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FACULTY OF HOTEL MANAGEMENT
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HOTELS AND SOCIAL MEDIA – CASE STUDY OF SERBIA

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Abstract

Considering the impact of Social Media on hotel business performance, the aim of this study is to identify ways of presenting hotels from Serbia with special reference to spa hotels. The research has been conducted on a sample of 331 categorized hotels in Serbia and it includes content analysis of the major Social Media portals such as TripAdvisor, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. Significant differences in applied appearance strategies of these hotels have been found. These differences become apparent when a group of town, mountain and spa hotels and hotels of different official categories are compared. Regarding the segment of spa hotels, the participation of those who are represented on Instagram is less than 45%, on Facebook less than 24%, on YouTube less than 12%, TripAdvisor less than 11%, compared to the average established on a sample of all hotels in Serbia. A passive approach to managing online spa hotel image is also registered. At the level of Serbia, hotel management responded to 28% of published reviews on TripAdvisor, while that percentage is lower for spa hotels and it is 22%.

Keywords: *Social Media, hotels, spa, online image, managing.*

Introduction

The rapid development of the Internet and the possibilities it offers in terms of information distribution have enabled the creation of online platforms whose contents are created by users themselves. Such portals are often called social media. Social media are defined as a “set of online tools open for public membership that support idea sharing, creating and editing content, and building relationships through interaction and collaboration” (Mount & Martinez, 2014, p.126). Xiang and Gretzel

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(2010) have identified five basic types of social media, and those are virtual communities, review websites, social networks, blogs and portals for sharing multimedia content. As some of the most important representatives of certain types of social media, we can name Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, and TripAdvisor, the most important review website in hotel industry. According to Duggan et al. (2015), Facebook is the most popular social network, on which 58% of all adult citizens of the United States have an account, while this participation is 21% on Instagram, and 19% on Twitter. Duggan et al. further state that, not only does a large number of people have accounts on social networks that they use for different forms of communication, but they do that very often. Leung et al. (2015) note that 70% of the companies in the United States have a Facebook page, 46% are represented on Twitter, and 25% use YouTube. They also state that 75% of hotels use social media for marketing purposes.

On the Internet, there is a large number of portals that enable users of different products and/or services to share their experiences related to the purchase and consumption of these products and services. According data available at TripAdvisor, there are about 320 million reviews; 997 thousand accommodations were presented and rated by guests. YouTube is a portal for the exchange of video content and according to the data presented on that portal it has over a billion users, which is almost a third of the total number of the Internet users in the world.

Based on the data presented, it can be unambiguously concluded that social media are a reality that should not be and cannot be ignored without consequences. This paper aims to provide answers to the question of how hotels from Serbia are presented on social media. What social media do Serbian hoteliers use in order to communicate with customers? The paper also aims to draw attention to possible differences in the presentation of hotels from different types of tourist destinations. Given the importance of the portal TripAdvisor on the contemporary market, the analysis specifically focuses on contents that present hotels from Serbia on this portal and determines whether and to what extent hotel management reacts to published reviews.

Literature review

The contents on social media where users share their opinions and attitudes about products and services after their consummation are also

called eWOM – electronic word of mouth, while these portals are called eWOM portals (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Litvin et al., 2008; Bronner & De Hoog, 2010; Purnawirawan et al., 2012). One of the most commonly quoted definitions of eWOM in literature is the one provided by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (p.39). Numerous studies indicate that review websites are the most important form of eWOM in the hotel industry (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Blal & Sturman, 2014). Yan et al. (2016) have identified two forms of eWOM, online reviews provided by e-commerce websites, which is called EC-eWOM, and eWOM on social media, which is called SM-eWOM.

Sun et al. (2006) state that eWOM communication, in comparison with the classic promotion by word of mouth (WOM), is significantly more influential because of “speed, convenience, one-to-many reach, and its absence of face-to-face human pressure” (p. 1106). Bearing in mind that eWOM stays on the Internet portals over a long period of time during which users can access these contents, Duan et al. (2008) state that eWOM exceeds time limits. King et al. (2014) add that eWOM works in such a manner that the participants in fact communicate with a network of people who belong to a virtual community whose members share some common interests and emphasize that the members of this virtual community usually do not know one another. Bachleda and Berrada-Fathi (2016) state that the strength of connections between users on different social media differs, because the most frequently accessed contents on review websites are reviews written by complete strangers, while in case of social networks, those are sometimes people with whom we have relatively strong connections.

