



THE SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY FOR BAY AREA GREEN TOURS

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ABSTRACT

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The Social Media Strategy for Bay Area Green Tours

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This thesis features a non-profit organization called Bay Area Green Tours (BAGT). They offer private educational tours all over the Bay Area in California. The tours showcase projects and entities that are creating a greener environment and sustainable future.

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate to Bay Area Green Tours the benefits of developing an efficient social media strategy as part of their online marketing. BAGT has an active online presence including social media, but this project will help them improve the quality of its use as well as expand its range and audience. The goal of the research was to explore the most suitable social media platforms for BAGT and determine how to best use them to attract more customers. This was done by developing a new social media strategy and then trying out different marketing statistics.

The data of this study were collected from interviews with three employees from Bay Area Green Tours, literature, articles published by tourism or marketing professionals and by designing a survey tailored to this project. The results of the survey were analyzed quantitatively, revealing three main social media platforms for BAGT which are well recognized in and adapted to the tourism industry. Thus, crafting and maintaining a great social media strategy has a significant impact on customer relations, brand awareness and sales.

In conclusion, by having a social media strategy BAGT keeps customers engaged, and they are able to show people that they truly value their customers. By providing relevance and depth to the content it will sell itself. Focusing on the right social media platforms gives them visibility they seek as well as saving staff time and thereby increasing efficacy and productivity. As the research results indicated a group's internet footprint is the number one information source for customers other than personal recommendations, and only the for smaller organizations to build a larger following without a large advertising budget.

Key words: online tourism, online marketing, social media

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu
Tampere University of Applied Sciences
Matkailun koulutusohjelma

JENNA SILANDER:

Sosiaalisen median markkinointisuunnitelma Bay Area Green Tours:lle

Opinnäytetyö 57 sivua, joista liitteitä 5 sivua
Syyskuu 2013

Tämä opinnäytetyö käsittelee voittoa tavoittelematonta Bay Area Green Tours – organisaatiota, joka tarjoaa asiakaskohtaisia matkoja asiakkailleen Kaliforniassa. Yritys on kestävä kehityksen matkailualan yritys, jonka matkat ovat suunniteltu ekologisesti.

Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli demostroida Bay Area Green Tours:lle, mitä hyötyä ja etua tehokkaasta sosiaalisen median markkinointisuunnitelmasta on ja kuinka oleellinen osa se on heidän digitaalista markkinointiaan. Tavoitteena oli löytää yritykselle sopivimmat sosiaalisen median kanavat, joiden avulla mahdollisimman moni uusi asiakas kiinnostuisi yrityksestä. Markkinointisuunnitelman avulla tehostetaan valittujen kanavien sisällön laatua, lisätään myyntiä ja brändin tunnettavuutta.

Tietojen keruumenetelmänä oli haastattelut, jotka käytiin Bay Area Green Toursin työntekijöiden kanssa, asiakastutkimuskysely sekä kirjallisuuden ja digitaalisten lähteiden lukeminen. Asiakastutkimuskysely oli kvantitatiivinen eli määrällinen tutkimus. Kyselyn avulla tunnistettiin kolme tärkeintä sosiaalisen median kanavaa. Nämä kanavat ovat jo entuudestaan tunnettuja ja käytettyjä matkailualalla.

Johtopäätöksenä voidaan todeta, että onnistunut sosiaalisen median markkinointisuunnitelma luo uusia asiakassuhteita ja vahvistaa jo olemassa olevia. Keskittymällä oikeisiin sosiaalisen median kanaviin, tehokkuus ja tuottavuus lisääntyy sekä työntekijöiden resursseja säästyy. Tutkimuksen tuloksista voimme päätellä, että internet on yksi tärkeimmistä matkailualan tiedonlähteistä ja sen takia pienikin yritys voi saada näkyvyyttä sosiaalisessa mediassa ilman suurta markkinointibudjettia.

Avainsanat: digitaalinen markkinointi, sosiaalinen markkinointi, digitaalinen matkailu

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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis features a non-profit organization called Bay Area Green Tours (BAGT). BAGT offers educational tours all over the Bay Area in California, providing high impact opportunities to taste, touch and see innovative solutions in action. I was amazed by their story and their mission; the idea of helping them with improving their online marketing was a privilege.

Bay Area Green Tours, online tourism, online marketing, social media and how to create a distinguishable social media content are the main themes of this thesis. These themes will be introduced in detail in the following sections. This thesis examines the most suitable and relevant social media platforms for BAGT and how they can improve and develop the content in those platforms. No similar prior research has been conducted specific to Bay Area Green Tours; it will provide information to help BAGT strengthen their online presence as well as emphasize their social media as part of their online marketing. By creating a great social media strategy plan BAGT will be able to share their story effectively, attract more customers and improve their customer relationships generally.

The research documented here aims to determine the relevancy of having a strong social media presence for tour operators such as Bay Area Green Tours. It will explore what kind of expectations customers have regarding the social media content. Moreover, it aims at showing the benefits of having a successful social media strategy.

The data collected include primary sources: a survey of selected BAGT newsletter readers and interviews with three employees from Bay Area Green Tours. Additional research drew from articles and books written by professionals, brochures and several electronic sources about social media and online marketing.

2 RESEARCH PLAN

This chapter explains the process of the chosen research method of the author. It presents the research questions and problems, and the planned method for gathering the required research data. The chapter also introduces the concepts and theories that were used in the study. In addition, it explains why the author chose to research this specific topic.

2.1 Research topic

The author chose to research the importance of social media as an online marketing tool for Tour Operator Bay Area Green Tours. During the last five years, social media channels have become crucial marketing tools for the Tourism industry. Furthermore, it is important to understand how to use social media efficiently and strategically. Social media should be recognized as an essential sales channel which can be used to interact with customers or to manage brand and organization reputation. In order to use social media successfully there is a need to develop a social media strategy and following that plan requires substantial commitment and continuous monitoring (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, Rapp 2012).

With this research, the author wanted to show Bay Area Green Tours the benefits of social media and find the most suitable social media channels for them. Social media can have different value for different customers and companies. So instead of just having a presence in every social media channel for of the sake of having it, the tour operator should identify the most relevant social media platforms in the Tourism industry and learn how approach customers throughout those social media platforms. Thus the aim of this research is that the analyzed results and collected data will help Bay Area Green Tours develop and strengthen their social media content. This will be done by creating a social media strategy plan with them, enlightening them of the advantages of utilizing it.

The objective of this research is to show how Bay Area Green Tours can promote their story with the right social media channels and attract more customers in doing so.

2.2 Concepts and theories

2.2.1 Online marketing

Usage of the internet has transformed marketing approaches into totally different level. Online marketing is about delivering useful content at just the precise moment that a customer needs it. Online marketing is about interaction, information, education, and choices. Before the internet, organizations had only few significant options for attracting attention: buy expensive advertising or get third-party ink from the media (Meerman 2013, 15–23).

Online marketing is more than just free advertising, it is about communicating, promoting and selling products or services. Organizations have a great opportunity to drive people into the purchasing process by having a great online marketing strategy (Meerman 2013, 36). By interacting with customers, online organizations get first-hand information about their target audience and most importantly, customers can ask questions and give feedback (reviews). These online platforms such as Yelp and TripAdvisor are extremely important in the tourism industry.

