution purposes has been overlooked by researchers.

In summary, many prior studies did not concentrate or differentiate the marketing function or focused on specific sectors using social media. As stated above, many studies were widely covered several areas, only few studies concentrate on single topic. If there is a tendency in terms of analyzing single sectors of the tourism industry, the accommodation segment was given favor among all these studies. This complies with Fuchs et al, (2009) and Sánchez-Franco et al. (2010) findings that especially numerous hotels and tourism businesses have made social media tool as part of their marketing mix. This leads to the result that airline sector is not very well covered in terms of analyzing the application of social media. This is interesting because on one hand, airlines were probably the early adopters of Internet-based technologies within their marketing mix. On the other hand, this sector seems to be always overlooked by researchers. Social media emphasis on interaction between customer and organization, as a result, customers expected feedback from the organization. Word-of-mouth, could influence corporate image (Lin & Lu, 2010) so organization should pay attention to customer complains, customers' travel experiences or anything related to service recoveries.

3 Methodology

Taking all social network sites into account, Facebook seems to be largest cyberspace, with its members covering 12% of the world's population (Internet World Stats, 2012). This study examined the Facebook pages of the three budget airlines including Air Asia, Easy Jet and Jet Blue. These three airlines were the most popular one in Asia, Europe, and North America respectively and the use of social media tools is within their marketing mix in opposite to, for instance, Ryanair or Southwest Airlines, which are focusing on true low-cost with minimized marketing presence. The three selected airlines are comparable, because they actively maintain the community via social media for marketing purpose, and their product and brand image are very similar to each other as well as the customer segments. These three airlines present their products as a lifestyle for a hybrid customer segment, which is looking for a tailored but fashionable "low-cost some-frills" product beyond a very low fare and different image such as Ryanair or Southwest Airlines. These two airlines are following a pure low-cost no-frills policy, using the price as their one and only principle in marketing. Their pricing strategies are different from the three selected airlines. Ryanair did not have Facebook or Twitter account, and adopted a very basic use of ICT to communicate with the customer. Therefore it is excluded in this study.

Data were collected from 15 June to 10 August 2012. Facebook wall posts which were published from 15 June to 31 July 2012 were captured into an Excel worksheet. This date range was selected because all three airlines have popular wall posts with a dramatic increase in "people talking about this". This statistics added up all counts of likes, shares and users' comments. As each airline owned more than one Facebook page, only the global and official pages were included in this study, all other regional pages or fan pages were excluded. The data collected, focused on the four steps to engage customers: user connection, user engagement, influential power, and integration functions. These four steps were proposed by Facebook during their

marketing conference (Facebook, March 2012). First, airlines must get users connected before they could start any marketing activities on social media. To get them connected, users must be able to locate the social media pages via the airline official online channels such as websites. Then airlines should get users engaged via interaction over time. Inviting them participate lucky draw, competitions, and online games could encourage users actively engage with the page. Prior study confirmed word-of-mouth, especially recommendations from friends, could influence users' perceptions and corporate image (Lin & Lu, 2010). Therefore it is very important to encourage users to share the company information, especially promotional materials, to their friends so as to increase the influential power. Finally, as people frequently engaged with Facebook, the Facebook page should not only use as information distribution channel, but also should act as business channels. As a result, certain airline business functions should be integrated into the Facebook page.

To examine the performance of the three budget airlines, 13 types of data were collected from their Facebook page for further analysis. To examine the connectivity, the airline official websites were visited on 31 July 2012 to check if there were any linkages from the website to the social media. Then the weekly data on "number of new likes" and "number of people talking about this" were captured. For measuring the user engagement, the content of the wall post within the study period were captured. The influential power of each wall post could be examined by calculating number of shares, user comments, and the likes from the user friends' network. Finally, the number of Facebook applications available were collected for examine the system integration. Table 1 summarized the types of data collected for this study.

Table 1. Types of data collected from airlines' Facebook page

Types of Association	Data collected from Facebook Page
Connect	1) Linkage to Facebook page from official website; 2) No. of likes; 3) no. of new likes;
Engage	1) No. of people talking about this; 2) No. of post per day; 3) post types; 4) users' comments
Influence	1) No. of post by the airline; 2) No. of shares; 3) No. of comments; 4) No. of likes of user's comments
Integrate	1) No. of Facebook apps; 2) types of apps

4 Findings and Discussions

4.1 Connecting Users

Connecting users here refer to whether there is any links from official website to Facebook and how many users were connected to the Facebook page. Social media is very popular among business world so it was quite surprise to found that Easy Jet's website did not provide any linkages to any of the social media sites. Easy Jet fans may need to pay extra effort to locate the official Easy jet Facebook page as there is no direct linkage between the company website and Facebook. For both Air Asia and Jet Blue, these two websites provided icon linkage connecting Twitter, YouTube,

Facebook, and their blog. As a result, the total numbers of likes and the total number of new likes were the lowest among the three. Table 2 presented the statistical data collected from the airline Facebook page that was collected on 15 June 2012.