Litvin et al. (2008) state that eWOM is very important for the hotel industry because the offer is intangible, the purchase is perceived by consumers as high-risk purchase, the demand is often characterized by a pronounced seasonality, the competition is intense. Even in such conditions, many hoteliers have not taken any action aimed at managing their social media image, and it provides an opportunity for the creation of competitive advantage for those who do it adequately.

Although, in literature, one can find articles whose topic is eWOM and tourism, Dijkmans et al. (2015) state that, so far the topic of social media

and hotel industry has not been given special importance in literature. Reviewing available scientific papers, Cantallops and Salvi (2014) have identified two main lines of research: the papers that explore the motivations that drive consumers to publish, via social media, comments about their experiences regarding consumption of goods and services, and the papers that analyze the influence of eWOM both from the perspective of corporations and consumers.

Zhang and Vasquez (2014) state that the rapid development of the Internet and eWOM portals has changed the way of communication and led to the fact that, while searching for information regarding products and services, consumers are less oriented to expert sources, and more oriented to the “non-specialist” sources.

On the basis of what information can the consumer compare insufficiently known hotel products? The modern consumer will search for information on the Internet, and during the search, will consult a variety of sources. According to Google, around 80% of people, when planning a vacation, consult online sources (Filieri et al., 2015). Liu and Park (2015) state the research results of Vlachos (2012), according to whom, 87% of passengers in international tourist traffic use the Internet when planning their travels, and 43% of them read comments posted by other users. The conclusion is stated that social media, especially review websites, are extremely important in the purchase of intangible products and services of whose quality we cannot be assured before the consumption of the product. In essence, the hotel product is such a product.

Given the sources of content on social media, a question of credibility of information regarding products and services can be raised. In the media, there are reports claiming that certain hotel managers praise their hotels online and encourage their employees to do the same or that they even write negative comments about competitors' accommodations (Filieri et al., 2015), posing as hotel guests. It is stated that some hoteliers offered money to users to remove the published content that did not suit them (Sharkey, 2009).

The influence of eWOM on sales has been a subject to a large number of studies (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Studies referring hotel business have also been carried out (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Kim et al., 2015). In Serbia, this kind of research has been conducted by Čačić and Mašić (2013). The

research results confirm the existence of a link between the online image of a hotel and its business results.

Bearing in mind the undoubted influence of the content with which the hotel is presented on social media on business performance, it is clear that this business segment cannot be ignored by hotel management. Thus Zhang and Vasquez (2014) state that the increase in the number of online reviews of products and services has led to an increase in the number of responses by the company. They state that such reactions of management to online reviews are called in literature “webcare”, “online reputation management”, and when responding to negative reviews, it is part of a process called “service recovery”.

The importance of responding to online hotel reviews has been a subject of a large number of studies (Zhang & Vasquez, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; Casalo et al., 2015; Sparks et al., 2016 etc.). The results suggest the confirmation of the need for providing responses by the hotel management to reviews published online, although there are studies whose results suggest that responses by the hotel management may have an adverse effect on consumers (Mauri & Minazzi, 2013), i.e. a negative effect on their behavior and intentions relating to the purchase of hotel products. They explain this by stating that consumers can perceive the management response as a form of promotion and consider it less credible because it comes from a source that is not independent from the hotel. Yet Mauri and Minazzi emphasize that it is not a question of whether hotel management should give a response, but “how” and “where.”

A large number of authors analyze the way in which hotel managers give response to online reviews, and some suggest what elements should be included in the response in order for it to be more effective (Min et al., 2015; Sparks et al. 2016) and, on the basis of research carried out, they propose the online review management (ORM) strategy elements (Nguyen & Coudounaris, 2015).

