

Digital as the predominant channel for travel



By Robin Fredericks

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With the ever-growing digital landscape, trends and technologies are becoming increasingly challenging to identify and as digital is evolving in the travel space, it's become crucial to look at relevant and growing trends and just how people are responding to them. Damian Cook, CEO of E-Tourism Frontiers shared some key trends when it comes to the digital landscape at WTM Africa 2018.

Working with destinations across the world on their digital strategies, Cook and his team have been witness to how tourist boards, government and private sector associations adapt and grow in the travel space.

“ ...digital is not the future of travel, it's the present. ”



Damian Cook

"Destinations are increasingly realising that they've moved out of a space where they need to be investing heavily in production television ads and produced media. They need to actually focus on experiential content from visitors to their countries – and the best source of that is actual visitors to the country – and the best way for them to reach that is via people in the tourist trade."

Working with over 30 destinations around the world, Cook noted that he has seen unique challenges and opportunities in different destinations and that there have been influential key trends emerging as digital in the travel space starts to evolve. Cook says that before people started realising how important digital was; now they're in a period of refinement, i.e. knowing how to use, understand and not fight the digital rise.

"Digital has had a huge impact on travel trade worldwide. We've seen more changes in the last 10 years in the way tourism is marketed and sold that we did in the previous 15. We still see some people resisting it, still seeing people cling to old-school models of business, still thinking that the future lies in those old school contracted and commission business relationships with agents and operators in the market – those old fashion forms of media in terms of reaching customers. **We need to accept that digital is becoming the predominant channel for travel.**"

The digital now

Cook says that many people say digital is the future, however, it is the now. "Yes, the future of travel is online, but digital is not the future of travel, it's the present. If we keep treating it as the future, it means that we are in the past – we need to move into the present and accept that digital has become the predominant channel."

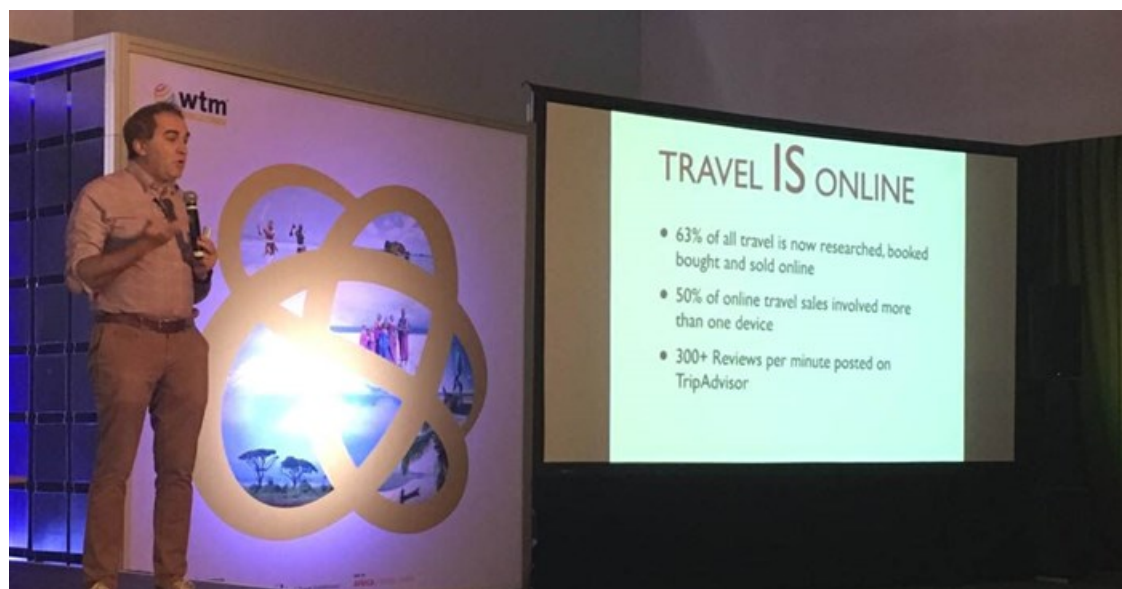
But what then of humans being taken out of the business model? Cook says that many would want to argue that technology has taken from the human equation, however, it's actually increased it. "If you're using social media effectively, using the messaging tools and platforms to talk to customers in a social online environment, then you're interacting and engaging directly with more people than ever before than you would via phone or email. Online allows for direct conversation with customers all around the world in a free environment."