Whether an organization is using blogs, online videos, e-books, e-newsletter or other online marketing forms, it is important to understand that the line between marketing and PR has been blurred. In an off-line world, marketing and PR were separate departments with different people- and different skill sets. But online the same channels are used for both of them. Since online content drives the customers to take action, you need to have a great content in all online forms that you use (Meerman 2013, 36–37).

2.2.2 Social media

Many companies are using social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter to address this trend. To use these avenues to drive customer traffic, increase customer loyalty, increase sales and revenues, improve customer satisfaction, create brand awareness and build their reputation. In addition, companies can use social media to develop their product and strengthen their customer service (He, Zha & Li 2013, 464–472).

The current challenge for companies is to understand how to use social media effectively and know which social media platforms they should use. When organizations are developing their social media strategies, platforms such as Youtube, Facebook and Twitter they are too often treated as stand-alone element rather than cohesive parts of a marketing plan. Interactive social media platforms are changing the marketing landscape, and the nature and sources of information are vast and available 24/7 to customers (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden 2011, 265–273).

Providing content in the form of social media networks enables organizations to create, share, and- recommend information is extending spheres of marketing influence. A wide variety of social media platforms are providing the tools for these meaningful firm-customer exchanges. For example, the social networking site Facebook now has over a billion monthly active users (Hanna ym. 2011, 265–273). There is also a need of organizations to establish a social media monitoring and competitive analysis strategy therefore, it is important to be aware of current markets and competitor's approaches to social media (He ym. 2013, 464–472).

2.2.3 Online Tourism

The importance of the internet for the travel and tourism industry has grown rapidly over the last 10 years. Understanding how travelers behave is critical to tour operators formulating an appropriate online marketing strategy. The tourism sector has been a pioneer in adapting and developing Information Communication Technologies (ICT) applications. Furthermore, customers are now able to interact directly a with tour operator, which allows them to identify and satisfy their constantly changing needs for tourism products. Also tour operators are able to deal more effectively with increasing complexity and diversity of customer requirements.

Nowadays tour operators can communicate, distribute and market their product and services via online channels in a cost-and time efficient way. The importance of the internet has grown due to multiplication of “infomediaries” that provide even easier access to information. Likewise, the creation of shop bots that compare prices or the selection sites that allow you to play with different choice criteria have supported the increased

use of the internet in the tourism industry. The easy access to information contributes to lowering the products prices, since customer can so easily compare the prices between tour operators (Internet Usage for... 2010).

2.2.4 Likeable Business model

The Likeable Business Model has 11 main principles that demonstrate how to make your business more “Likeable” with the help of social media. It focuses on building a successful brand in the era of social media. It provides clear step-by-step instructions for how-to improve the content of social media and how to interact with customers to be successful (Kerpen 2013, 7).

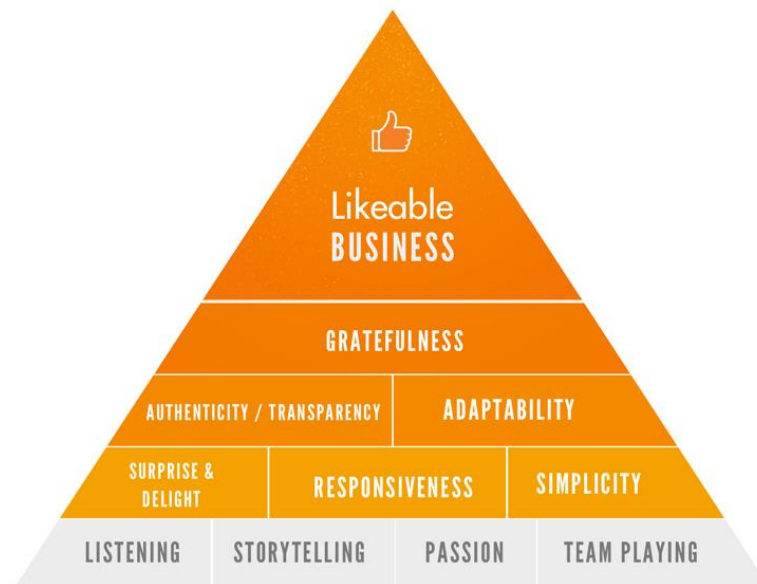


FIGURE 1. The Likeable Pyramid shows the foundation for a likeable business (Kerpen 2013, 8)

Listening is the foundation of any working business. Listening is the process of thinking about what is important to someone else rather what might be important to you. Active listening requires a person to put his own ideas aside in order to focus on what someone else has to say. People do business with people they know, like and trust, and listening is vital in building up likeability and trust. Listening to customers help build relationships with them but it can also help to understand how to deliver more appropri-

ate products and identify possible product/service changes that need to be done. Lack of time to listen might lead to the loss of valuable sales leads to competitors.

Listening through social media makes it possible to have a conversation and engage with dozens, hundreds and thousands of people every day. By listening and asking the right questions, companies are getting free ideas to develop their services and products instead of having to set up focus groups. By listening to customers, customers will feel valued and respected and are more likely to do collaboration with good results. The more you are willing to listen, the more you will learn (Kerpen 2013, 14–27).

A huge part of persuasive communication, and communication general, is **storytelling**. “Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today.” (Kerpen 2013, 29). By telling a great story people will connect with you emotionally and want to get to know you. You will become more likeable. When a company brand tells a relatable story, customers will connect to the brand and this can turn into sales. Telling a story creates a gateway for understanding. Storytelling has the power to form connections and cement relationships. Stories help companies focus on a vision, give employees something to believe in, motivating them to work (Kerpen 2013, 30–44).

Authenticity means that processes are what you say they are and products and services do what you say they do. Customers want to interact with a true person, not with a machine or cold soulless company. In order to gain customers, you must be a likeable person, in order to be likeable, you must be genuine and reliable. You must be authentic. Authenticity also means being vulnerable and humble and those qualities will create positive, attractive energy which will make costumers and media support you (Kerpen 2013, 47–60).

Transparency is a really important part of the messages you are sending to your customers since information spreads more quickly than ever before through modern media. By embracing transparency you will create an open and positive environment which strengthens your company. Nonprofit organizations are especially under pressure to operate transparently since people want to know where their donations go. When Google and social media are booming, consumers are increasingly expecting open access to information, and they do not react well when details are purposefully withheld

from them. When you get caught not being transparent, you lose customers which will lead into losing sales and trust (Kerpen 2013, 63–66, 73–77).

Team playing is the commitment to your company's staff and it can determine your success. Team playing as well as any work, is not about doing things in the same way just because it is the way that it has been done before therefore thinking outside the box is essential. The best way to make people share their unique ideas is to provide a comfortable environment that welcomes creative thinking and values differing opinions. For example, in terms of external social media, opening up access to your business's Twitter account to various employees will allow them to have a voice and interact with your customers (Kerpen 2013, 81, 85, 88, 95–96).

Responsiveness is crucial in today's age of digital communication and social media. Customers are not shy about sharing their opinions and they are eager to make their voice heard. It is not only enough to listen, you have to show your customers that you care. The ability to listen and respond to your community provides a great opportunity to improve business and as it will ensure that customers will invest in your business.

