DESIGNING A SOCIAL MEDIA UNIT IN A TRAVEL AGENCY

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION/RATIONALE

Public relations researchers have not focused enough on the necessity of understanding the role of public relations in the tourism industry. According to Huertas (2008), most tourism studies have focused on marketing, advertising and travelers' behavior but without much attention to the public relations' role in this industry. Huertas (2008) said, public relations helps build a brand, get into the news and show the society what the agency means to this industry.

On the practical level, many tourist companies/agencies are aware of the role of public relations in their business. From a quick look at some of the travel agencies' websites it seems that they are giving attention to media relations, meetings with the media, bloggers, travel analysts, customers and investors.

According to L'Etang, Falkheimer, and Lugo (2007), in today's travel and tourism industry public relations plays an important role in both tactical and strategic activities and in many cases is integrated with marketing activities. The tourism industry has many supporting sectors such as hotels, restaurants, transportation service, and tourist attractions. All those sectors has its own key audiences, public relations activities and messages.

 L'Etang, Falkheimer, and Lugo (2007), said it is important to create a positive perception about a holiday destination in the visitor's mind because success in the field of travel and tourism depends on it so much. Hotels, restaurants, destinations, attractions and transportation all need effective public relations to be successful and popular among tourists. The public relations department creates favorable impressions of each and every one of those and consequently can create more business for the agency. Designing messages, presenting companies, planning and conducting public relations campaigns are major tasks used to gain

public attention in tourism. Another major task for public relations activities is media relations (newspapers, radio, television, Internet), for clients, partners and competitors and government.

As a result of the public relations efforts in order to reach a large number of audiences, public relations today is taking advantage of the social media platforms. According to Jana (2011), social media is one of the fastest growing and most powerful forces in the travel field today. These social media platforms make it easier to communicate with potential clients. In addition, social media helps with policies such as immediate reservations by offering one to one conversations. It is also a new way to involve people in the agency's activities by sharing experiences. Many guests start with random Internet research before they plan a holiday. Social media should be there for them when they start. Travelers want direct answers about hotels and attractions. Engaging with customers before, during and after their trip through a social media platform gives the travel agencies the ability to continually improve their service and also enable two-way communication. Personal recommendations are worth much more than any advertisement, social media offers a large space for personal recommendations.

Therefore, the significance of this project derives from the need to have a variety of ways to reach people in the tourism industry. Furthermore, having more academic research about the role of public relations in the tourism industry could increase the possibility of establishing a theoretical framework. In addition, the role of public relations in tourism deserves to be studied more in the academic field in order for the travel agencies/companies to pay attention to the importance of utilizing public relations applications which provide a communication benefit for them. On the other hand, social media is used extensively in the travel industry, however, it is used in limited extent and in administratively disorganized way. The researcher in this project studied samples of travel based organizations and depending on the description of their practices

of social media he adapt each factor into the designed unit in a way that present a holistic

concepts of what a social media unit needs to function in a travel agency.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Role of Public Relations in Tourism:

According to Sallot (2005), the necessity of public relations research in the tourism industry is growing due to the fact that tourism is considered one of the top three engines of the world's economy. According to the United Nations–affiliated World Tourism Organization (WTO), nearly 715 million global tourist arrivals were recorded in 2002. By comparison with 2001 there was a growth of 22 million tourist arrivals. And for the first time international tourist arrivals crossed the 700 million mark.

Sallot (2005), said the tourism industry has many travel suppliers such as hotels, resorts, cruise lines, airlines, trains, car rental agencies, taxis, attractions, restaurants, and other important travel suppliers. At the other end of this traveling process stands the public\ travelers. The public relations department could be a bridge on behalf of any of the travel suppliers though their travel agencies by building relationships with the travel buyers\consumers, creating awareness, publishing information, attracting brand favorability and loyalty for the travel services.

Public relations can assist in building a strong relationship with the travel industry press. Newspapers, such as *Travel Weekly* and magazines such as *Travel Agent* must be supplied on a regular basis with material about travel agencies due to their broad popularity among travel customers. In addition, public relations practitioners often use the travel sections of popular newspapers such as *The New York Times* to disseminate a travel agency's messages taking advantage of the credibility and popularity of those newspapers. (Sallot, 2005)

According to Sallot (2005), one of the typical practices that public relations practitioners use in the travel industry to conduct media relations is providing a trip for journalists individually or in groups to examine the travel agency's services at free or reduced prices. But, recently this practice have been limited by many media outlets by preventing journalists from accepting free travel. However, some independent travel writers still accept those trips. Many public relations practitioners join the Society of American Travel Writers (SATW) to be aware of the guiding principles that govern the media relations in order to take full advantage of their media relations practices without being unethical.

In addition to media relations the public relations practitioner could direct communication by targeting publics directly using newsletters, brochures, the Internet and social media. Interpersonal and group communication approaches also are effective, such as exhibitions and special events. Special events usually are planned to illustrate a new travel product/ service in conjunction with an event. (Sallot, 2005)

The public relations practitioner could also play a role by being an activist in issues that affect tourism/travel, such as working with governments to influence regulation that helps growing tourism activities, conserving natural resources that impact tourism in a certain city, and informing the citizens of the society about the benefits of tourism revenues on them. (Sallot, 2005)

Managing communications during crisis is also an important role for public relations in the travel and tourism industry. Crisis in the tourism industry includes airplane accidents, terrorist attacks, the spread of viral diseases and any other crises that could negatively affect the tourism industry. (Sallot, 2005)

According to Huertas (2008), it is clear that public relations is important in the promotions function of a tourism organization. However, there is a gap between theory and practice in tourism public relations. The theories, models and concepts of public relations have not been studied in tourism rather marketing has dominated. On the other hand, public relations activities are applied frequently in the practice of tourism. Public relations ought to be the dominant activity in promoting and communicating with stakeholders in the tourism industry.

Huertas (2008), said that tourism organizations, especially tourism offices – the small tourism businesses- use graphic materials and promotional products. Among the most important products that have been used are publications of all kinds, including hotel guides, restaurant locations, sightseeing and beach locations, catalogues of different services, maps and street guides. According to Huertas (2008), tourism offices design a large number of such materials aiming basically two major objectives: first, to inform potential target audience about an attraction; second, to orient tourists to the attraction. In contrast, hotel groups and big travel agencies design a different kind of published material which focuses only on the products and services they are offering.

Huertas (2008), stated that one of the most important public relations activities used in tourism is sponsoring events. Sponsoring is used in the public sector and private sector. The most common sponsored events are sport, culture and heritage. Sponsorship of events usually includes regattas, rallies and different kinds of sporting events.

Organization of events is another action specific to public relations and common in the tourism industry. It includes international music and cinema festivals, gastronomic competitions, conventions, traditional and folklore celebrations, etc. Those actions could promote tourism

activities in themselves, draw media attention and also foment the creation of a certain image.