Table 2. Airlines Facebook page user connection statistics

	Air Asia	Easy Jet	Jet Blue
Social media link available on airline website home page	Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, blog	Not Available	Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, blog
Total no. of likes	1,554,796	108,073	629,695
Average no. of new “likes” per day	814	213	321
Airline base continent	Asia	Europe	North America

4.2 Engaging Users

Air Asia accumulated 1.5 million likes while Jet Blue had attracted around 630,000 likes from their page. Though there were only 108,000 total likes in East Jet’s page, these fans were found relatively involved in the Facebook activities when we comparing the “numbers of people talking about this”. The ratio of “talking about this” to total likes for each airline was 1.42%, 4.85%, and 0.91% for Air Asia, Easy Jet and Jet Blue respectively. This ratio indicated Easy Jet’s users have the highest engagement via the Facebook page among three airlines. Though their fans size was small, however, a company may want to engage an “active” Facebook fans which may bring higher influence power that we would cover in next section.

From the data collected, Air Asia has the highest number of wall posts and highest average number of posts per day (85 wall posts, 1.81 posts per day) within the study period. Easy jet ranked second with 53 wall posts (1.13 posts per day), and Jet Blue has posted 46 wall posts which imply 0.97 posts per day. As mentioned before, the more users’ comments and share, the higher influential power the post would be.

All 184 wall posts were classified into six categories including promotions (special fare, new routes promotion, and new apps promotion), sharing (external link sharing, photo and videos sharing, and profile update), announcement (company announcement, ad hoc emergency announcement, and pre-promotion announcement), invite engagement (photo competition, lucky draw, guessing games, interactive games, and polling), celebrities at destination (announcement of celebrities visiting a destination), and user involvement (photos posted by customers to the wall and were highlighted by Jet Blue administrator). Among all six categories, 28% of post belongs to promotion, 20% belongs to information sharing, and 15% belongs to announcement. 14% were invite user engagement, 8% were announcement of celebrities visiting one of the flight destinations, and 16% comes from user involvement. Interestingly, promotion post was not the main focus of Easy Jet and Jet Blue. For Easy Jet, around 55% of the wall posts were from the customers. Apparently Easy Jet intentionally selected some interesting users post published on their wall. This can arouse users’ interest to upload their interesting Easy Jet fleet photos to the wall. Majority of the posts were the photos of Easy Jet’s fleet taken by

the customers. This can encourage more users to share their feelings about Easy Jet with others via the Facebook page. For Jet Blue, 46% of the posts were related to link sharing including videos and photos sharing. Several company public announcement links were also published here. The social media approach among three airlines has significant difference. Air Asia mainly adopt Facebook page as their marketing channel therefore majority of the wall posts were related to ticket promotion. For Easy Jet, although they did not have large number of fans connected, their encourage users to post on the wall. For Jet Blue, their posts mainly linked to external URL could redirect their Facebook user to their destination pages so as to obtain more comprehensive information (Table 3).

Table 3. Statistics of Airlines Wall Posts

	Air Asia (%)	Easy Jet (%)	Jet Blue (%)	Total (%)
Promotion	35 (41)	13 (25)	4 (9)	52 (28)
Sharing	12 (14)	3 (6)	21 (46)	36 (20)
Announcement	18 (21)	2 (4)	8 (17)	28 (15)
Invite engagement	10 (12)	6 (11)	9 (20)	25 (14)
Celebrities at Destination	10 (12)	- -	4 (9)	14 (8)
User involvement	- -	29 (55)	- -	29 (16)
Total no. of wall post	85 (100)	53 (100)	46 (100)	184 (100)
Average no. of wall post per day	1.81	1.13	0.98	
Highest no. of post per day	5	5	3	
Average weekly "people talking about this"	22,098	5,246	5,744	
Total no. of users' comments	4,945	506	2,716	
No. of company responses	5	14	17	

Although the user engagement among all three airlines were quite successful, it was not common to see the company response to users' comment. From the data collected, Air Asia has only five responses which were the lowest among all three. Although Easy Jet and Jet Blue have a higher response rate, there were only 14 and 17 responses.