It is also an important fact to note that not responding is a respond and it can be directly translated to: "I do not care". If you have a good experience you most likely tell it to one person but if you have a bad experience you will share it with multiple people and with the help of social media your bad experience can be easily spread to hundreds of people (Kerpen 2013, 97,99, 114–116).

Adaptability means that organization is able meet its customers ever-changing needs. If you are not open to the new demands of customers, you might end up with losing opportunity to improve your products, and losing potential customers and sales. Not taking any risks is the riskiest thing you could ever do, so as people adapt in order to survive, so must your business. Social media is the most rapidly changing marketing landscape in the human history; being adaptable is the key to survival (Kerpen 2013, 119, 131–132).

Passion is vital to your success. It gives meaning to your work as well as focuses and shapes your work. It gives value to what you do. In a sense everyone at your company is an internal marketer. If an IT- person or any person who is not doing sales speaks about how he loves his work or the company, and someone hears it, it can lead to sales. One great aspect of social media is that you can convey your passion with hundreds and thousands of people at once (Kerpen 2013, 137, 143, 151).

Surprise and delight, being delightful is about creating remarkable customer service and providing an enjoyable experience to customers every time. Being delightful simply means exceeding your customers' expectations. For example, instead of just giving a discount, to surprise people the magic word is; free. Free products or services usually attracts amazingly huge amount of people. The point is to strategically pick your customers and the right timing to create small moments of surprise and delight that will easily spread and have expand impact of your business (Kerpen 2013, 156, 158, 167).

Simplicity can serve as a competitive advantage. Nowadays customers are overwhelmed and confused by the insane amount of offerings, information, and messaging they receive on a daily basis from business via email and social media; the perils of complexity are great. The easier you make it for customers to decide on a product, the more likely they are going to choose your product/service. Being able to use simplicity successfully isn't just a marketing or organizational strategy, but rather an important value and philosophy. Customers need to understand without any confusion and superfluousness, who you are, what is your mission, and what your products and services do. When you share too much, ask too much and you have too many things to focus on, you really do not have any focus at all. Focus is imperative to simplicity.

The point is not to please everybody. Innovation can be saying no to the hundred other good ideas that are there and just picking the right ones carefully. Not every social media channel is right for you and your audience. The point is to keep your social media plan simple, choose the right social media platforms and provide value in the content (Kerpen 2013, 171, 176–182).

Gratefulness within a business a simply act itself. Gratefulness and kindness form a virtuous circle, and more often than not, being thankful and doing well do not only make you feel good, but makes amazing things happen in your business. Being grateful

for what you have requires reflecting on those who have helped you along the way. By thanking them, you consciously acknowledge what they have contributed to your success. By understanding what or who has influenced your business, you are able to continue the success and those influential people will continue assist you. Social media allows for expressions of gratitude in business at a bigger scale than ever before. It creates public spaces in which thankfulness can be passed on and paid forward (Kerpen 2013, 192–200).

2.3 Research questions

In this Bachelor thesis, the main topic is; the most suitable social media platforms for Bay Area Green Tours and the improvement of the existing content in those platforms. The author's main research questions are: what are the right social media platforms for Bay Area Green Tours? Why they should use them and how should they use them? How can Bay Area Green Tours improve their social media content and What actions needs to be done? Tightly linked to those main questions are few sub-questions that will be answered through the research: how much is social media or general web presence a contributing factor in the tour purchase process?

2.4 Data and methods

The authors working experience with Bay Area Green Tours brings huge advantage since she is aware of their current social media strategy plan and understands what needs to be done, and what possibilities there are. Moreover, her own interests in online marketing helps in the process of improving Bay Area Green Tours social media strategy plan.

The author will use quantitative research method. In order to answer the research questions mentioned, primary and secondary data will be collected and analyzed. For primary data, the author will create a survey, using a questionnaire to target previous customers and new potential customers. The aim of the survey is to find out what social media platforms people are using and what kind of expectations they have related on BAGT social media content. The author will collect the customer contact information from Bay

Area Green Tours internal database (Madmimi & Bacthbook). Survey and questionnaire will be then defined. The survey research will provide a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of a larger group. The goal of the research is to identify the most significant variables within the Bay Area Green Tours social media strategy and interpret those in relation to the sample group (Moutinho, Huarng 2013, 92).

Pilot testing or field testing the survey provides a rationale for this survey. The author will set up discussion sessions with five experts in the field and will get possible improvement suggestions. This testing is important to establish the content validity of this survey and possibly improve the questions, format and scales as well as incorporate test groups comments into the Surveys final version (Creswell 2009, 150).

This survey will be carried out with the online survey service called SurveyMonkey. It is a commercial product that has been available since 1999. By using this service, the author can create a survey which will fit to her own research purpose. Instead of posting the survey link in the web sites, author will send via email to all the participants. SurveyMonkey is able to generate and collect results and form descriptive and graphed information of them (Creswell 2009, 149). Closed questions will be used in this survey and one open-end question. With closed questions participants will select the most suitable option, and with the open-end questions, the author can possibly get a new perspective on the research topic (Hara 2008, 25–30).

For this research, the questionnaire will aim at determining what social media platforms are currently the most relevant for tour operator, for Bay Area Green Tours. The author wants to find out how the tour operator's strong online presence affects the purchase process and what kind expectations customers have related to social media content. Moreover, the author is able to combine the purpose of the survey with current tour deal by offering additional discount to those people who fill out the survey (Appendix 1). The author's aim is to attract more people to respond to her survey as well as initiate sales.

Besides primary data, secondary data will be collected by the author. Secondary data will include books and articles published by tourism or marketing professionals. By

familiarizing with topics such as online marketing, usage of social media, author will understand what the key factors are to creating a successful social media strategy plan.

To be able to develop and improve the social media strategy plan the author will use the “Likeable Business Model” as well as other various articles to support this theory. (Kerpen 2013, 8).

2.5 Structure of the research

Chapter 3 will present general information about Bay Area Green Tours, information about their mission, target audience, products, tour types, current online marketing and social media platforms. Chapter 4 is about research analysis, the author will present the collected data and results. Chapter 5 concerns the right Social Media platforms for Bay Area Green Tours. Chapter 6 will present the new social media strategy plan by applying Likeable business model and focus on the improvement of the content. Chapter 7 concludes the research and sums up the results.

3 BAY AREA GREEN TOURS

Executive Director Marissa LaMagna founded Bay Area Green Tours (BAGT) in Berkeley, California, in 2008 initially as a project of the San Francisco Green Festival. It has grown into an educational organization showcasing local green models focused on creating a greener environment and sustainable future (Bay Area Green Tours: Team BAGT 2013). BAGT has enabled students, professionals, business owners, local citizens and eco-tourists from around the world to witness models of environmental responsibility. BAGT helps revitalize local economies by educating participants on the economic and environmental impacts of their actions, and encouraging them to make conscious choices about the things they consume and businesses they support (Bay Area Green Tours: Sponsorship Opportunities 2013).