(Huertas, 2008)

> One of the examples for the role of organizing of events in tourism, was when "The Goodwill Games were a tool of diplomatic public relations strategy during the Cold War. After the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, the USA and other Western countries boycotted the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. The boycott was reciprocated by the Soviet Bloc at the 1984 Los Angeles Games. The Goodwill Games were conceived of by the founder of CNN, Ted Turner and were located in Moscow in 1986. The Games featured 182 events and 3,000 athletes and attracted thousands of US and Western European tourists, visitors and journalists who were granted access to the Soviet Union. Some that they were highly significant in easing tensions and creating a public opinion climate in both countries that later facilitated the non-proliferation treaty between the USSR and the US." (L'Etang, Falkheimer, & Lugo, 2007, p. 74)

Huertas (2008), concluded that it was clear that there is a movement to develop a theoretical framework for public relations in tourism regardless of the history of having a certain disassociation between the theorists of public relations and professionals. According to Huertas (2008), developing a theoretical framework for public relations is needed to gain several objectives: to build relationships with the public, to exchange the experiences of former tourists and to discover the opinions about the whole tourism procedure. It is also important to focus on two-way communication, responsibility and mutual understanding. Furthermore, there are major public relations activities which have not been fully developed in tourism companies and institutions. These activities are research, image audits, crisis planning and management, the application of actions of social responsibility and all activities related to the outside environment and community benefits.

According to Wiggins (2011), Public relations practitioners very much understand the importance of public relations in the field of tourism. Top tourism professionals use public relations as an important part of their marketing mix to increase their brand, sales and arrivals. There are three keys that public relations practitioners focus on in the travel agencies. First,

develop an audience for the agency by having media contacts and a database that contains the audience the agency aims to attract. Second, be ready with press releases and strategies to pitch the media. Third, follow up with media constantly.

Wiggins (2011), said 90% of all successful travel and hospitality sellers, suppliers, and hotels integrate public relations into their ongoing marketing, advertising and branding. He said, when a travel agency get a strong mention or endorsement in print, broadcast or even online in a blog, the agency's inquiries, booking and arrivals will go up.

Brooks (2004), said that tourism needs both media coverage and advertising, but, media coverage is more important than advertising. Advertising is how to maintain the position, but, public relations is about how to build the brand. A solid public relations campaign has potential benefits: the tourism agency/company can build its brand, improve its image, increase credibility and provide a greater return on investment than advertising alone.

The Importance of Social Media Participation in Public Relations:

It is important to define exactly what social media is. According to Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011), social media is shared online platforms on which people can build their own content. Social media websites include sites like Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, Blogs and Myspace.

Another definition of social media according to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (2011), is that social media is the term that generally used to refer to Internet and mobile-based channels and tools which enable members to communicate with one other and express views and ideas. Social media includes the formation of the network platform and motivating the members to participate.

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), "social networking is web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks." (p.211)

According to Seiple (2010), social media created an easy way for businesses to reach their publics. Social media is very well serving the public relations' effectiveness. People now have a platform to exchange their opinions about the company's products and services. Therefore, not giving social media the importance that is deserved will lead the company to miss a great opportunity to extend the reach of its message. According to McLennan and Howell (2010), social media is a great way to show customers that the organization seeks to develop relationships with them, not to influence their decision to buy a product. Therefore, the organization should use social media as a way to let customers feel that their opinions are appreciated and the organization is welling to serve them whither they buy or not.

According to Matthews (2010), social media supports the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. He says, one-way communication cannot survive in the social media world. Social media encourages having a dialogue that focuses on the public. Therefore, it is an opportunity for public relations to directly impact its publics online.

Wright and Hinson (2012), studied how social media are being implemented in public relations practice. Research subjects were selected via a random sample of PRSA members who received e-mailed invitations to participate. The results of the survey indicated that each year social media is increasing in terms of use in public relations practice. In 2012, 35 % of the studied sample spend at least 25 % of their workday with social media and 15 % spend half of

their working with social media. Public relations is still the organizational function responsible for handling the social media activity in the organization according to the study's results. According to the study Facebook and LinkedIn were the most used tools in the 2012 sample. After that comes – in the following order- Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and electronic forums.

The Role of Social Media in Public Relations:

According to Eyrich, Padman, and Sweetser (2008), social media has become a strategic tool in public relations. Many public relations practitioners are developing skills on online communication technology. Recent research suggests that public relations professionals are now even more active in adopting online tools. According to Eyrich, Padman, and Sweetser (2008), the majority of public relations professionals believe that using communication technology gave them the capacity to reach a large audience in an easy way. Social media provides an opportunity to reinforce media relations by following up with the public before and after the traditional media efforts. Therefore, using social media does not only allow public relations practitioners to reach out the public and involve them in discussions; it is a strategic tool that helps other public relations activities such as planning campaigns and evaluation of outcomes.

Social media can be a useful tool for delivering press releases. However, with using social media the press release should be aimed at customers, not gatekeepers. In the few coming years public relations will become aiming primarily at the publics. The organizations are capable of targeting the client directly now without much need for a provider in the middle of the procedure. So, that highlights the importance of using a direct tool to reach them without any multiple filters that the traditional media have. (Fernando, 2011)

The social media press release is one of the newer tactics in public relations. This growth came as result of the growth of social media use by the people.

"What exactly is a social media release? It has its roots in a February 2006 blog post by Financial Times correspondent Tom Foremski ("Die! Press Release! Die! Die! Die!"; find it here: http://bit.ly/cwiabc03). Foremski railed against traditional press releases, calling for PR people to "deconstruct" the information in the release and place it "into special sections," tagging the different elements so that a publisher could then "pre-assemble" the story. That challenge was taken up by Todd Defren of shift Communications, who created a template for the social media press release." (Fernando, 2011, p. 12).

The researcher concluded that public relations practitioners today are more aware of the importance of its place in the social media word. It might not be yet recognized in the academic field but it is certainly practiced in the everyday work. In addition, it depends on the public relations' practitioner capabilities and how he/she knows to use social media in his/her job. It is also related to the how much the public relations practitioner is convinced about the importance of using social media and the extent of satisfaction with the traditional methods in the public relations practice.

Practical Social Media Practices in Public Relations:

1. Develop relationships with social media leaders. In the past the company had to go to the traditional media to disseminate its message. With social media the company can communicate online with journalists, reporters, bloggers, and opinion leaders who cover issues in business and develop relationships with them. The company can develop relationships using a variety of social media tools, however, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are the most influential tools in this regard: (Seiple, 2010)

- Twitter is an excellent tool to present a company to journalists, reporters, bloggers, and opinion leaders. The public relations practitioner should identify journalists who cover stories about the company then follow them on Twitter. The goal is to develop a relationships not sell products. Therefore, the public relations practitioner could tweet to a journalist mentioning that he/she liked an article that he/she wrote or asking about his/her opinion about a specific topic related to the industry. It will be a great opportunity to be involved with the journalist when they are looking for more information about subjects which the public relations practitioner could help with. (Seiple, 2010)

- Facebook plays a significant role in maintaining relationships with the media. However, due the fact that Facebook is somehow personal, it is important not to start with Facebook to build professional relationships. Also, it is important not to "friend" any journalist, the relationship should be grown in first place before it is taken to a personal level. (Seiple, 2010)

- According to Siegchrist (2012), YouTube is creating stars day after day. The public relations practitioner should look for videos on issues that relate to the company's business and comment on them. Creating a YouTube channel is one of the useful actions that gives the company a place to introduce its self. The channel's content should be very well organized so it is easy to follow. In addition, updating the channel frequently with new videos will give the subscribers the motivation to return regularly to the channel, and step by step the follows will note the channel as a star.