4.3 Influential Power

The purpose of publish a wall post has two fold, first to invite user engagement, and second is to influence potential customers via users' own network. From the statistics collected from Facebook's "number of people talking about this" that reflect the total number of shares, likes, and comments, the user reactions on company wall posts were somewhat different among three airlines. Fig. 1 indicated Air Asia's fans mainly interested in ticket promotion. When there are new promotion post appeared, users will share the information with their friends. For Easy Jet's fans, they mainly interested in involving the polling activities telling Easy Jet where they want to fly during summer holidays. For Jet Blue fans, they are more interested in the company announcement on new route.

By calculating the fans involvement ratio (highest people talking about this / total number of likes), Easy Jet got the highest users' involvement ratio among all three airlines. Air Asia got more than 1.5 million total likes but the users' involvement ratio was only 3.5%. Jet Blue's ratio was even lower with only 2.1%. Although Easy Jet has only 108,073 likes, but their user involvement ratio was 13.8%. This result may shed some light to the type of message should be posted in Facebook. Customer may more focus on the promotion and the service related to them such as polling the new destination and flight route.

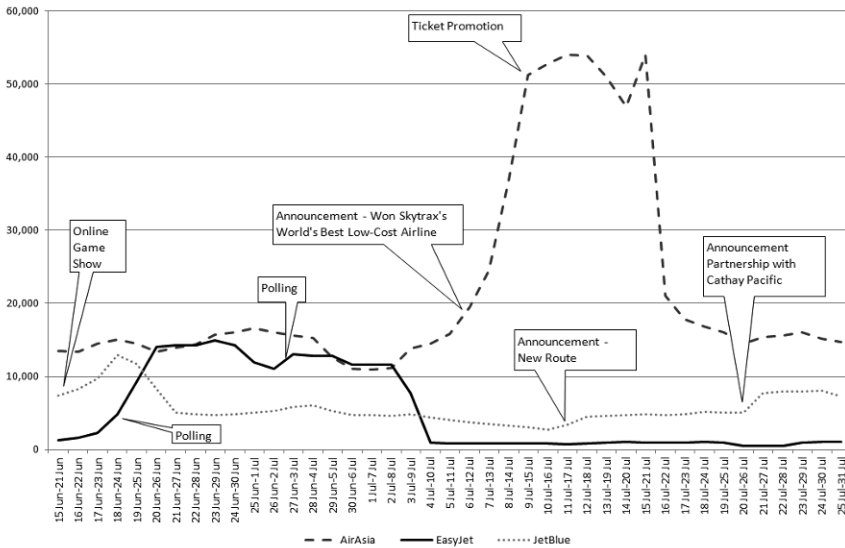


Fig. 1. “People talking about this” trends among three airlines

As shown in Fig. 2, around 90% of the wall post user comments were appeared on the first two days of the post published. Only 10% of the users post comments after the third publish date. This indicated social media users like respond to the “fresh” information, and seldom reacts to dated ones. This may also provide some guidelines to any company on the frequency of post in order to engage the user. This result also align with the airlines existing behavior that was posting frequency were about 1-2 days as user were more active once a post published. As a result, in order to increase the influential powers among users' network, airlines should consistently publish new wall posts so as to maintain the users' engagement.

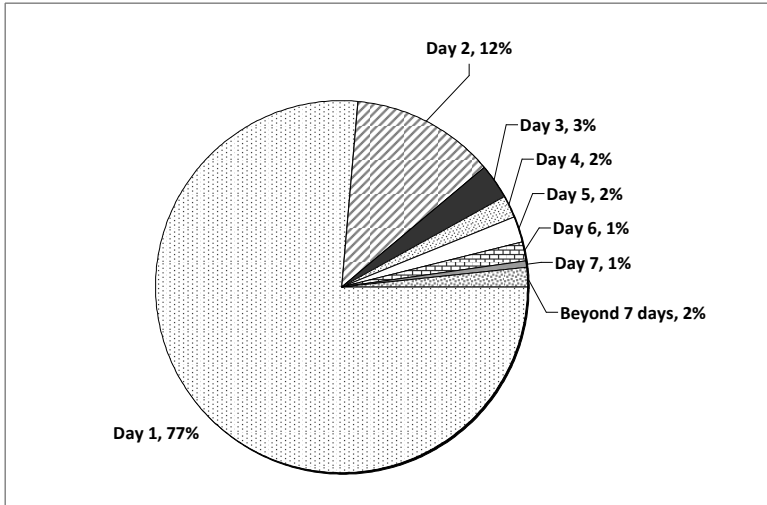


Figure 2. Posting Ratio of Airline Wall Post Users' Comments from publish date

4.4 Integrate Functions

Studies have confirmed people visit their Facebook account several times a day (Rainie et al. 2012). Therefore additional functions on Facebook page would provide conveniences to users when they want to perform the business related activities. Furthermore users can have higher interaction and engagement with the page rather than simply read the wall post contents.