Baka (2016) states the results of research conducted by Barsky and Frame in 2009, indicating that, in that year, 85% of the analyzed hotels did not have a developed strategy for monitoring and responding to online reviews, and that only 7% of hotels responded to online reviews, although 71% of people consider management responses significant. Čačić and Mašić (2013) state that, based on a sample of Serbian hotels, management responses have been found in 11.5% of the hotels. It is observed that the

number online reviews to which a response was found has been growing. Thus, Mašić (2015) notes that in 2011, on a sample of Belgrade hotels on TripAdvisor portal, a response was found only to every 29th review, while in 2014 a response was found to around 39% of hotel reviews. Mašić indicates that the willingness of hotel management to provide a response to online reviews is associated with the hotel category. Therefore, in the segment of 5* hotels, the response has been found to around 42.5% of the comments, 4*-29%, 3*-14.2%, 2*-3.4%, while in the segment of 1* hotels, management responses have not been found.

Global hotel corporations recognize the importance of social media in today's market. Thus, *Hyatt Hotels & Resorts* corporation invests significant resources to improve the online image. They have a team of employees who in a very short period of time, give responses to comments on social media (Glusac, 2015). In the market of Serbia, there is a small number of hotels under the control of global hotel corporations (Barjaktarović & Mašić, 2014), so it is harder to provide a transfer of knowledge and technology to local hotel corporations.

TripAdvisor is one of the most popular review websites in the field of tourism and hospitality (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), and it allows its users, on the one hand, to review a hotel service, and on the other hand, to access a truly vast number of hotel service reviews posted by users from around the world.

In order to rate a hotel service on TripAdvisor portal, users have to register. Given that, when writing hotel service reviews, TripAdvisor does not require any proof that the user has indeed been a hotel guest, it raises doubts. Thus Ayeh et al. (2013) convey the report of a very influential medium, according to which TripAdvisor contains about 27,000 reviews that, in legal terms, can be characterized as libelous. Mašić et al. (2014) have conducted a study on a sample of all categorized hotels in Belgrade, which aimed to assess the credibility of the reviews of Belgrade hotels on TripAdvisor. The credibility of reviews has been estimated by the comparison of the average traveler rating on TripAdvisor with the average traveler rating found on the online booking systems of Booking.com, Hotels.com, Expedia.com, Venere.com, HRS.com, and Orbitz.com. Unlike on TripAdvisor, on these portals, before being able to publish a review, it is first necessary to prove that the user has indeed been a guest of the hotel, and this is performed by making a hotel reservation through this online mediator or even by a hotel confirmation

that the portal user has used their services. The results of this study indicate that there is no significant difference between the average traveler rating of the hotel service quality on the same sample of hotels on TripAdvisor and the said online booking systems.

Baka (2016) states that the hoteliers initially rejected TripAdvisor, but they have realized that, as she states, it has opened a Pandora's box, and now they are trying to understand in what way TripAdvisor influences their business and what it is that they can and should do in everyday business activities regarding the content on TripAdvisor.

TripAdvisor allows hotel management to take over the hotel account. Controlling the hotel account on TripAdvisor gives them a possibility of uploading selected photos, videos, and what is particularly important in today's market, to give response to each review.

A study conducted by Zhang and Vasquez (2014) leads to the conclusion that the responses to the comments of hotel guests on TripAdvisor portal are often patterned, and that, in most cases, they consist of a number of elements that are repeated in the responses. Sparks et al. (2016) have analyzed management responses on TripAdvisor portal and their influence on consumer attitudes. The results suggest that the use of the communication style that they call "human voice," instead of patterned responses, as well as timeliness of response giving by the management, lead consumers to draw more favorable conclusions regarding the hotel.

Facebook has gained a dominant position in the market and it is by far the most popular social network (Mich & Baggio, 2015). Leung et al. (2015) report the results of Stelzner's research (2011), according to which Facebook and Twitter are the two most used social networks by marketers. Yet, despite the vast global distribution and popularity of Facebook, Goodrich and de Mooij (2014) state that there are significant differences in the penetration of Facebook among active Internet users in different countries, and state that, at the same time, the penetration in the U.S. was 68%, while in Russia, it was 10%, and in China only 1%. They further point out that in some countries there are local websites similar to Facebook with more active users. As an example, they state that renren.com is such a website in China, mixi.jp in Japan, and vkontakte.ru in Russia.

