

# Social media can make or break your tourism business

While the tourism industry is arguably one of those that has most benefited from the advent of social media, it hasn't arrived without pitfalls for owner-managed tourism businesses.



Image source: Getty/Gallo

“Social media is having a major positive impact on the tourism industry, but it requires tourism business owners to pay careful attention to their online presence, and to remain on top of the rapidly changing social media landscape,” says Anton Roelofse, regional general manager of Business Partners.

Digital media has allowed ordinary people to broadcast their travels to their extended circle of friends via platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, using hashtags like #Instatravel, which has further promoted the very prospect of travel as glamorous and exciting.

“In addition, social media has helped to show large parts of the globe as less scary and more familiar,” he says, pointing out that this is especially beneficial for South Africa’s tourism sector, which tends to be seen as far flung by the rest of the world and often makes international news headlines for the wrong reasons.

## Online marketing campaigns

One in every 10 jobs and 10% of global GDP is now derived from tourism, and this is set to rise, especially in the developing world, according to Airbnb. The rise of this app and other travel-based digital platforms shows that tourism accommodation businesses cannot afford to not have a strong internet presence. This would include being listed on all the major travel platforms such as Airbnb, Booking.com, LekkeSlaap and TripAdvisor, and being active and visible on social media sites like Facebook and Instagram, as well as search engines like Google.

“Although there is still a case to be made for having physical brochures which can be disseminated at tourism information kiosks and complementary businesses, expensive print advertising is waning. In turn, a lot of the budget that used to be reserved for print advertising has now been absorbed by boosting social media presence. Even though social media is still free for the most part, the race among businesses to land at the top of search rankings has meant spending increasingly more on online marketing campaigns.”

## Strong digital presence

According to Roelofse, a strong digital presence begins with the costs of having professional pictures taken of the business, and professional text written about it. “Even if posting the pictures online is free on various platforms, fierce industry competition means tourism businesses can’t skimp on the quality of their social media content. In addition to this, there are the costs of professional website design, search engine optimisation, and paid advertising on the various platforms.

“However, it’s important to remember that, in the age of social media, customers themselves are the most potent form of advertising. Not only do they advertise your business to their circle of friends through their posts on social media, but they can impact your reputation through their reviews posted to the travel platforms.”

## **Customer service**

As such, Roelofse believes that customer service is more important than ever before, and for tourism business owners it should start with quick and efficient direct contact, via digital platforms, with their prospective customer before they even arrive. “Adding to this, it helps to have a strategy ready to deal with bad reviews, which not only takes customer complaints seriously and fixes the problems within the business, but is also seen to be done on social media,” he says.

“Effective online reputation management usually includes a strategy of responding immediately to bad reviews in an empathetic and sincere manner, while avoiding getting into an online spat with the unhappy customer. It is also important to encourage as many happy clients as possible to post positive online reviews,” says Roelofse.

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