Generally speaking, all three airlines provided several integrated features for their customers. However, the target of each airlines apparently has significant different. Air Asia mainly focused on obtaining business; therefore their integrated features were related to ticket selling and promotions, such as interactive FAQ, joint promotion with Chengdu tourism board on their new route, and an external link to their flight schedule web page. They also listed the job opportunities on their Facebook page to encourage their fans to become their employees. To provide convenience and encourage users to upload holiday videos, Easy Jet provided a movie making application. By simply upload a series of photos, this application can automatically generate a movie so user can directly upload it to the Facebook page. Easy Jet Facebook page provided a customized flight booking applications that allow users to book flights directly from Facebook, and Air Asia provided an external link for flight schedule search. Interestingly, Jet Blue did not provided any flight-related features in their page. They focused on obtaining new frequent flyer members. Their page allowed users to register as new members, and also gain mileage points when they use the Facebook check-in functions. Furthermore, their holiday granter application allows user to personalize a video for their boss asking for holidays.

All three airlines continuously provide user engagement campaign encourage users to participate and win a holiday prize, especially for Air Asia, this campaign provided a

monthly prize so users can regularly submit photos to participate the competition. Easy Jet encourages users to upload holiday movies to win the holiday. Jet Blue not only invite user to share a children book title on the Facebook page, they also donate the book. This can reflect Jet Blue not only focus on business but also social responsibilities. Table 4 listed the integrated features available on the Facebook page.

Table 4. Integrated functions available on Facebook Page

Type of Integrations	Air Asia (N=9)	Easy Jet (N=11)	Jet Blue (N=8)
Facebook standard features	Photos Video Albums Events Notes	Photos Video Albums Events Notes	Photos Video Albums Events
Campaign	submit photos, win a monthly prize	upload movies, win a holiday	Soar with Reading - Share children book title, Jet Blue donate, and user win holiday
Facebook Apps	Ask AirAsia – FAQ Joint Promotion with Chengdu Tourism Board	Flight bookings Memory maker Link to you tube You above all – TV advertisement FAQ	Getaways Granter Go Places – gain miles when using Facebook check-in Location – Airport map
External Link	Flight Schedule	Welcome info	True Blue - Frequent Flyer official page
Others	Job Opportunities		

5 Conclusions

This study examined the social media strategies among three popular budget airlines by the four steps of user engagement (Facebook, March 2012). The results indicated Air Asia successfully attracted 1.5 million likes which was the highest among all three airlines. Besides, they have the highest number of wall posts and average post of day. Fans normally respond to wall posts only when it is “fresh”. The results indicated around 90% of the fans commented on company wall posted within the first two days. Nevertheless, Easy Jet’s fans have highest involvement ratio (13%) but Air Asia only has 3.5%. Different airlines have different strategies. Air Asia mainly use Facebook for distributing promotion airfare; Easy Jet use Facebook to engage with customers; Jet Blue share their from company information with their fans via external link sharing.

By connecting and engaging user in the social media, companies can make use of the fans network to influence their friends via word of mouth. Integrating the business with the social media will be the new trend of business. Three examined airlines have adopted different strategies in social media. However, one common point is that no

matter the airlines responded to any post or not, customers would still post or respond to both positive and negative comments on the wall.

This research provided a solid suggestion on the frequency of post initiated by company. This also shed the light on what kind of post content that could arouse the interests of the users and that may spread the e-word-of-mouth through the social media.

6 Limitations and Implications on Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, only the wall posts posted shown on “highlights” section were captured. Any post by users that were not shown in this section was not analyzed. Second, this study only captured 1.5 months wall post which might not reflect the some seasonal fans behavior.

The findings in this study indicated users’ mainly engage in “fresh” wall post therefore in order to invite users’ engagement; airlines should keep posting on the wall so as to encourage more user engagement. However, the number of wall posts might affect the users’ perceptions. Future studies could examine how users’ responses on the wall post frequency and number of wall post whether users welcome these posts or feel annoying. Furthermore, content analysis of users’ comments is required. Wall posts engage users to respond, however, these responses might be negative comments that will affect the corporate images and word of mouth. As a result, other than simply focus on the involvement ratio and number of likes, the nature of the comments should also be analyzed by social network analysis. It might be also subject to future research, if there is a link between business model and the use of social media, why users are more involved into feedback on accommodation then on transportation and how important social media feedback for airlines really is.

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