The influence of the social network Facebook on consumer behavior in hotel management has been a subject of several researches. The research conducted by Ladhari and Michaud (2015) can be singled out. They have investigated the influence of comments posted on Facebook on the intentions of consumers and their choice of hotel. The results of their study suggest that there is a connection between the comments available on Facebook and consumers' intentions, attitudes, and confidence.

Given the influence of Facebook it is of great importance for the hotel to be presented by relevant contents on this social network. In this way, the hotel opens a modern channel of communication with consumers. Since Facebook offers the possibility of promoting its users' pages, the hotel can address precisely defined target segments of consumers at minimum cost. In this way, it is possible to provide an additional sales volume and revenue to justify the investment in this promotion channel. Recently, Facebook has offered a widget that allows booking hotel services directly from Facebook (Baka, 2016).

Twitter allows its users to publish short messages with a maximum length of 140 characters, as well as multimedia content, links, and so on. Hotel guests can publish their experiences via Twitter related to the use of hotel services regardless of whether the hotel has a Twitter account. Therefore, the question is not whether the hotel should monitor Twitter contents, but in what way (Taylor et al., 2015).

For the hotel, Twitter becomes not only a significant promotional, but also a communication channel. Thus, Dan Moriarty, the Director of Digital Strategy at Hyatt Hotels & Resorts, states that messages on Twitter, for a certain group of hotel guests, substitute phone calls to the front office. He states that this segment of consumers does not want to call the front office and wait for an answer, but instead posts tweets on the hotel page and continues doing their tasks (Glusac, 2015).

Taylor et al. (2015) have conducted a study that included a comparative analysis of the use of Twitter on the segment of the middle class hotels and luxury hotels. The results of their study suggest that the consumers in the segment of the hotel guests of luxury hotels significantly more frequently use Twitter. They further conclude that, although at the moment, the guests of middle class hotels do not expect the hotel to have a Twitter account and to follow the tweets of its guests, the evident growth in popularity of Twitter will, in the near future, lead to a need for

these hotels to take active part in social media in order to meet the needs of their consumers.

Research methodology

The initial step in conducting the research was to identify the categorized hotels in Serbia. The list of categorized hotels in Serbia with the cut-off date – November 2015, was taken from the competent Ministry website. The analyzed set consists of 331 hotels with a total of 17,438 accommodation units – 15,664 rooms and 1,774 suites.

For each of these hotels, searches on the social media Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have been performed in order to determine whether the hotel is presented on them and in what way. At the same time, for each individual hotel, a search on TripAdvisor portal has been performed for the period until the end of 2015 in order to determine the number of hotels in Serbia presented and reviewed on this portal, as well as the total number of published reviews. Simultaneously, the reviews to which the management of Serbian hotels gave a response have been identified.

The hotels were then grouped into those located in towns, spas and mountain resorts, and we compared the obtained data of the analyzed parameters in order to determine whether significant differences between hotels from different groups can be found.

The results and analysis

On TripAdvisor portal, 270 hotels from Serbia are presented, which is 81.6% of the total number of hotels from the analyzed sample.

Table 1: *Presentation of Serbian hotels on TripAdvisor*

	All hotels	Hotels in:		
		towns	mountain resorts	spa resorts
Hotels presented (in %)	81.6%	84.4%	73.7%	72.4%
Average number of reviews	48.2	55.7	20.8	14.8
Percentage of reviews with management response	28%	29.3%	4.6%	22.3%

Source: *Own research*

If we group the hotels based on their location, we can notice that the participation of spa hotels presented on TripAdvisor portal in the total number of hotels in the group is the lowest.

From the data presented in Table 1, it can be seen that, not only are the spa hotels presented in a lower percentage on the portal TripAdvisor, but they have a significantly lower number of reviews compared to the average for the entire Serbia. The difference is even more significant if the spa and town hotels are compared. The hotels located in towns, on average, have almost four times as many published reviews.