As the level of human interaction increases through this process, so it becomes vital to integrate technology into the equation, especially as desktop computers are no longer the only device used to access the internet or research business.

"You'll hardly ever see a teenager use a mobile phone to make a call. Phones have become a primary connection and messaging tool, used as a video camera, camera and GPS – all playing a key role in the way travel is being marketed, particularly when tourists are using them."

Travellers as content producers

Cook shared how user-generated content has become a key trend, with tourists producing content while in a destination. "Look at TripAdvisor as a single platform, receiving over 300 reviews every single minute, making it the largest online travel search content in the world. People wouldn't be writing or publishing those reviews if no one was reading them. TripAdvisor has become a point of research and a point of information for the majority of travellers around the world. So **user-generated content is something that needs to be addressed in a destination's strategy.**"



Understanding the customer is essential in how you plan on reaching them. Cook says what the industry used to call a **path to purchase** no longer exists, i.e. marketing content, ads that people see which peak interest and then contacting tour operators to make a booking. This was a straight line – a path to purchase.

This is no longer the way. It has become a cycle or a circle. "People are seeing content in the online space, they are being exposed to it and that's the key inspirational point where people start to think about travel. They start to think about what they would like to do when they travel, often thinking more about an activity than a destination. They ask themselves: Do I need to relax? Do I want to do some adventure activity? Do I want to be fitter? Do I want to be healthier? Do I want to be happier?

"And then from that, they see content that starts to narrow down those decisions towards an actual destination. They then use those same online tools to book and buy that travel – that's the end of a traditional path to purchase."

Cook notes that it is from this cycle that travellers become content producers as they capture all of their experiences through photos, videos, updates and reviews – a traditional word-of-mouth happening online. "This is what effective travel marketing has actually become."

“ Online is cheaper, more cost-effective and if we need to change something, we can change it in a second – it's 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Constant contact with an audience. ”

Developing the destination strategy

Destinations have different models, so understanding the customer – what sort of people they are, what sort of content they

might consume – is a critical part of creating an effective strategy.

Referring to strategic planning and budgeting, Cook shared how so many people are still spending on printing travel brochures rather than online - and that it makes no sense to do this. The money invested into print for events, especially, sees bins overflowing with brochures – people take this more out of courtesy, they don't really want it. "I always tell people in the industry when you look at that bin, just picture in your mind that that bin is overflowing with money and that that is your money, that is your marketing budget overflowing out of a bin. Online is cheaper, more cost-effective and if we need to change something, we can change it in a second – it's 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Constant contact with an audience."



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Cook says that family and friends, sitting at 71%, still serves as the highest form of travel and/or business recognition. Family and friends are no longer sharing slideshows of their experiences or heading off to a photo booth to have their photos printed, they're finding that online – Facebook, Instagram, and social media in general. Online has replaced the old model of doing things, says Cook.

"So how do we start developing a strategy to use this effectively? Make this work for us?"

The age of demographics

Twitter: "Twitter has always had an issue in terms of people understanding what it is used for and what it is effective for. People are getting much better at using it but really one of Twitter's real powers are the delivery of links and more information. Cook says that people who navigate toward Twitter are a generation who still likes to read. They like to access news content. "It's a source of information. They can open links and read content directly."

Facebook: Cook says that Facebook is pretty much owning the demographic of 30 to 40-year-olds, i.e. the Gen X demographic. "Effectively, a Facebook page is a storytelling platform and these are the people heading to the middle of their lives and have stories to tell. This generation does care about the past. They like to go and look back on Facebook at what they did. Facebook will tell you every morning what you did three or five years ago. There's a sense of connection to the past which becomes important as we move down through the generations."

Instagram: Millenials – those aged between 20 and 30 years old – have become an important market for many travel companies as they are seen as the strongest emerging market. "Instagram is a shift away from Facebook. Millennials, when becoming friends with someone on Facebook, tend to navigate to their photos first. They just want to see photos. When travel companies polled this market about what they didn't like about Facebook, they said all that reading – they don't want to read about someone's ex, they just want to see photos. So we need to ask ourselves, does Facebook really appeal to them?"

Instagram caters exactly to this.

"They are effectively looking for a photo album, a 'past' album, that they can scroll back on and have a look at what others have done over recent years. Individual filled moments that they want to experience and share. Their friends' moments, captured in a single visual image. That concept of the moment is really preferred for the travel market – we give people great experiences, we give them great moments that they want to share.

"In marketing terms, that's how you need to think about it – what's a strong single image that we can talk about in our business?"