3.1 BAGT's mission

Bay Area Green Tours offers private educational tours that demonstrate the sustainable economy in action, inspire support of local green businesses, and empower people to incorporate environmental responsibility and social justice into their personal and professional lives (Bay Area Green Tours: BAGT's Mission 2013).

3.2 Target audience

Typical clients on tours are professional adults who are committed to environmental protection and sustainable development. These individuals are willing spend more to ensure they are acting in keeping their beliefs such as eating organic foods, recycling, shopping locally and avoiding toxins. (Bay Area Green Tours: Sponsorship Opportunities 2013). Some of BAGT's clients:

- High Schools (Berkeley High School, Kennedy High School)
- Universities (Haas School of business, University of San Francisco)
- Green Companies (Whole foods)
- Green hotels (Intercontinental hotel)
- Associations (The National Science Teachers Association, East West foundation)

3.3 BAGT's Products and Services

The Bay Area is home to four of the top “Greenest Cities in America”: San Francisco (2nd), Oakland (4th) and Berkeley (7th) (Bay Area Green Tours: Sponsorship Opportunities 2013). BAGT provides tours in San Francisco, Marin County, Napa Valley, Sonoma, Berkeley, Oakland, Richmond, Brentwood, San Mateo Coast, and the Central Valley. BAGT provides private tours for groups but on September 28th, 2013, they will launch their first open to the public farm tour (in nearly two years). BAGT's main products can be divided into three main categories:

- **Eco Tours of San Francisco and the Bay Area** tour participants meet with the owners of pioneering organizations and businesses that drive the engine of the global green economy, gaining memorable insights into how they think green and succeed. Eco Tours are considered to be informative yet interesting and fun.
- **Educational tours** tour participants experience behind-the-scenes visits and engage with innovators around the Bay Area who are working to create a sustainable future. These tours are a great learning experience.
- **Events** BAGT offers a range of private events, such as business retreats, birthday parties, weddings, reunions and more. Events could include: massage, yoga, meditation, cooking classes, and delicious local meals.

3.4 Tour Types

BAGT offers about 16 different types of tours, and crafts others specific to companies, groups, schools, conferences, and retreats. BAGT is in the process of introducing more standardized tours. BAGT's six most popular tour topics are presented below (Bay Area Green Tours: Sponsorship Opportunities 2013).

3.4.1 Trash to Treasures: Rethinking Waste Tour

One person's garbage can be another's gold. On this tour you have the opportunity to meet innovators who are responsible for keeping tons of reusable materials out of the landfill, and you can learn how waste is transformed into valuable products through creative re-use and recycling. This tour can include a visit to: Berkeley transfer station,

Urban Ore, Omega Salvage, and other innovative models of re-use and sustainability (BAGT Tour Catalog 2013).

3.4.2 Renewable Energy: Sun, Wind and Water

During this tour you can educate yourself on: renewable sources of energy wind power, solarpower, tidal power, hydroelectric power, geothermal energy and biomass and how essential these alternatives are for fossil fuels. This tour can include visits to: Sungevity, Sirona Fuels, AC Transit Fueling Station, Solar Power Partners Array (BAGT Tour Catalog 2013).

3.4.3 Edible Cities: Urban Farm Tour

This tour features farms which demonstrate that food can also be grown with great success in urban settings, even in major metropolitan areas like San Francisco. By visiting urban farms you will learn how to set up your own urban garden and create healthier communities. You can visit Hayes Valley, Urban Adamah or Spiral Gardens (BAGT Tour Catalog 2013).

3.4.4 Sustainable Wine & Cheese Tour

Visit a sustainable or biodynamic Bay Area winery and have the chance to hear directly from the wine maker or manager of the sustainable vineyard. You will have a tour of the vineyard, a wine tasting and the opportunity to buy products on site. Participants will also visit and learn from cheese producers about sustainable farming, the process of making cheese, and how they care for the farm animals. BAGT has partner wineries and cheese farms all over the Bay Area, one example is Harley Farms Goat Dairy (BAGT Tour Catalog 2013).

3.4.5 Sustainable Farm & Agriculture Tour

On this tour you will spend a day on a beautiful sustainable farm and learn about farm life, sustainable agriculture techniques and the history of the area. In addition, you will learn about the importance of Agricultural Land Trusts protecting farmland from being converted urban development. Usually customers enjoy lunch at the farm. One take away from this tour is understanding the benefits of buying organic products as well as supporting locally- produced food. Possible farm tour stops: River Dog Farm, Full Belly Farm and Alemany Farm (BAGT Tour Catalog 2013).

3.4.6 Sustainable Cityscapes: Green Building Tour

You are invited to explore some of the most sustainable architecture in the Bay Area on this educational tour and see how green buildings can serve as exciting new models for the future. You will meet green leaders and see green buildings that vary from offices to family homes as well as establishments that produce alternative building materials. In this tour you will get an explanation of how building green lowers the ecological footprint of any structure. Possible green buildings tour stops are: The David Brower Center, Gather Restaurant, Hotel Shattuck Plaza and The Freight & Salvage Coffeehouse (BAGT Tour Catalog 2013).

3.5 BAGT's Online Marketing

BAGT has a strong online presence. Their website where features tour information, employee information, testimonials, articles etc. It is the main online marketing tool that is used to advertise products and services, to communicate with customers and raise BAGT's brand awareness. BAGT also has an e-newsletter which will be sent to customers approximately once a month. The e-newsletter is sent to about 5 000 people. The email database has been collected by direct sign-ups at many venues and events during the last five years, and is occasionally used for direct marketing as well. The e-newsletter is also published on the BAGT website, including the full text of extended articles that are clipped in the emailed version.

At the moment BAGT is using several social media platforms and that are the primary purview of various interns. BAGT is currently on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, and Pinterest. It is clear the organization is very active on social media but the author wants to help BAGT to optimize their social media usage for each platform and improve the specific content.

Pinterest is a tool for collecting and organizing things that you like or feel passion about by using beautiful and inspiring pictures (Pinterest 2013). BAGT has a Pinterest account but it has been a largely static collection since its initial creation. To inspire people BAGT should use it actively by posting new pictures, setting up contests and embracing what they are passionate about. **Instagram** is another photo based application where you can share quickly and agilely videos or pictures with your friends. BAGT is sharing pictures via Instagram when they host tours or participate on events.

BAGT is using Hootsuite, a social media management system to manage their multiple social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Google+). Mainly BAGT is posting the same content on all these channels. **Facebook** is the most popular social networking website in which you can upload photos and videos and it is considered to be a great marketplace. People with similar interests can set up groups or events, Facebook is all about sharing whether it is stories, experiences or photos, and it is available in 37 languages (Rouse 2013).

BAGT uses Facebook for educating people about sustainability or other environmentally relevant issues, producing two articles for posts per day. In addition, they post pictures when they are hosting a tour or participating in events. BAGT was identified as a Facebook marketing star since they have had such a rapid audience growth. They have 1219 friends/fans at the moment. (See Figure 2. below).