2. Analyzing the company's social media performance. The public relations department in any company could use social media as an analyzing tool. The department can track the mentions of the company during a specific period of time. Then, calculate the proportion

of positive to negative comments. Questions include: what platform are the most mentions? Why are the mentions more positive or negative on this platform than others? Those questions and other similar questions are the ones that the public relations department should focus on to analyze its performance on social media. (Falkowl, 2011)

3. Pitching the traditional media. Pitching is one of the most common activities that could be applied through social media. However, there are some key points to be considered when pitching journalists to be able to have great coverage:

- The public relations practitioner must target the right person. One of the worst things that bother journalists is receiving pitches about things that doesn't link to what they write about. The most critical tasks before pitching include: studying the style of journalists, knowing the favorable topics and showing that the public relations practitioner did the research. (Seiple, 2010)

- The pitch should be short, nicely written, convincing, and goes directly to the point. Journalists usually do not have the time to read long pitches. (Seiple, 2010)

- The pitch must be newsworthy and written from a different angle that will distinguish it from other pitches. In addition, it should state what this pitch will benefit the journalists' readers and why it will attract them. (Seiple, 2010)

4. According to Seiple (2010), managing the company's blog is a significant public relations practice to create awareness and generate media attention. Some important keys to consider when managing the company's blog:

- The content should be updated by focusing on the achievements.

- Provide information about the company's informal events such as, "a holiday party, or a softball tournament".

- The reader of the blog should have an easy way to share the content of the blog so it could be spread on other social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. (Seiple, 2010)

5. Employee misrepresentation of the company is one of the major fears when allowing employees to participate in social media. However, having respected happy employees will lead to having good representatives for the company. Therefore, to have happy employees there are a few things that could be done using social media to facilitate this: (Seiple, 2010)

- Don't restrict social media because applying harsh social media rules with employees will lead to an angry work environment. The social media policy should not be more than reminding the employees that they should not release confidential information on any social media platform. Every employee in the company has his/her own social media account, so, it is important that they are happy and say good things about the company. In other words, they have their own publics and they promote the company to them. (Seiple, 2010)

- Create an internal platform for employees so they will have a common ground to communicate and build relationships with each other. Generating new ideas and getting feedback from employees are the two main goals for creating this internal platform. (Seiple, 2010)

- Transparency between top management and employees is significant to create a happy work environment. It is important that the employees are involved in the main issues related to the company. The internal platform can be used to exchange ideas between different management levels in the company. (Seiple, 2010)

Current Social Media Practice in Tourism:

Social media platforms are an easy way to contact with publics. In tourism, many customers begin researching the Internet before they decide to book or even chose destinations. Customers look for fast information and direct answers about their accommodations and destinations. It is important for tourism agencies to be involved with customers at all time. The thing that will give the agency the ability to develop its services, have new clients and maintain the current clients. (Jana, 2011)

Websites in general are important to build up relations with customers. In addition, websites are more significant when of dealing with multicultural audiences. Tourism websites give the public relations professionals the ability to draw a general image of the agency/company according to each culture. It is important to note that delivering messages to website visitors from their own cultural perspectives is an advantage. (Kang & Mastin, 2008)

Social media has significant effects on the popularity of the tourism websites. Therefore, the adoption of social media tools is considered to be so important for improving the capability of tourism websites. Social media is increasing the number of visitors to the websites significantly. (Milano, Baggio & Piattelli, 2011).

> "It is clear that Internet information search and travel booking and social networking are pervasive factors. Travellers were asked about the sources of information on their trips to Australia. 75 percent indicated that family and friends provided information. 46 percent obtained information from websites. 51 percent of respondents indicated that they used social networks with family, friends, and others to plan their trips. 78 percent of these respondents used Facebook. 56 percent of travellers indicated that they would share emails, blogs and pictures online. 95 percent of those that used Facebook accessed this website at least once per week." (Sood, Kattiyapornpong & Miller, 2011 p. 6).

According to Jana (2011), different tourism agencies use different kinds of social media tools. Some agencies have blogs for the hotels that they work with. Blog can be used to inform

customers about special offers, news about new staff, allows guests to renew rooms and post pictures of the hotel. Also, guests can write about what is going on in the hotel such as new events, new bars, restaurants or clubs. This will help attract people to the hotel. Another way to use social media is being active on Facebook and Flickr. Those two platforms are useful to engage customers with the agency's activities and motivate customers to give their own feedback, share pictures of their travel and talk about their last experience with the agency. This will be better than having a paid advertisement. In addition, Twitter is one of the most used tools in the tourism industry. Twitter could be used as a quick answering tool along with the normal communication tools such as phone, e-mail and fax. However, Twitter is helpful when publishing the agency's news to interested clients.

According to Bennett (2012), word of mouth is a major factor in spreading opinions in the business of travel and tourism. Therefore, the opinions on social media platforms are critical to help growing the agency's business. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council 92% of customers trust platforms that enable recommendations from members. 52 % said that their plans were changed depending on comments on social media. And also, 52 % said that photos shared on Facebook motivated them to choose the place that they saw on the photos.

According to a study that was conducted by the World Travel Market Industry with 1,000 members of travel based organizations, 22 % of the agencies in the travel industry today are using social media in their businesses, and nearly 50 % of the agencies in the travel industry will be using social media by 2016. Moreover, 20 % of the sample said that they decreased spending on the Internet search engines like Yahoo and Google and they are using social media more now. Social media topped the list as the most used marketing channel in travel for today and for 2016. 15 % of the sample said that social media will be less used in 2016 in the travel industry.

Basically, travel based organizations used to focus on using search engines as a communication and marketing strategy, however, the findings of this study show that social media is taking this role and it will be even more used as the time goes on. (World Travel Market Industry Report, 2011)

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Examine

This creative research project focused on designing a social media unit in a travel agency. Therefore, the approach was four mini case studies from tourism/travel organizations to analyze the ways that the social media tools were used in those organizations. In addition, analyzing the practices of social media in those tourism /travel organizations provided guidelines about a good social media unit in a tourism / travel agency. The cases were both descriptive and explanatory. The discussion section was a description of the social media usage in those cases to reach a holistic understanding about the different ways that the social media tools were used. However, the conclusion section explained the cases by highlighting the connections between the public relations activities and social media in order to find the primary functions from the social media usage in the overall communication system for the travel agency. The selected organizations were all tourism based organizations, however, they were in slightly different forms to give a variety of concepts to the issue. The organizations were: KAL Tours of South Korea, the Louisiana Office of Tourism of the United States, Spaceships New Zealand Ltd. of New Zealand and Grand Geneva Resort of United States.

Discussion

The first case was about KAL Tours, a secondary company that belongs to KAL (Korean Airlines). In KAL Tours the application of social media tools were chosen depending on an extensive research on the target publics. So, the social media tools were not chosen first. In addition, the social media tools in KAL Tours were used as an important income generator by

applying social media marketing efforts. Information about KAL Tours travel services were provided two times a day using the company's Twitter or Facebook platform. The travel services that come close to deadlines were usually sold at reduced prices through social media sites. In order to develop relationship with customers, KAL Tours answered the customers' questions through social media and email. Furthermore, rewards were offered during or after the trip for customers who purchased travel services through social media. The thing that increased repurchase via social media. (Park & Oh, 2012)

The second case study was about the Louisiana Office of Tourism which is the state's official tourism organization. The Louisiana Office of Tourism used mainly Facebook and Twitter as social media tools to promote Louisiana tourism. According to the Destination Analysts (2010), report which illustrated the social media activates of the Louisiana Office of Tourism said that the two most wanted kinds of information were "things to see and do" and "travel discounts". The most significant concern that the Louisiana uses of social media said they worried about was the credibility of the posts and content generated in Facebook and Twitter. Social media sources should clearly tie the Louisiana Office of Tourism to reliable outside sources. Users do not want to doubts about who is responding to them. The report also said that the content should fit nicely with the Louisiana Office of Tourism communications strategy. In other words, posting content is not meant to satisfy the manager's benefits, it meant to be consistent with the whole communications strategy of the Louisiana Office of Tourism.

