

INFLUENCER MARKETING: THE MODERN WORD-OF-MOUTH THAT SELLS

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Abstract: Social media has radically changed the process by which consumers discover, evaluate and choose hospitality and tourism brands. This research explores influencer marketing as a strategic tool that serves to build sincere engagement and trust. By analyzing examples of Hilton Hotels, Marriott Bonvoy, VisitScotland, the Maine Tourism Authority, and Pigeon Forge Tourism, the study shows that influencer collaborations increase brand visibility, reach a specific audience, and increase conversions. Influencer types such as Nano, Micro, Macro, and Mega are also explored, as are best practices such as experience-based stay, event coverage, local address promotion, and the right to use content. The results show that collaborations that match brand identity and audience orientation provide a higher level of engagement and positive attitude towards traditional advertising. Key indicators such as level of engagement, coverage, conversions and audience feedback are offered to measure efficiency. The study concludes that influencer marketing is an extensible form of word-to-word advertising adapted to the 21st century, a powerful tool to inspire travel desire for hospitality and tourism brands and build long-term commitment in a competitive digital market setting.

Keywords: influencer marketing, tourism, hospitality, social media, brand engagement, destination marketing.

Introduction

In a time when social media is dominating the process of people discovering, evaluating, and selecting brands, influencer marketing has become one of the most effective tools to communicate with audiences in a sincere way. For hotels, restaurants and tourism complexes, this approach can also turn ordinary interested observers into loyal customers if implemented strategically.

What is Influencer marketing?

Influencer marketing is a collaboration between a brand and a person with a specific online audience, i.e. influencer. Instead of traditional advertising, influencer creates content about the brand and shares it with its way of life, harmonizing it naturally. Thus, the audience perceives this propaganda as a recommendation from a person they trust.

Why it works effectively

Confidence factor: Observers perceive influencers as a reliable source, which makes their

recommendations much more influential than traditional ads.

Reaching a specific audience: Influencers operate in specific areas such as Travel, Food, Wellness, bringing campaigns to an audience that is already interested in what you offer.

Sincerity: The best campaigns are perceived as a real experience, not an artificial script.

Visual impact: Platforms like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube show addresses in a way that is desirable and worth sharing with others.

Influencer types

1. Nano-influencers (1 thousand -10 thousand observers): small audience, high confidence level ideal to reach the audience at a very local level.
2. Micro-influencers (10 thousand - 100 thousand): strong attraction and reputation in a particular area; often provides the best investment return (ROI).
3. Macro-influencers (100 thousand - 1 million): wider audience coverage, but still celebrated impact power.
4. Mega-influencers / celebrities (1 million+): very large mass coverage, high cost, lower level of personal communication.

Realistic examples in hospitality and tourism

1. Hilton Hotels-long format experience on TikTok

Hilton abandoned the traditional approach to the TikTok platform to produce an almost 10-minute advertisement with content creators including Paris Hilton. The content was deliberately impassable by harmonizing humor, mini-scenes, and interactive elements.

Results: more than 35.7 million views (86 times more than Hilton's typical posts), an additional 13.3 million views through duets and stitches, as well as a 12-point increase in positive feedback on the brand. (MMA, 2023)

2. Maine Tourism Authority-promotion through Instagram Stories

The Maine State Tourism Office partnered with five Instagram photographers to capture and share beautiful scenic experiences across the state. Each influencer used its own visual style to create a lot of shareable content.

Results: the campaign won the U.S. Travel Association Mercury Award for innovative destination marketing and significantly increased organic coverage for Maine's tourism channels. (BVK, 2019; U.S. Travel Association, 2019)

3. Marriott Bonvoy-wide engagement of special area influencers

Marriott Bonvoy partnered with several mid-level content creators operating in lifestyle, travel, and adventure areas to highlight the brand's unique experiences.

Results: more than 11 million audience coverage has been created through storytelling divided into segments, and effective targeting of different traveller demographics has been achieved as part of one campaign. (Marriott Bonvoy, 2022)

4. Pigeon Forge Tourism – “Destination Adventure” campaign

The Tourism Division of Pigeon Forge in Tennessee launched an influencer campaign called “Extreme Adventure” to showcase adrenaline-boosting entertainment venues such as zip lines, rafting, and Mountain roller coasters.

Results: the level of attraction in social networks has increased, and the interest of tourists from other states in adventure tourism has increased significantly. (Orange142, 2021)

5. VisitScotland-a combination of user-generated content and influencers

VisitScotland's #ScotSpirit campaign combined user-generated content (UGC) with influencers to promote Scotland as a year-round travelable destination.

Results: the brand's visibility has expanded, interest in seasonal travel has increased and inspired the most user content to be sent in the history of this destination marketing. (VisitScotland, 2016)

How Hotel and tourism brands can take advantage of this

Experience-based stay: invite influencers to highlight their experience as real guests.

Event coverage: live broadcast of events or festivals taking place on your site using influencers.

Promote local addresses: show nearby attractions in collaboration with local guides.

Content usage rights: Reuse influencer-created videos and photos in your marketing materials.

Measurement Indicators to observe success:

Level of engagement: likes, comments, shares.

Coverage / number of views: Number of people who view content.

Traffic / conversions: Bookings or requests made via Influencer code or link.

Brand sentiment: The tone of audience sentiment after a campaign.

Best practices

Choose compatibility, NOT popularity: the number of observers is less important than the level of relevance and attraction.

Set goals clearly: whether it is to increase brand awareness or increase reservations depends on your approach.

Invest in relationships: long-term cooperation gives a better result than one-time posts.

Respect creative freedom: allow influencers to speak in their natural voice.

Conclusion. Influencer marketing is not the most popular face hire, but the choice of the right storyteller who can make your brand look desirable but accessible to everyone. In the field of hospitality and tourism, one candid video can inspire hundreds of people to dream and ultimately book the same experience. When done correctly, it is a form of word-of-mouth advertising adapted to the 21st century: faster, more visual, and much more comprehensive.

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