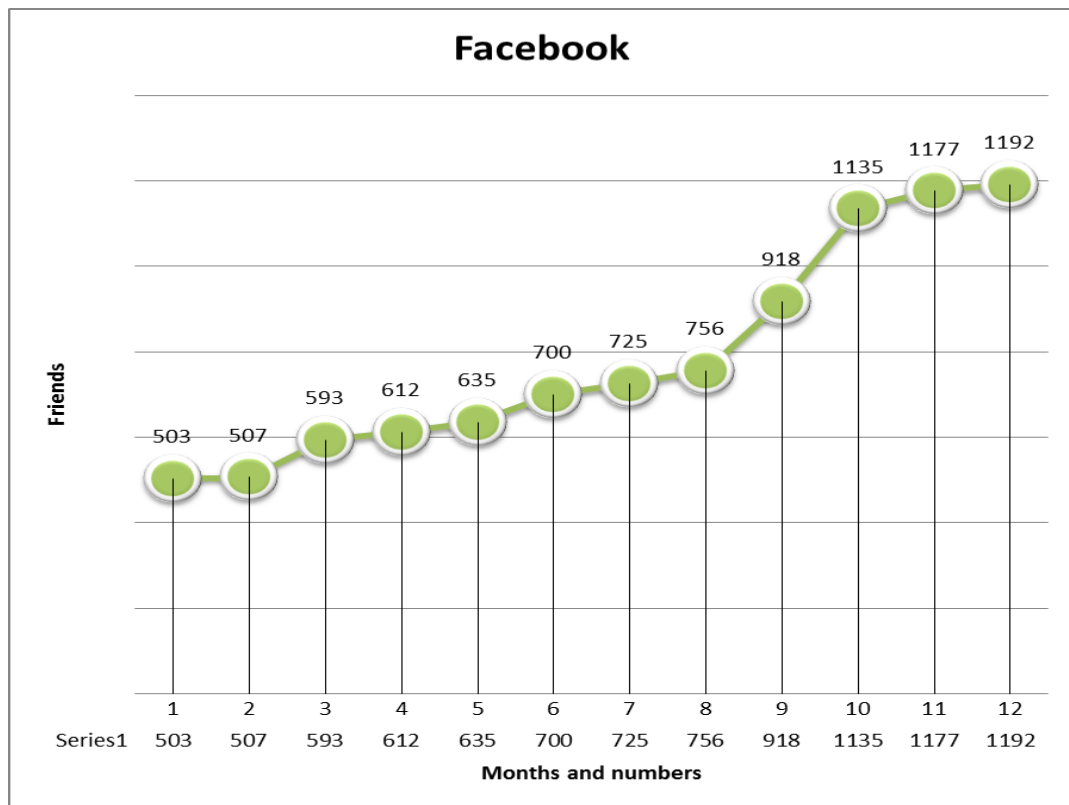


FIGURE 2. Facebook Friends, Last 12 Months

The Facebook statistics in Figure 2 reflect the number of friends/fans that BAGT has, and covers the months of September 2012 through August 2013. Between April (756 friends) and June (1135 friends), you can see is the biggest jump; during this two month period BAGT used its monthly for advertising budget by concentrating on one week instead of spreading it out. They also targeted an international as well as a domestic audience. It was a good experiment, and they gained lot of fans but they weren't able to reach out specifically to people who live in the Bay Area or more importantly they didn't target possible future customers. It is crucial to build an online community instead of going for the "low-hanging fruit" to increase the number of people who like your page, which creates an illusion of engagement (EdgeRank 2013). BAGT will need to find a way to reach out to these crucial demographics connect with them, share BAGT story, and make sales.

Google+ is another social network that provides an opportunity for organizations to share their stories and even set up panel discussion. It is quite similar to Facebook but it claims to be even better when it comes to researching people. Google+ has one interesting feature called Circles, which allows you to create groups of people to follow. Unlike with Facebook, the other person need not reciprocate your follow in order to make the

connection. You can create multiple Circles to categorize your contacts (Meerman 2013, 253). BAGT uses the same postings for Google+ as for Facebook. **Twitter** is another social network which is based on text messages of up to 140 characters (tweets). Twitter is useful when it comes to sharing your daily activities in brief, or if you have a succinct announcement to make. BAGT clips the Facebook content and puts these shorter entries on Twitter. BAGT has currently 542 followers and is following 279 organizations/people in Twitter.

This section has briefly identified the current social media channels that Bay Area Green Tours uses. It focused specifically on Facebook since it is the biggest social network in the world as well as it is the most active social media platform for BAGT.

Also, the author wanted to explore Bay Area Green Tours as an organization therefore in order to properly analyze the most suitable and useful social media platforms for their purposes. A sustainability focused non-profit organization has specific needs to consider while creating a new social media strategy plan. Marketing generally isn't about who has the most money, it's about who's the most clever. Social media is designed to get the customer over the threshold by experiencing a great level of hospitality, BAGT needs to consistently deliver that great experience by first creating an engaging and productive social media strategy that requires constant attention and refinement (Stagg 2012, 34–37).

4 QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

The purpose of this survey was to investigate what the most relevant social media platforms are for Bay Area Green Tours as well as what expectations customers have related on the tour operator's content. In addition, will a strong web presence or social media affect to the purchase process? This survey consisted of 15 questions. Questions 1-3 concerned the demographic information of the respondents. Questions 4-6 asks respondents travel information and questions 7-14 explain respondents' social media behavior. Question 15 was optional for those who were interested in receiving a discount code for BAGT public tours (appendix 1).

The questionnaires data was collected in August 2013 through email. The survey and survey letter (appendices 1 & 2) were sent to BAGT's current customers and possible future customers. All the contact information was taken from their own database (Madmimi & Batchbook). The survey was sent to 740 people, 145 (20 %) of them were current customers and 595 (80 %) of them were possible customers who have showed interest in Bay Area Green Tours by signing up for their e-newsletter. The goal was to get at least 5-7 % people to respond, and at the closing of the questionnaire form, there were 37 (5 %) respondents. All 37 respondents qualified for the analysis. The author hoped to get a larger sample, however the research respondents were enough for successful research.

4.1 Demographic Information

The questions 1-3 were designed to gather demographic information of the participants. These questions were about gender, age and the residential area of the respondents. Most of the respondents were women. Out of 37 respondents, 26 were women, which is 70 % and 11 of them were men which is 30 % of them. There can be several reasons why women are more responsive, one reason could be that they spend more time online.

Most of the respondents were 25- 34 years old (27 %). There was almost the same amount of respondents in the age group of 18-24 (24 %). The third largest age group was 65-74 years old people (13.5 %). Age groups 44-54 years old and 55-64 years old have the same respond percentage (11 %) and people 34-44 years old had a bit smaller

percentage (8 %). There was one person younger than 18 years old and one person older than 75 years old (2.7 %). The group 18- 24 being so much more represented shows that they felt more comfortable to fill out the questionnaire since they are from a generation that has grown up with the internet. The figure 3 displays the division of age distribution.