Cook says that in the next five to ten years, teenagers will be an important market to focus on. Their main focus at the moment is direct messaging – the ability to talk to each other in real time. "They don't have stories about their lives to tell, they don't have things they want to go back and look at so much, so it's all about the real-time – about talking to their friends and contacts directly online."

The competitive edge

As real-time messaging grew, not only on Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger, instant live sharing content became an even stronger emerging element of social media with the rise of **Snapchat**, ideal for rising trends teenagers would be keen on.

However, this created a battle between various social media platforms, especially that of Facebook and Instagram. With the introduction of live, real-time feeds, both Facebook and Instagram started becoming more relevant. "For those marketing to millennials, you need to be aware of the emerging trends – that millennials will now open Instagram and not scroll down to photos. They never scroll down. They tap into Instagram stories and watch days worth of stories and that's it.

"So if your Instagram marketing includes just posting photos, there's a good chance that the millennials aren't going to see them – still post it for those older users, though, that do scroll down, and think about Instagram stories." Facebook Live takes this up a notch, especially for those with destination marketing organisations to demonstrate the destination in a clever way – guiding, interacting and engaging with users in real time. "So this is a strong emerging trend to consider as part of your marketing strategy, which would fundamentally reshape your social media in the years to come."

Cook also says that if you are using any one of these platforms, there is one simple rule: **If the service is free, customers are the product.** "These platforms need to make revenue and if customers aren't paying for it, ads are and they pay to get access to the customers. This is an enabler of independent decision making.

"The future of tourism lies in independent decision making - access to information that enables people to make those independent decisions and move away from group models because travellers now have a whole world of choices at their fingertips." From property choices, airline choices to activities of their choice. However, Cook says to be careful to not run the risk of taking that choice away from them. Tour operators, or old school packaging models need to get much smarter and better at expressing their skills and the knowledge of the product that they have and help people shape their independent items.

"The lifespan for certain products, such as cruises and package tours are limited since young travellers aren't booking package tours. Value over volume is defining the tourism economy."

Value over volume

"Africa has to really start rethinking its fixation on the Chinese market - we have been talking for years how important this market is, how huge and how much potential is found in it, but the reality is that the majority of its travel is large scale group travel that continuously erodes its pricing. So what is emerging now is called **Zero Dollar Tourism** – these are businesses in markets that do deals with Chinese companies to create Chinese owned hotels, shopping centres and restaurants in destinations. They then give China free holidays with no payments, free flights and accommodation in a country as long as they stay in those hotels and spend in the shops within that hotel.

"It creates damage in terms of flooding a destination with huge numbers and virtually no infrastructure for tourists. There's a high spending demographic in China – very wealthy and well travelled – but the trend I've seen is that those travellers will not go to a destination where they going to see large groups of Chinese travellers. So we need to make much smarter decisions about **value and volume** when it comes to our markets and the segments that we are reaching out to."

Cooks says another change seen in the media is that no one watches TV anymore. "We watch lots of TV content, but we don't sit down on a Sunday night to watch a film. We download. And the reality is whether people pay through a company like Netflix or use a Torrent to steal that content, they do not seeing advertising. They are using a model which is moving away from advertising.

"Yet we see so many destinations and companies investing millions of dollars to produce 30-second television commercials. Where do they put them when no one is watching? Ads are what we skip over on YouTube. We're going to watch genuine, experiential content from other travellers – interesting content that you can experience and watch longer than before. The convergence of devices has actually changed the old rule of YouTube videos. We are now seeing the emergence of long-form video content comprising up to an hour of content that people are willing to watch.

“ *The best marketing agency at your disposal is your customers.* ”

Sharing the experience

"The old-school model of television channels putting out content and putting ads in is gone, because that model was about television controlling its users. Now its been replaced by video content controlled by its users."

Cook ended off by saying that it's about people experiencing content and then sharing that content. **"We need to understand how important sharing is and how it becomes a marketing tool.** Travel is the most shared experience on social media. The average person now, when they travel, has a social media output which is four times more than a usual post on Facebook or Twitter alone, because they have more to talk about and share and the majority of that content is posted in real time. It's that sense of the moment.

"The best marketing agency at your disposal is your customers. What makes the genuine experience of a customer credible is the fact that they paid for it. They have no agenda and most importantly, no marketing agenda - they are just sharing their experience. The second you pay someone to do that – where is that credibility? Every single customer you have is an influencer, every single one of us is a blogger. We all log our experiences when we travel, we all have influence over our friends and family."

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