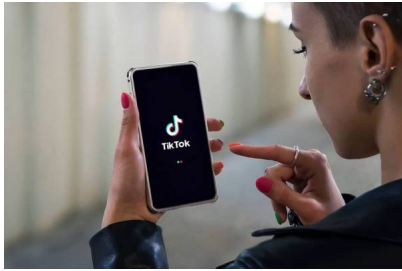


TIKTOK AS A MARKETING TOOL FOR DESTINATION BRANDING



TikTok is a platform that needs no further introduction. After the lockdown in 2020, TikTok has become one of the most widely used social media platforms, and its growth remains exponential worldwide. TikTok is a short-form video-sharing platform that allows users to create and share creative content with a wider community of individuals. It is also used for destination branding.

The content varies from math equations to comedy, lip-sync and dance challenges, movie reviews and computer tips, but the basic premise is that the posts are quirky and fun. At first glance, TikTok seems like a fun and playful platform aimed at a younger audience. **Yet, with availability in 150 countries, 1.2 billion monthly active users, and an estimated 2.6 billion downloads worldwide, as reported by Sensor Tower (2020), the platform has become much more than that.**

Unlike its competitors, TikTok is not a short-lived trend; it hosts and shapes the communication of an entire generation in the way content is created, resulting in the birth of its own community. TikTok has become an attractive communication channel for various companies and brands, and travel-related topics have become the most popular. For marketers, however, this opens up an opportunity to adopt TikTok as a strategic tool to help with destination branding.

In 2019, the fast-growing platform launched a #TikTokTravel campaign to inspire and encourage users to share content from their holidays around the world. This innovative idea caught the attention of users and several tourism boards around the world, who ended up joining the conversation using specialized hashtags.

With a platform like TikTok overtaking Google as the leading information search tool and maintaining its lead by engaging a wider audience in ways that are fun, educational and creative, marketing professionals use the platform to inform the world about travel destinations.

Marketing communication experts could start involving local talent resources (musical artists, actors, dancers and content creators) as a group when launching tourism projects.

Taking a Long-term Vision

Countries need to start telling powerful and authentic stories to drive economic growth using memorable hashtags. In 2018, for example, Ghana launched its destination branding campaign - Year of Return, an initiative project by the Akufo-Addo government, to encourage African diasporas to come to Ghana to settle and invest in the continent. This is said to have contributed \$1.9 billion to the Ghanaian economy.

In 2021, TikTok was finally part of the campaign, with #YearOfReturn getting over 8.1 million views with various content. It's only a matter of time before the numbers change in scale, as in the case of Dubai's #MyDubai, which has 3.6 billion views, and #ThisIsDubai, which has garnered 109.6 million views.

Reputation management professionals must start creating trends that promote identity and

transcend destinations. More importantly, these trends must not be the result of chance; they must be the result of a carefully crafted strategic plan driven by a single purpose.

Becoming a Source of Contents

The fantastic thing about TikTok is its ability to tell stories in many creative expressions. From transitional videos to fashion, quick information and face and voice editing, the app offers many resources to enhance storytelling. Any good content is an opportunity to present interesting and exciting features of your country.

As experts, you need to learn how to create flexible content that can be delivered in different formats. You could identify all the highlights of the country and turn them into fashion-themed content. For example, if you want to spread the word about Mauritius' famous "land of seven colors," you can ask an influencer to make a fashion transition video showing how this tourist attraction can inspire your wardrobe when you're planning your vacation.

Another idea is to create a duet trend that teaches tourists how to navigate the country while speaking the local dialect. A quick tip is that users are already creating this type of content. They have created a country hashtag to promote their identity as citizens. As a professional, you need to set up a funnel system to select the ones that get the most engagement and turn them into more prominent trends. And most importantly, never run out of content.

Reviving the Spirit of Collaboration

Taking charge of TikTok to drive targeted engagement is not the work of one person. The platform is powered by a community; therefore, a project as large as nation branding requires a collective effort from professionals, government agencies, citizens, and even TikTok to accomplish this feat.

For example, after the success of its first collaboration with TikTok, which garnered over 70 million views, the Department of Tourism (DoT) of the Philippines has embarked on a second collaboration to launch a campaign that celebrates the beauty of the country's islands through the hashtag - #GandaMoPinas. In addition, the DoT shortlisted nine designers from different parts of the country in 2021. Their main task was to promote their province through TikTok Live. They were able to showcase the natural landscape, key tourist sites and activities, and increase engagement on the official DoT TikTok account. This example shows how collaboration only adds to the power and reach of the campaign, creating not only a brand for the country but also a strong personality and following.

The world is about to experience a new paradigm shift in communication and destination branding, and the possibilities remain endless. In conclusion, destination branding can only succeed if locals are involved in the process, regardless of their mode of communication.

Marketing professionals must learn to innovate by adopting new technologies and platforms to foster effective communication, regardless of who is leading the conversation. **One might ask what a platform like TikTok, seemingly known for distracting young people from serious discussions, has to do with historical milestones like enhancing the reputation of travel destinations.** The answer is in the people.

Experts should never forget that the target audience will always determine the preferred communication channels to use to convey their message. The purpose of communication is incomplete if the message is not clearly understood. The purpose is to translate seemingly complex concepts and situations into simple narratives that even the target audience can relate to and adopt.

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