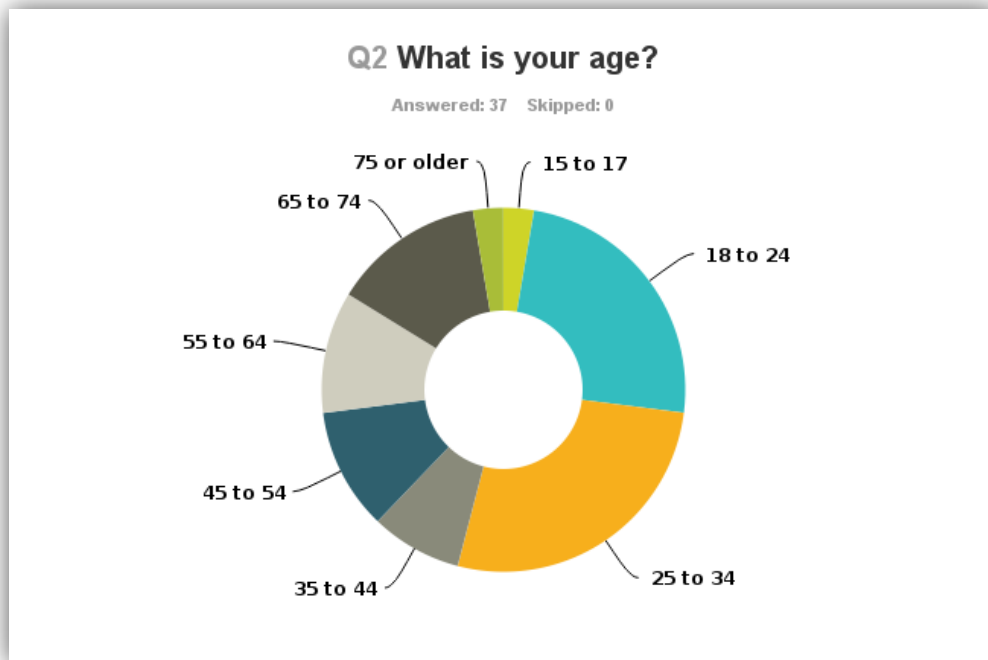


FIGURE 3. The age of respondents

In total the questionnaire got respondents from three different countries, Finland, Sweden and United States of America. Out of 37 people, eight of them were international (22 %). Seven of them were from Finland (19 %) and one person was from Sweden (3 %). What is more relevant is that 29 (78 %) of all respondents were local people who specifically live in the Bay Area of California. 15 (41 %) of survey takers lived in Berkeley, CA. The other 14 of the U.S residents live in San Francisco(8 %), Oakland(6 %), Richmond(3 %), Fairfax(3 %), Dillon Beach(3 %), Kensington(3 %), Concord(3 %), Sacramento(3 %), El Sobrante(3 %) and Lafayette(3 %). By identifying the respondents, place of residence assumptions can be made that this survey reached out to BAGT target audience and that respondents can be used as a valuable source of information.

4.2 Travel Information

The survey questions 5- 7 were about respondents' purpose of travel and how often they go on a one day tour organized by a tour operator. When an organization tries to attract more customers it is relevant to know more about the customers travelling behavior. It is equally important to examine what sources customers are using when they are looking information because the information source can be a contributing factor to whether the customer decides to purchase a trip or not. On average 27(82 %) of the respondents takes one day trips 1-2 per year, 5(15 %) respondents take 3-4 one day trips per year and 1(3 %) of them takes more than 5 one day trips per year. With this question (Figure 4.) four (10 %) of all respondents skipped this question.

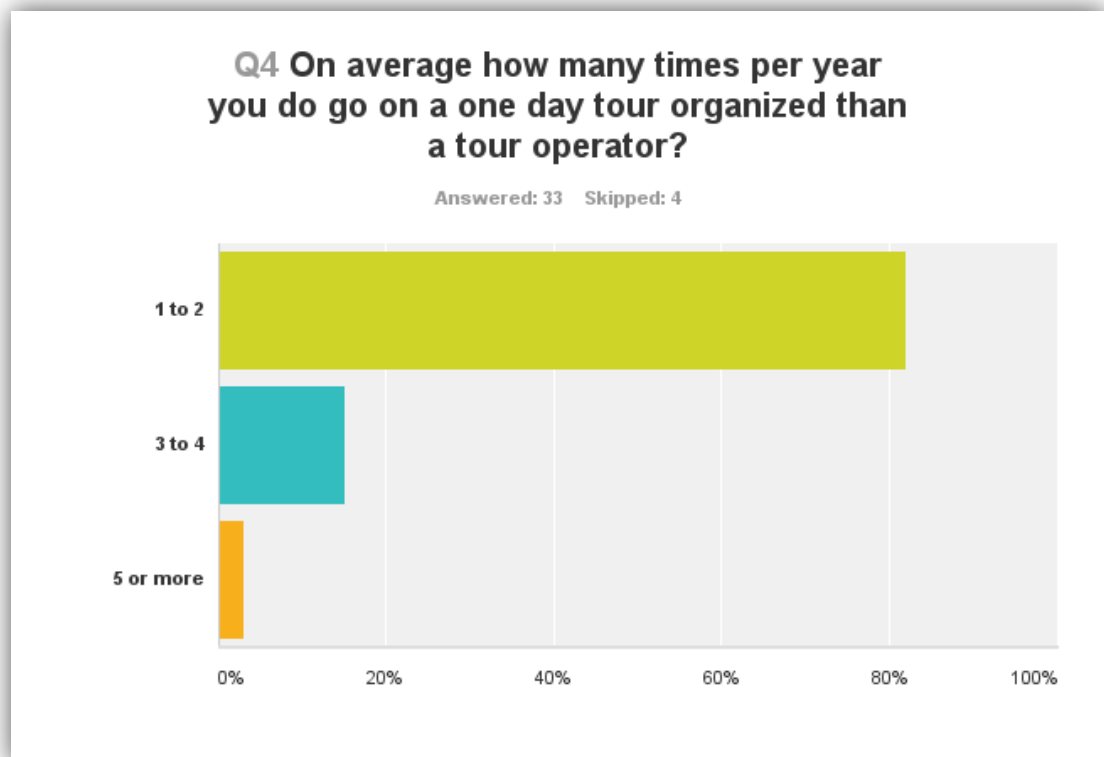


FIGURE 4. The frequency of one day tour per year

The reasons for travelling vary and respondents had multiple choice answers to select from when answering this question. Most of the respondents travel for leisure 28 (78 %). The second most common reason was for to see family/friends 14(39%). 7 (19 %) of respondents said that travelling is for business while 5(14 %) are travel to educate

themselves. One person skipped this question (3 %). One person also pointed out that he travels for sport tournaments. A statement can be made that people travelling with a leisure purpose also have time for different kind of activities including one day trips.