The third case was about Spaceships New Zealand, Ltd. which is a New Zealand travel agency. Spaceships New Zealand, Ltd. blogs is not broadly used to post information about the agency to influence costumers' decisions. It was used to post additional details and interesting points about actives that could be done during the trip. Facebook at Spaceships New Zealand was

used mostly by customers to post comments when they were in the planning stage of their trip such as their expectations, their enthusiasm, and description of their plans. Spaceships New Zealand provides through Facebook links to important sites such as the official destination websites, ratings websites, and travel guides forums to enable the costumers to socialize before the trip, the thing the made the customers feel happy about their decision. The pre-experiences posts were so helpful for Spaceships New Zealand to know the costumers plans and be prepared for them. (Jenkin, 2010)

The fourth case was about Grand Geneva Resort which is a four-star leisure resort located in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Many tourism based businesses were struggling from the drooping economy. The Grand Geneva Resort was searching for methods to develop its business by communicating with customers. Grand Geneva Resort hired a social media/public relations company called Comet Branding to develop a strategic social media program. Before hiring Comet Branding, Grand Geneva Resort had planned to donate all the unsold tickets for the snow sports season weekend. Comet Branding developed the Grand Geneva Facebook page enabling the customers to printout free lift ticket vouchers. In addition to that, Comet Branding produced a series of social media videos that were shared on YouTube and Facebook. The result of those social media efforts were the biggest snow sports season weekend in the history of the resort in both profit and guests. The resort reached its revenue goal three months before the end of the season and nearly 75% of attendants were visiting Grand Geneva for the first time. (Somesso, 2010)

Conclusion

Depending on the description above, there were important points to be concluded. The social media strategy should be compatible with the public relations/communications strategy. Therefore, the social media strategy must serve the whole communications strategy so that the social media content does not represent an odd voice for the travel agency. In other words, social media is a part of the public relations/communications department, not a dependent department that works according to its strategy.

Having a social media research unit is a significant factor to research the targeted audiences. The social media practitioner must identify what the agency needs on each specific step before starting to search for the tool. Furthermore, social media should take advantage of every marketing opportunity to support the agency. Social media activities could be used as a great marking tool. Travel agencies should give social media shoppers special treatment such as rewards and discounts to encourage repeat business via social media.

Blogs are frequently used by travel agencies to post additional interesting information rather than for commercial purposes. Blogs can provide customers with ideas about more activities that could be done during the trip. Furthermore, pre-experience posts are an important source of information for the travel agency, so, those posts should be analyzed.

Social media content must not be only promotional information, it must focus on the publics' needs. Publics need information about what additional things they could do on their visit. Therefore, it is wise to allow the publics to express their needs and give them an appropriate forum to respond. Credibility is a significant factor in social media. It should be clear to the public that the posts are coming from reliable sources. Therefore, it is important that the

travel agency speak with one voice on all the social media platforms to prevent any kind of duplication or contradiction.

All those conclusions were taken into account when designing the social media unit for this creative project. The researcher adapted each factor into the designed unit in a way that present a holistic concepts of what a social media unit needs to function in a travel agency. In addition, the designed social media unit in this project focused on four social media tools which are: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Blogs since they were the most used tools according to the research.

CHAPTER IV

BODY OF PROJECT

This chapter focused on designing the social media unit in a travel agency. According to Dand (2010), businesses design their organizational structure depending on what the business needs. Therefore, obviously there is not a universal organizational structure for a social media department. However, to have a good start, the organization must define the goals of the social media function and which specific group is the social media department aligned with, such as marketing or public relations etc. Also, determine clear responsibilities from the beginning to be able to estimate the financial resources that the department needs. Having an organizational chart for the social media department is critical to give the department an official status.

Recommendations for the Social Media Unit's Goals, Objectives and Strategies:
- The goals:
  - Establish the social media unit as a primary public relations function in the agency.
  - Use the social media unit to create mutually beneficial relationships with customers/publics.
- The objectives:
  - Grow the following on Twitter by having 500 followers within 9-12 months.
  - Grow fan base on Facebook by having 100 likes within 9-12 months.
  - Grow fan base on YouTube by having 100 subscribers to the agency's channel within 9-12 months.

- Grow the member base in the blog by having 100 subscribers within 9-12 months.

- The strategies:

  - Design a social media unit that is linked to the public relations department.

  - Assign a specific role for each social media platform in the unit.

  - Clarify the organizational structure of the unit in way that helps the agency's commutations strategy.

Recommendations for the Social Media Unit Structure:

The researcher designed this project to be applied to a travel agency that has 100 – 150 employees total. The social media unit was organized based on the functional structure and the social media unit director reports to the vice president for public relations in the agency. According to Gupta (2009), the functional structure has several advantages:

1. The ability to put in one place all the human and informational resources necessary for a single activity. This will elicit the best performance out of the staff.

2. To have a solid chain of command. A clear chain of command is important because it creates a reward and punishment system.

3. All duties and responsibilities are clearly defined so that there will be no unnecessary replication of work.

Therefore, depending on the reasons stated above, the functional structure is suitable for the recommended social media unit in the travel agency.

The Necessity of Linking the Social Media Unit to the Public Relations Department:

The social media unit should report to the public relations department

According to Goodwin (2013), social media must be linked to public relations for several

reasons:

1. Managing social media by storytelling and journalism branding. Both are vital roles of the public relations work. Social media will be an important way to disseminate stories. Public relations practitioners ought to be skilled writers and those are the skills that social media platforms need.

2. Public relations is a practice of building relationships with publics. Social media offers tools to understand the audience and communicate with them to know their needs in order to build mutually beneficial relationships.

3. Public relations practitioners are experts in creating specific messages for targeted publics. By adapting social media the public relations department will continue playing this role but using a more advanced platform that enable to target the audience directly.

4. Social media is a suitable platform for crisis management. The public relations department can take a great advantage of social media to state the company's voice into the public's conversation as quick as possible.

5. Public relations practitioners must receive feedback to understand the public's views of the agency. The public relations department should conduct surveys and focus groups and use other research methods.

In terms of the reporting, the social media director reports directly to the vice president of public relations not to any member lower than that in the public relations department. The researcher took this approach for several reasons:

- Reporting to any executive other than the vice president of public relations would limit the social media unit's effectiveness. In other words, when the social media unit has an urgent situation, it must be free to report directly to the vice president of public relations without having to go through a chain of command.

- Reporting to any other position below the vice president of public relations moves the social media unit a step further away from where the communication strategic decisions are made.

- The vice president of public relations is responsible for shaping the agency's culture, and the social media unit is the best provider of the culture. Having a clear understanding of the agency's culture will allow the social media unit to do its job by promoting and developing programs that support it.

Line authority:

Decision making in the social media unit should be centralized. Authority starts from the social media director, who has all the authority. The social media director has five managers. All the managers report to the social media director and take directions from him\her only. Those managers can write to each other but do not take orders from each other. Each manager has two employees under him\her, those employees report only to their direct manager.