The differences can be at least partially explained by different structure of guests. Foreign tourists are the ones who more often, compared to tourists from Serbia and the region, use TripAdvisor portal for publishing their experiences regarding the purchase of hotel products. Throughout the entire period observed, the structure of tourists' nights of foreign tourists in Serbia shows a rather uneven distribution in such a way that the percentage of foreign tourists' nights in urban centers, primarily Belgrade and Novi Sad, by far exceeds the percentages in other places. To illustrate this, we can mention that, in 2014, 61.4% of the total number of foreign tourists' nights in Serbia was found in Belgrade and Novi Sad, while in spas, this percentage was only 9.3% (Statistical Yearbook of Serbia 2015, p. 343). Also, in domestic tourists, we can notice differences in their characteristics by types of tourism products. Thus, some studies point out significant differences between the typical consumers of tourism services in towns, spas and mountain resorts in Serbia. It is stated that the dominant guests in spas are older than 50 who, on average, prefer complementary forms of accommodation. When they choose a hotel accommodation, they prefer three-star hotels. They belong to the lower and middle class (Tourism Development Strategy of Serbia – the first phase report, 2005, p. 21). It can be expected that the consumers who belong to a demographic segment of older people, with a low or middle income level, are on average less prone to accepting modern information technology, on which social media is based.

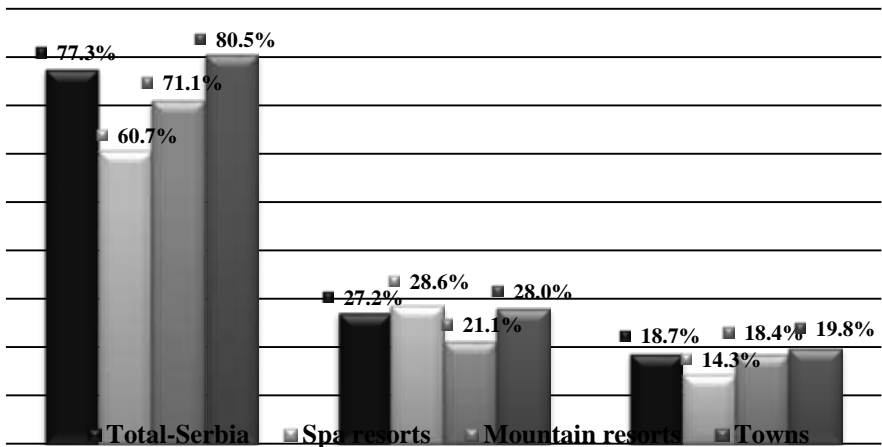
Throughout the paper, we have emphasized the importance given, in scientific and professional literature, to hotel management responses to reviews published on TripAdvisor portal.

On the sample of hotels located in spas, a significantly lower tendency of the hotel management to give a response in relation to the average for the

entire Serbia has been found (Table 1). In this way, the chance to influence the creation of a better online image is missed, because the response essentially is not addressed only to the person who wrote the review, but also to all those who are interested in the hotel on TripAdvisor.

The situation becomes even more alarming if we do not observe the percentage of reviews to which a response has been given, but the percentage of the hotels whose management use the possibility to give a response whatsoever. On the sample of spa hotels, that option is used by only about 7.1% of the hotels, which is significantly lower than the average for Serbia, which is 20.8%.

Chart 1: *Hotels in Serbia on social networks*



Source: *Own research*

The data presented (Chart 1) show that Facebook is by far the social network which is most widely used for communication with consumers by local hoteliers in all types of destinations. The spa hotels use the possibilities offered by Facebook and Instagram to a lesser extent than the average for all hotels in Serbia, while the use of Twitter is slightly more frequent in relation to the average found for the hotels from the whole country.

However, the fact that a hotel has an account on some of these social networks does not have to imply anything. Namely, hotels may have inactive pages that serve no purpose. Therefore, it is also important to

determine the way in which hotels are presented on social networks. This will be done for a group of spa hotels.