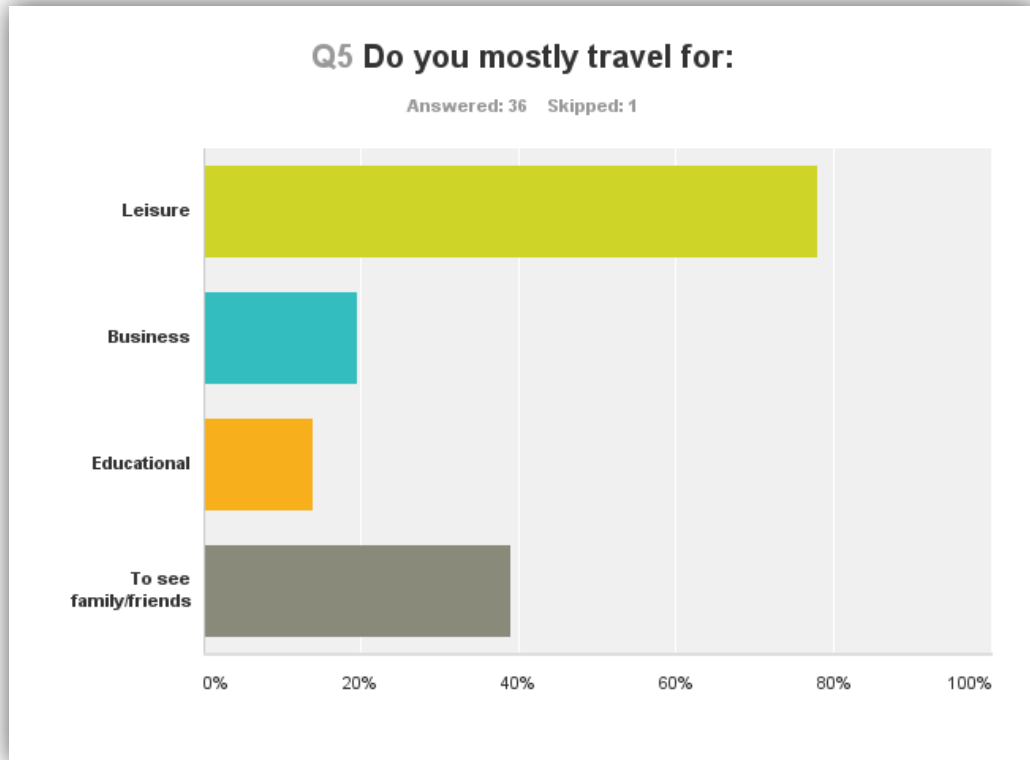


FIGURE 5. The reasons for travelling

Concerning different information sources 24 (65 %) of the respondents use their family and friends as a valuable information source. The second best source was online tour/trip websites like Viator and Expedia according to 20 (54 %) respondents. Another valuable source for information included social media reviews like Yelp and TripAdvisor, citing 17 (46 %) of them considering online reviews and stories useful. Almost half of the respondents 16 (43 %) thought that destination websites were also helpful. 13 (35 %) of the respondents use travel guide and books for finding information. To search for information 9 (24 %) of them use Social media and less than ten people 6 (16 %) go to tourist information offices. According to responses travel affairs were not considered useful source for information (0 %).

The results from this question explicates that people are widely using internet for finding information this shows that tour/trip websites, reviews in social media and destina-

tion websites are vital for customers. This is valuable information for organizations when they are developing their online marketing strategies (Figure 6). Certainly the value of friends/families as a source cannot be forgotten.

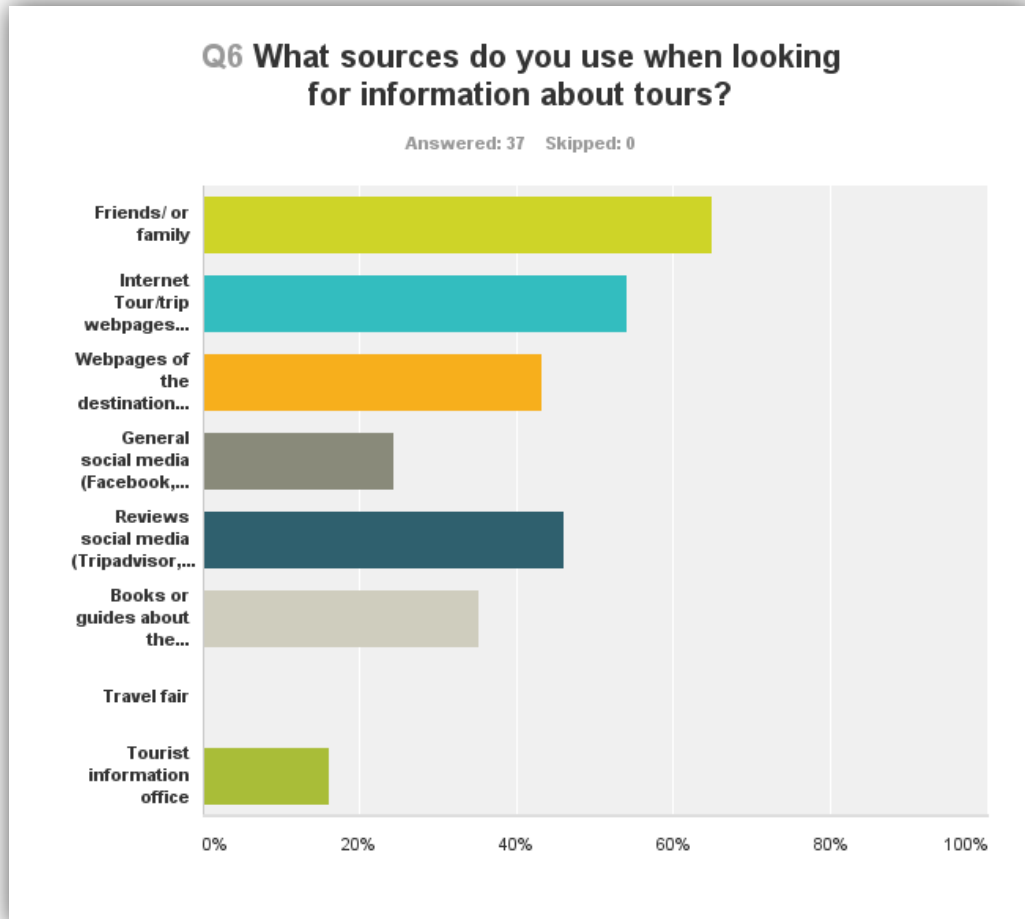


FIGURE 6. The sources used for finding information

4.3 Uses of Internet and Social Media

After knowing that people use internet to search for information and for bookings, it is important to examine how they use those online tools. The following questions 7-14 focused on what social media channels customers use from the travel point of view and what kind of expectations they have related to those channels. Moreover, it was asked if the general web presence or social media presence had an influence in the purchase process.

Almost all 36 (97 %) of the respondents said that it was important that tour operator had a website, 18 (49 %) of them considers Tripadvisor or Yelp with customer reviews important, 6(16 %) of states that having a Facebook page is relevant. Very few of the respondents 4 (11 %) expressed that having a booking webpage was somewhat important. None of the respondents thought the having a pinterest or twitter account to be relevant (Figure 7).