The social media unit should be strict about the chain of command. No manager should allow his\her employees to have any kind of order from another manager. Each manager is

responsible for his\her section. The employees in the section carry out the orders of his\her immediate manager, and he\she is not allowed to receive orders from others managers. The manager of each section is responsible for the performance of his\her section or unit that he\she administrates. Whatever goes wrong in the section, the manager is the one responsible for it.

Having a strict structure will benefit the unit in several ways. According to Acharya (2011), a strict structure enables a clear cut definition of authority and responsibility. Therefore, it avoids duplication and overlap between sections and units. Also, a strict structure is easier to operate and facilitates unity of control. Moreover, in the case of this project, the social media unit is in the establishment stage. So, the structure should be strict to ensure the unit's stability.

Staff authority:

Staff authority goes from the lower level in the unit to up. Each section has a specialization. The staff in this section should take orders and report only to the manager of the section. Staff members from different sections or units will be allowed to meet to discuss some issues and at the end of the meeting each staff will send a separate report to their manager.

The Social Media Tools/Platforms in the Unit:

The tools that were used in the social media unit are: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Blog. The reasons for choosing those tools were: first, the literature showed that they were the most popular and effective tools from a business point of view. Second, the research in the methodology indicated that they were the most used tools in the travel/tourism industry. Third, each one of those tools has a specific role that distinguish it from the others, each tool has a special function that separates it from the others and integrates into the overall strategy of the public relation department in the agency.

Hiring Staff:

The hiring policy focused on hiring the social media director and the manager of the head sections in the unit, and then give those manager the authority to hire their own staff for their sections. The total number of employees in the unit were sixteen employees as follow: one manager for each section and two staff members under each manager.

Job Description for the Head Sections Needed:

The Social Media Unit Director:

The social media director should coordinate the public relations department strategy by increasing the agency's brand awareness and making sure that the agency has a stable image among the publics.

According to Grimes-Viort (2010), the social media director must be responsible for the following:

- Ensure that the implementation of the social media practices meets the goals, objectives and strategies of the unit.
- Working with the IT department continuously to make sure all social media tools are working properly and up to date.
- Be in a consistent relationship with the managers of the unit (Research, Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, and Blog).

The Social Media Research Manager:

The social media research manager's duties focus on cooperating with each section in the unit to analyze the performance of the platform in each section. He/she is responsible for conducting research that is needed to improve the agency's social media performance by calculating the proportion of positive to negative comments, tracking the mentions of the agency in search engines, determining key publics, measuring effectiveness of each platform.

The Twitter Manager:

The basic duties of the Twitter manager includes approving the Twitter content and updating the followers list. Make sure that the tweets are meeting the goal of the section which is media and travel industry relations. The Twitter manager also is responsible for developing personal relationships with opinion leader in the travel industry in order to follow them in Twitter.

The Facebook Manager:

The basic duties for the Facebook manager are approving the Facebook content and making sure all the settings that enable the users to interact are working well. Also, he/she is responsible for responding to negative posts and contacting the customers privately – if needed- to talk about the complaints. The Facebook manager is responsible for making the decision to delete the inappropriate posts.

The YouTube Manager:

The YouTube manager duties along with the section's staff focus on creating and uploading videos to the agency's channel. He/she should work with the section's team to produce videos as needed. The YouTube manager also is responsible for scheduling the videos uploads.

The Blog Manager:

The blog manager duties include working with the blog's section team to create the content and schedule the blog posts. The blog manager also is responsible for coordinating with other sections to share the content that fits into the blog goals.

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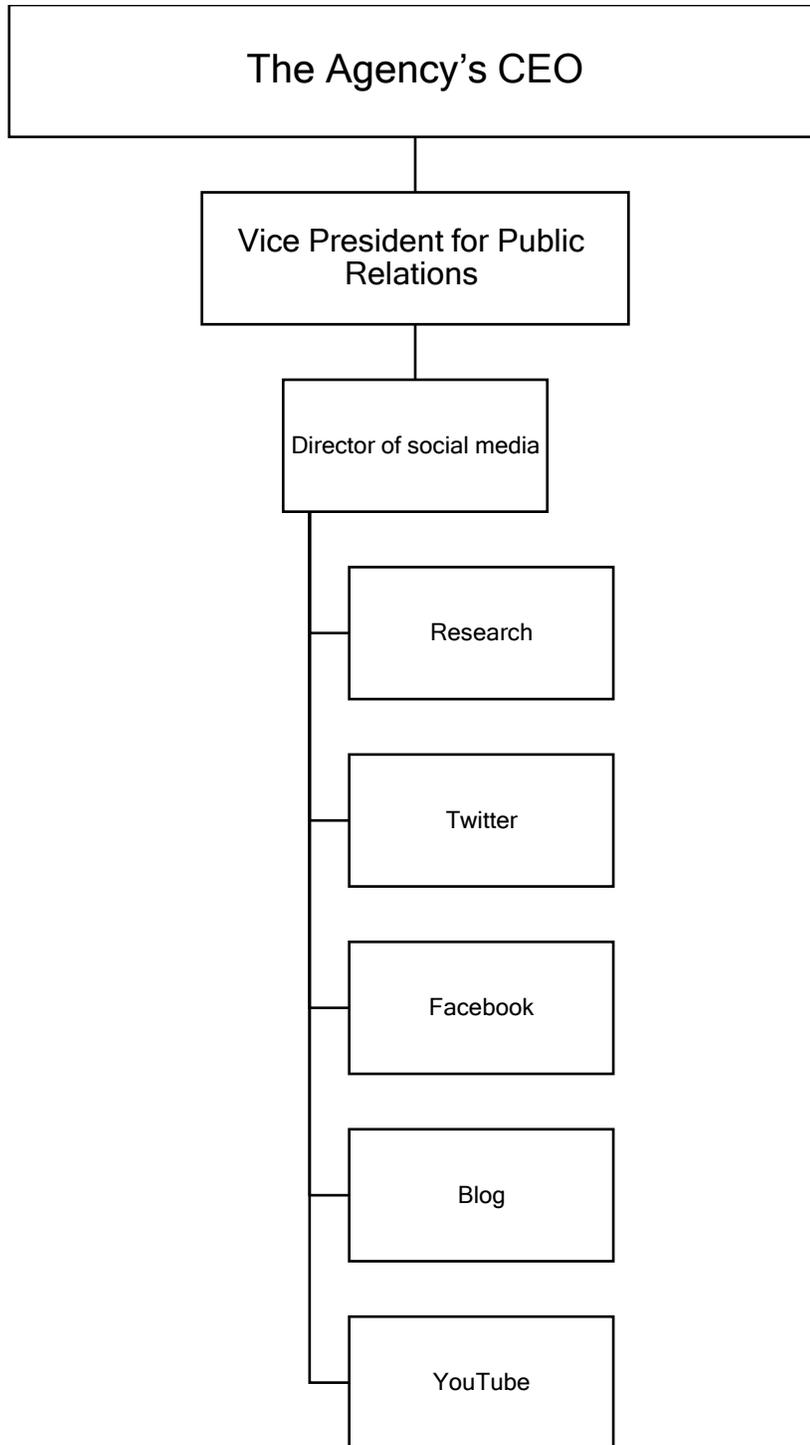
Figure 1. The organizational structure for the Social Media Unit.

Functions and Terms of Reference for Each Section:

The Social Media Research Section:

The social media research section is the cornerstone of the social media unit. The social media research section must study all the data in the agency's social network. The data includes information that the costumers created or shared while using the agency's platforms such as photos, comments, likes/dislikes, subscriptions, etc. The section also should create surveys on each platform page to measure the users' satisfaction.