On Facebook, there are official and unofficial pages of spa hotels. The largest number of pages has uploaded photos that present the hotel offer, however, on some the pages, there is a very small number of them or they are not systematized. Promotional offers, at the time of the research, were available on only two pages. Contact information and the link to the official website of the hotel were provided on the pages in most cases. The number of “likes” ranged from 30 to 9,000 per page, the number of check-ins ranged from zero to 18,502. The “book now” option was available on the page of only 4 hotels. Also, only 4 pages had the “very responsive to messages” mark, which implies that the employees reply to the questions asked on the page in a very short time, usually within an hour. The stated data suggest that the spa hotels insufficiently use the possibilities that Facebook offers related to the creation of modern sales, promotional, and communication channels.

On Twitter, 27.59% of the spa hotels had their page. The total number of followers on all pages was only 540. This was the audience which would see the posts of these hotels, and which could later continue to share them through retweets. A total of 1,648 tweets of hoteliers was found. In the analysis of this information, it is necessary to know that 1,327 tweets were found on only one hotel page, and 321 on all others. The link to the official website of the hotel was present on all pages. The offer of promotional packages via Twitter was found in only 4 spa hotels, and replies to guests’ questions were found in 3 hotels.

It can also be said for Instagram that it is an untapped potential for the promotion of spa hotels. Apart from the fact that only 14.29% of the spa hotels had the official page, most of those who formally had one practically did not use it. The total number of posts for all spa hotels was 40, and they were followed by a total of only 473 people. The published photos, in the case of the largest number of hotels, did not adequately present their offer. The total number of “likes” for the published photos was 804, and a total of only 13 comments was found.

On YouTube 67.86% of the spa hotels were presented, which is less than the average for all hotels in Serbia, which amounts to 74.62%. The spa hotels were more frequently presented through unofficial accounts. Namely, only 25% of the spa hotels were presented through official

accounts, and 35,733 views were found on those accounts. It should be noted that the number of views varies considerably among the hotels, ranging from 55 up to 21.917.

Conclusion

Modern technologies in hotel industry have resulted in a significant change in the way of communication between hotels and their customers, and among customers themselves. Hotel guests no longer depend on expert resources in terms of information about the quality of hotel services, and on travel agents, and the recommendations of their relatives and friends are no longer the main sources of information. They now have at their disposal a range of virtual online communities whose members are connected with a particular common interest. On these social media, hotel guests can find a multitude of impressions, opinions, views and recommendations of hotel guests regarding the consumption of the hotel product. In this manner, the intangible hotel service can gain tangible elements, and a certain experience of the product is being formed in potential hotel guests, even though they have not consumed it.

Many hotel companies initially ignored these contents, not understanding that it was not a passing fad, but a crucial change in the mode of communication that has resulted in a change in the behavior of hotel guests and attitudes regarding hotel products. Over time, the management of a large number of hotels began to understand the significance of these portals and started to develop strategies to improve their online image. Monitoring social media contents and adequately responding to them, as well as using their significant promotional, communication, and sales potentials are becoming part of the job description of employees in hotels. This leads to the emergence of new staff profiles in hotels (Kosar et al., 2014).

Hoteliers in Serbia started to use the given opportunities relatively late. Thus, the first management responses to reviews on TripAdvisor were found as late as in 2011, while it happened much earlier in countries where tourism was more developed. The same situation has been found regarding the use of the social media Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

If we group the hotels in Serbia based on their location, we come to the conclusion that the potential of social media uses the management of

town hotels to the fullest extent, primarily those in Belgrade and Novi Sad. In the segment of spa hotels, below-average values have been found, observing any of the analyzed indicators.

The previous conclusions have been drawn solely on the basis of quantitative analysis of the representation of the spa hotels and their management responses on social media. The results are even worse when analyzing the contents and the way in which the management of spa hotels uses the possibilities offered by social media. The results of this study suggest that, in a large number of cases, the social media pages are not used as communication, sales, and promotional channels adequately.

It can be concluded that, as part of activities to improve the overall image of Serbian spas, it is necessary to take serious actions to improve their online image. This segment can no longer be neglected without significant consequences on the hotel business performance.

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