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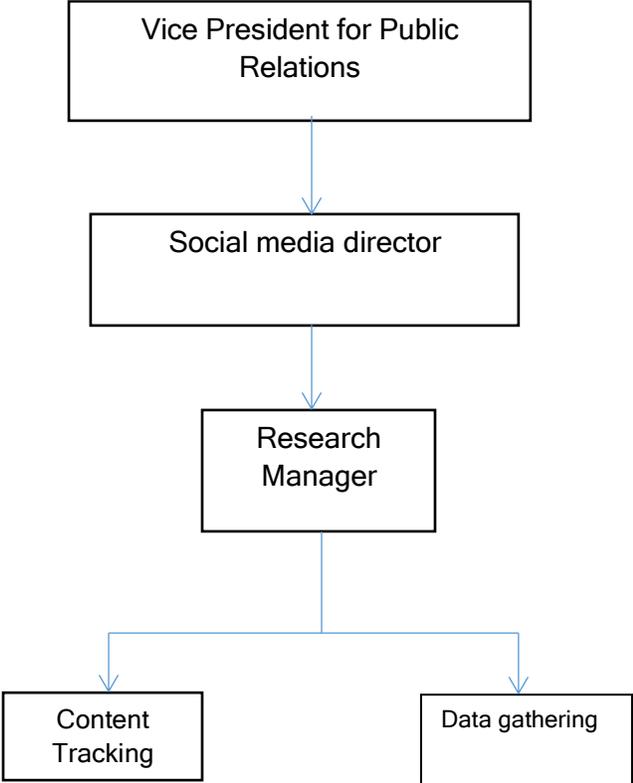
Figure 2. The organizational structure of the social media research section

Recommendations for the Social Media Research Section:

- The research section should focus on observing and evaluating customers' posts in order to gather primary data that will enable the agency to understand the costumers' needs. (World Research Codes and Guidelines, 2011)

- Develop creative research techniques that help the agency to gather significant data.

- Take full advantage of the technology nature of social media by collecting data online and avoid manual data collection.

- In the case of having a social media campaign, the research section must measure the success by tracking the data using the social media tools to ensure that the objectives were met. It is important to know the goals and objectives in advance to have a meaningful research results. (Gonzalez, 2012)

- Use the customers' personal information to create an electronic database for them in order to use the information as a background in future studies. The database should include the customers' age, last purchase, email address and location.

- Set up surveys on each social media tool to understand the characteristics of the users of the agency's platforms in order to add it to the customers' database and measure the customers' satisfaction.

- The research section must not overlook the online tracking tools such as Google Analytics, Hootsuite and PostRank which can track Facebook and Twitter and provide useful data in this regard. (Gonzalez, 2012)

Twitter section:

The Twitter section focused on building relationships with journalists, reporters, bloggers, and opinion leaders in the travel industry. Additionally, relationships must be developed with travel suppliers such as hotels /resorts, cruise lines, airlines, car rental agencies, taxis, attractions, restaurants, and other important travel suppliers.
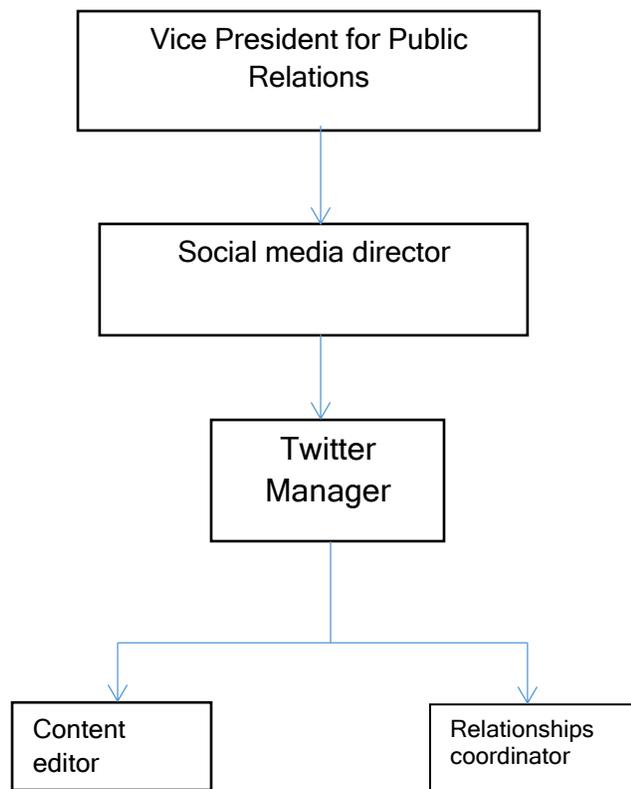
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Figure 3. The organizational structure for the Twitter section.

Recommendations for Building Relationships in Twitter:

- The Twitter account must be evaluated on regular basis (Cohn, 2013). The Twitter section should determine the value of each follower in the list. The follower value should be evaluated based on the number of tweets per week. Also, the followers must have a voice in the travel industry and can be consider an opinion leaders.

- Always respond to any kind of feedback. (Cohn, 2013). The person who wrote the feedback should feel that the feedback was appreciated and the agency is willing to build the relationship even if the feedback does not have a significant value. The agency needs the relationship more than the journalist or the opinion leader needs it.

- Encourage discussions on Twitter. (Cohn, 2013). When the agency's Twitter account hosts a discussion and the agency is involved in this discussion, it is a sign that a relationship is going to be built. Discussion about the travel industry in general is a good topic to engage journalists and suppliers.

- Auto responses must be avoided or limited. (Cohn, 2013). People do not appreciate auto messages. Auto responses are significantly weak when building relationships because they imply that the agency has more important things than the relationships.

- Always be polite when communicating with any person. Words do not show the real emotions if the words are not used effectively. (Cohn, 2013). To build or strengthen a relationship, the Twitter narrative needs to show kindness in the limited 140- maximum characters and that requires high writing proficiency.

The Facebook Section:

The Facebook section should focus on building the agency's credibility and image by delivering messages clearly. Special offers, coupons, and new travel services must be all launched on the agency's Facebook page.
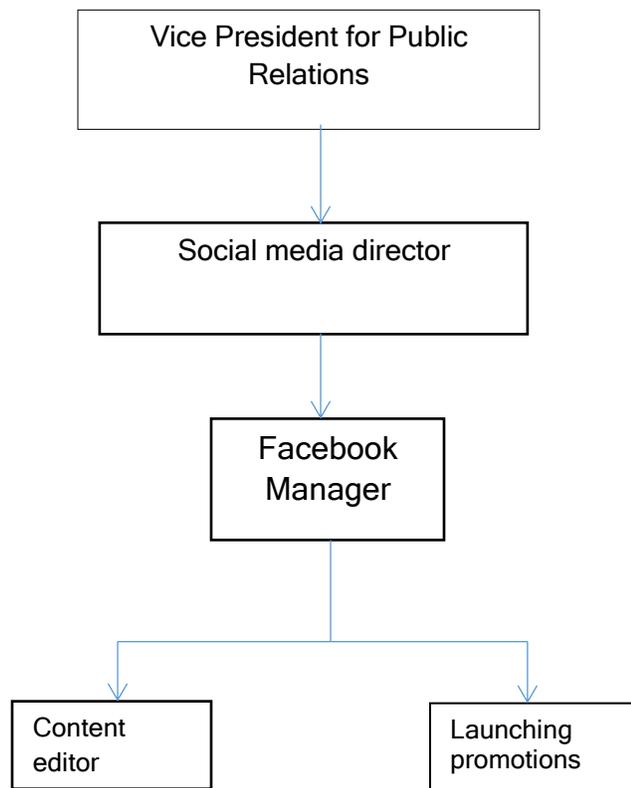
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Figure 4. The organizational structure for the Facebook section.

Recommendations for Using Facebook:

- The goal is not to have a large number of fans rather it is to have a dialogue with fans. (Johnson, 2011). The Facebook section should engage the customers in a dialogue, not only respond to the post. Therefore, the response should be written in a way that encourage the customers to reply.

- The agency must encourage the customer who had previous business to "like" the agency's page and through them the Facebook page will grow and thus the agency's name shines. (Johnson, 2011)

- Avoid only giving news about the company's products and services. The Facebook section must give the target audience inside guidelines and information to show small details about the company's activities. (Johnson, 2011). Posts about tips, ideas and experiences from former customers will be a great approach to brand the travel agency's name and give it a unique position.

- Posting on regular basis is an important factor. (Johnson, 2011). Having a scheduled posting policy could be helpful to keep growing the agency's name. The agency must have at least two posts a week.

- The Facebook section should assign a day for the agency's CEO to post and respond to the customers. This will help increase the page's credibility. (Johnson, 2011)

- When launching promotions on the Facebook page, they should not be regular deals. (Johnson, 2011). Only great deals should be launched on the Facebook page, such as free tickets to a football game when booking a trip or multiple passes to museums only when booking on Facebook. In other words, the Facebook deals should be exclusive on Facebook only.

The YouTube Section:

      The YouTube section focused on showing the fun side of the agency. The section should create a channel on YouTube and produce videos that highlight the agency's activities in an entertaining way, for example, a video about a contest that the agency organized on one of its trips, a hiking adventure, a sailing trip, etc.
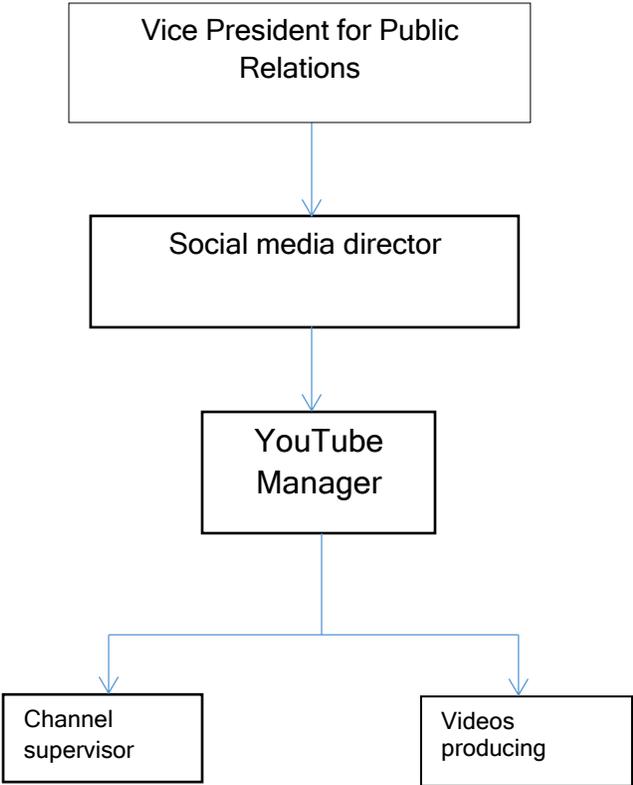
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Figure 5. The organizational structure for the YouTube section

Recommendations for Managing the Agency's YouTube Channel:

- The agency must make the YouTube channel a point that leads to other social media platforms by creating a short entertaining video that includes also links to the Facebook page, Twitter account and the agency's blog. (Pindoriya, 2012).

- Produce interviews with customers during their vacations and upload them on the channel. Let the customers express their experiences in purchasing the agency's services. The interviews must be about how much fun they had without giving the impression that it is a commercial video.

- Uploading videos that show the agency's employees in their offices. Interviewing them is a great way to highlight the effort that the employees are putting into serving the customers.

- In the case the agency has community relations activities such as, honoring talented children in various fields and supporting small businesses, etc, it is important to tape and upload those videos to the agency's channel.

- Short orientation videos that illustrate the agency's services are a great way to create awareness among publics.

- Make the videos searchable by writing a good title in order to ease the search for the video. (Pindoriya, 2012). Using keywords in the tag section when uploading a video is important to make the video findable especially with the search engines.

The Blog section:

The blog section focused on presenting the agency's philosophy and emphasize the goals and objectives of the agency. The section should depend on the agency's mission statement, view and core values as a guidelines for the blog's content. For example, the agency's charity events, ethics and compliance programs, etc.
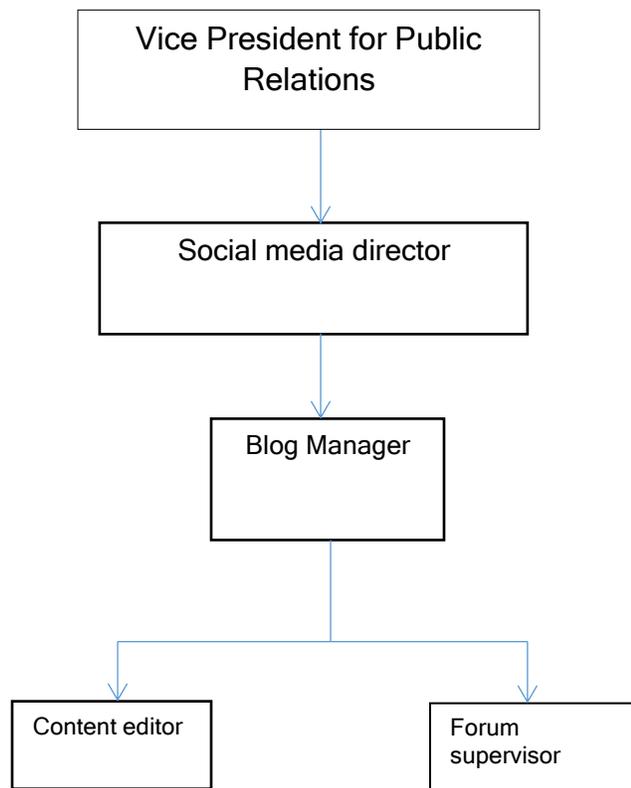

Figure 6. The organizational structure for Blog section.

Recommendations for Expressing the Agency's Philosophy in the Blog:

- The blog section could use the mission statement of the agency as a guideline for the blog's posts. The mission statement should concisely present the organization's goals and objectives. Therefore, the philosophy ought to amplify what the mission statement is about. (Spiro, 2010)

- The agency's code of ethics must be clearly addressed in the blog. The code of ethics sort out particular conditions and behaviors. (Spiro, 2010) Therefore, the blog could extensively express the importance of the code of ethics to the agency's practice and may have a section in the blog that illustrate case studies about ethical issue and how the agency dealt with them.

- The agency's CEO must have a monthly post that focus on the agency's values and culture. The blog will gain credibility from having the highest level in the agency's participating in the blog.

- The blog should be the platform for any kind of community relations that the agency did or planned to do. The blog could publicize the community events with pictures and press releases.

- Discussions about the agency's philosophy could be held on the blog's forum in order to have the customers' view toward it and thus evaluate the customers' satisfaction.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY /CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Overall, the researcher designed this project so that a travel agency will be able to help the public relations department to have a variety of ways to reach people, also so that the travel agency will have an elaborate social media system that divide the work by specialty. The literature review provided at the beginning of this project shows that public relations is an important factor in the travel industry regardless of the fact that there are few academic research in this regard, also, the literature indicated that social media is used in the travel/tourism industry, however, it was used in a limed level and focus mostly on one or two tools. Although the researcher feels that he has developed a social media unit that benefits any travel agency, there are several things he could change.

The first thing that the researcher would consider changing would be to try to name a travel agency and implement the designed social media unit in it. However, it was difficult to find a travel agency that was willing to give an access to its work and be fully cooperative in all the project's steps.

Another thing that the researcher would do in this project is to add two of the newest social media platforms which are: Google Plus and Keek. Since they are both new, the researcher did not find enough research or even online articles to demonstrate the usage of them in business. The researcher believes that Google Plus and Keek will play a critical role due to the special features that they have. Google Plus has the functions of You Tube and Facebook and it is progressing rapidly. Keek could be consider the video version on Twitter, and what make it special is that the videos is short, no more than 36 seconds long.

The researcher also would consider adding to the literature review a section about travelers' behavior and link it to social media to gain a better understanding about what social media tool would be more effective in dealing with any kind of situation. The researcher also would be more specific in explaining the travel activities that the social media unit should apply to make the designed unit tied to the travel industry instead of being general in some parts.

As far as a theoretical framework, the researcher would suggest the agenda setting theory as a mass communication theory to be used in future studies in regard to social media and travel industry. The agenda setting theory is an applicable mass communications theory to highlight the power that media have on the order of priorities and how public relations could use social media to serve the travel agency's interest by impacting the public opinion and the order of priority.

Finally, conducting research about social media organizational structure was not an easy task. What the researcher found was that there is scant research on this topic. Social media as a separate organizational department or unit was yet to be studied scholarly. Another point that the researcher noted was that social media is usually related to the marketing department more than public relations, a thing that made it even harder to use social media as public relations tactic.

CHAPTER VI

OUTSIDE RRVIEWS OF THE PROJECT

STUDENT: Abdullah Sindi

DEGREE: Master of Arts

MAJOR: Public Relations

June 2, 2013.

Evaluation by Mohsen Al-Eissa

Attn: Dr. Becky McDonald

Dear Dr. McDonald:

I have been involved within the travel and tourism industry for six years here in Saudi

Arabia. I have a bachelor's degree in Marketing and a diploma in Hospitality from King

Abdulaziz University. I had a position at Fadaaq Travel & Tourism Agency, in Jeddah, Saudi

Arabia, as a travel service consultant and travel coordinator. I worked in the communications

department for a year and I gained lots of experience in public relations in the tourism industry. I

have known Mr. Abdullah Sindi during his work in the Ministry of Hajj (Pilgrimage) and I used

to work with him for Fadaaq Travel & Tourism Agency at which we organized trips for pilgrims

to Saudi Arabia.

Overall, the project is very well thought out. I find it easy to follow. Abdullah tried to

cover many aspects of public relations in the designed unit. The five sections of the social media

unit were richly informative and well varied. The project also looks more practical than

academic because Abdullah has used many practical online sources from travel agencies and added his perception to what they did. Thus, I feel he designed a solid social media unit.

However, I suggest that Abdullah could make the structure in the unit less strict and more flexible because that would help the social media employees' interaction with each other. From my own experience, strict structures are not helpful when a crisis strikes an agency. Although, I admit that having a strict structure has many benefits since the unit is in the establishment phase.

As a marketing person, I think the marketing department should have a significant role in the social media unit. The social media unit should not be fully linked to the public relations department without having any influence from the marketing department, especially when promoting services. The marketing department could use social media very effectively. However, in the way that this project was designed, the marketing department will not have any chance to play its role.

The quality of the project provides an accurate view of the relationship between public relations and social media as it applies to the tourism industry. It was smart that the project was not designed to be applied in one country because from my experience the travel agencies activities do not differ that much from country to country. They differs only in the purpose of the trip to the particular country.

The methodology section was so informative and helpful since it provided a wide view about social media practices in the tourism organization. However, I believe that it would be better if the cases studied were all centered on travel agencies rather than tourism organizations. By focusing on studies regarding travel agencies, the analysis would be more precise and relevant to the subject matter.

In terms of depth and coverage, I think this project was good in most of the parts but it could be improved by linking all the social media practices and activities involved into the travel industry so it will be relevant to what could be done in a travel agency.

After all, designing a social media unit is a creative idea, although I think it was difficult to manage since it is new to the travel industry. But I believe that what made it creative and unique.

Mohsen Al-Eissa

Travel Coordinator
Fadaaq Travel & Tourism Agency

An evaluation of the creative project entitled *designing a social media unit in a travel agency* by the student Abdullah Sindi.

Master of Arts- Public relations

June 3, 2013.

Dr. McDonald:

My name is Ahmed Ali and I earned a bachelor's degree in mass communications from Cairo University, Egypt. I have been working in the tourism industry for ten years, eight years in Cairo for Hello Egypt Tours, and two years here for Fadaaq Travel & Tourism Agency, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. I am currently the assistant manager of the communications department in the agency and I have worked with social media continuously during the past two years. I have not personally met Abdullah Sindi but my coworker Mr. Mohsen Al-Eissa asked me if I was willing to evaluate this research project as part of the completion of Abdullah's master's degree from Ball State University. Abdullah, then, contacted me by email and gave me the details and I was happy to read and evaluate this research project.

This project attempted to cover many concepts of public relations that could be used in the travel industry. Having five sections in the unit would enable each section to implement a variety of activities that help the agency build a strong relationship with the customers. I think, however, Abdullah could make some rearrangements in the structures of those sections. For example, I suggest that he put all the sections tools (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the Blog) in one section. By doing so, investigating those tools would be focused. Furthermore, he could name it *the Tools/Platforms Section*. Thus, it will be only two sections in the unit, one for research and the other is for the tools. From my experience using Internet in the agency should

have one voice that represent the agency, dividing the platforms' work to more than one section might lead to have contradictory messages. But I think Abdullah made it more than one section in order to be creative so he can meet the project goal.

Abdullah had a great approach in the methodology chapter when he studied four tourism-based organizations so he will be able to understand how they used social media in their communications strategy. However, I believe that he should have studied at least one travel agency from his home country (Saudi Arabia). Saudi Arabia is a fast growing country in tourism especially in the religious tourism to the Holy Places.

In the summary chapter, Abdullah stated that he would like to be specific in explaining the travel activities that the social media unit should apply. I argue here that the project was broad in some parts. I would suggest that Abdullah should be more specific in explaining how the platforms are exactly used in depth and in detail.

I believe the literature review covered a lot of concepts of public relations, tourism and social media. However, I think it should be shortened. This project is significantly practical so it should not expand in reviewing academic research. What I really liked about the literature review is that Abdullah used many business sources, and he did not rely on theoretical frameworks too much, the thing that made it enjoyable for me to read.

Finally, I think the project is valuable to the public relations field and the tourism industry. The effort that Abdullah made is so clear and highly appreciated. And I believe that the designed unit could be applied and considered as a standard for social media departments/units.
Thank you,

Ahmed Ali

Assistant Manager of the Communications Department in Fadaaq Travel & Tourism Agency.

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