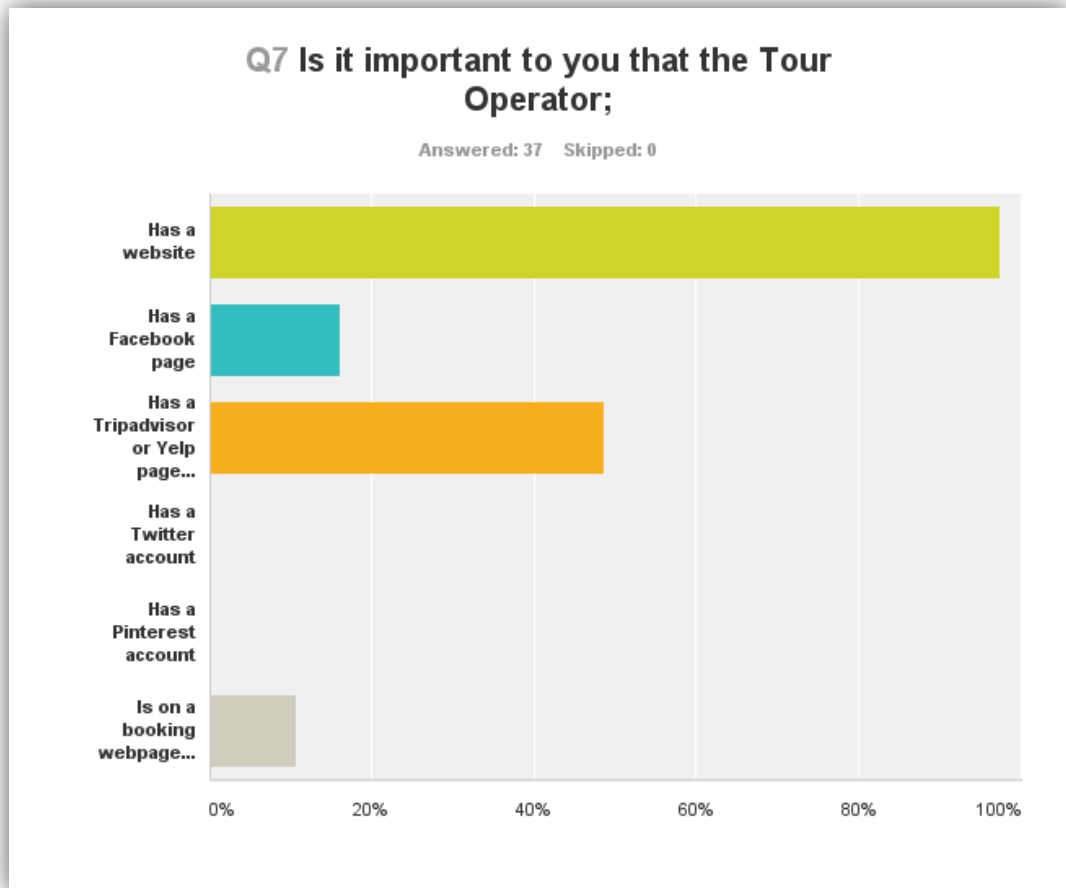


FIGURE 7. Importance of e-presence

Question 8 clarifies customers' expectations related to the tour operators websites, 31 (84 %) of them said that tour information (prices) should be available in the websites. Online booking system and photos of the tours were equally important, 27 (73 %). More than half of respondents 24 (65 %) wished to have customer service via email available. Only one person (3 %) thought that customer service via instant chat would be helpful.

With this question the author wanted to know what kind of expectations respondents have related on the websites. From this data, one can conclude that the website is the

main online marketing tool for Bay Area Green Tours that attracts customers. Also some respondents specifically mentioned that they want detailed information about the tours, tour prices and itineraries. Also a lack of clear contact information was mentioned as a downfall these results show that customers mostly want detailed information about tours and while they are looking for it, all information needs to be clearly available without putting any extra effort to get it. Additionally, if potential customers wish to have customer service they should be able to find the contact information easily (Figure 8).

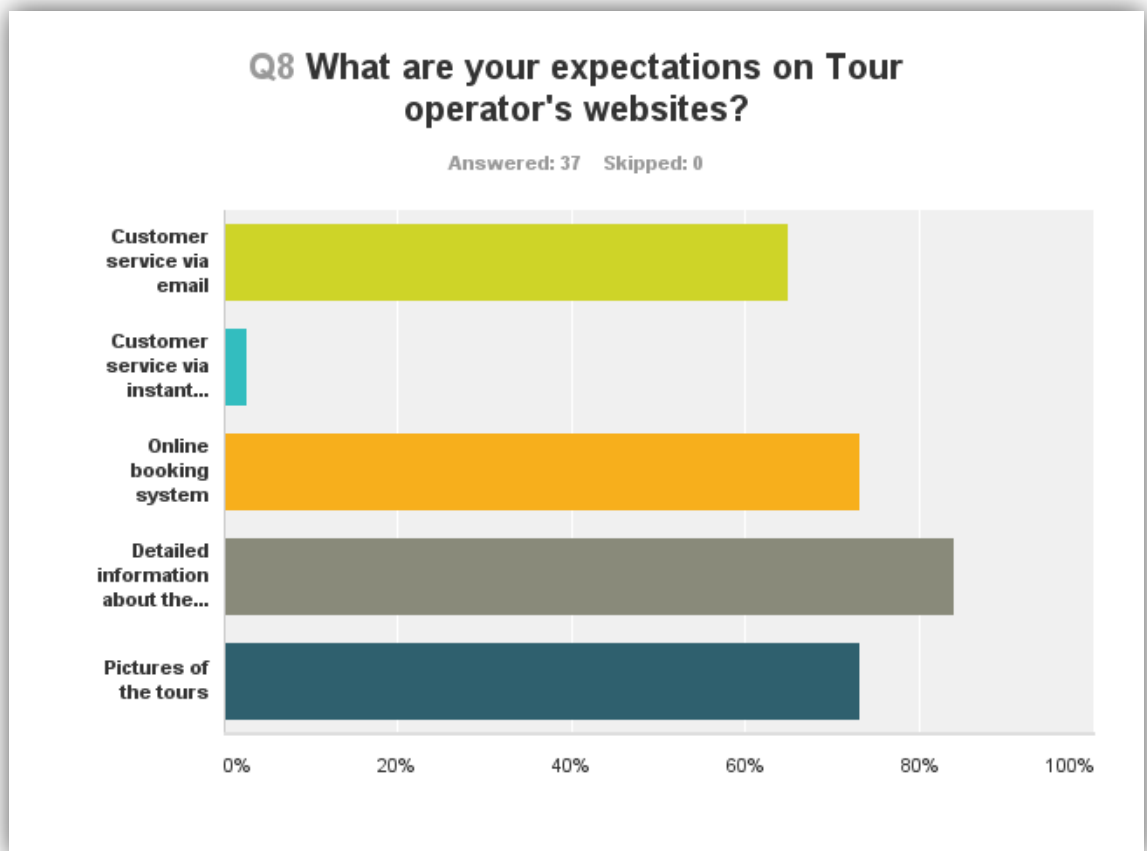


FIGURE 8. The expectations on Tour Operator's websites

By asking question 9: "What social media channels the respondents are using actively?" The author wanted to know how familiar those websites are to the survey takers. Almost all of them 34 (86 %) are using Facebook actively. A bit less than half 15 (41 %) are using Yelp and 11 (30 %) of them are using Twitter, 9 (24 %) of them are active users in Instagram. Some of them 7(19 %) are using Google+ and 6 (16 %) are familiar with Tripadvisor. For 5 (13 %) of them Pinterest was familiar. And few of them 3 (8 %) de-

clared not to use any social media platforms actively. The results showed that most of the respondents are familiar with Facebook and Yelp and are active users. Besides those platforms, however they are not using other social media platforms daily.

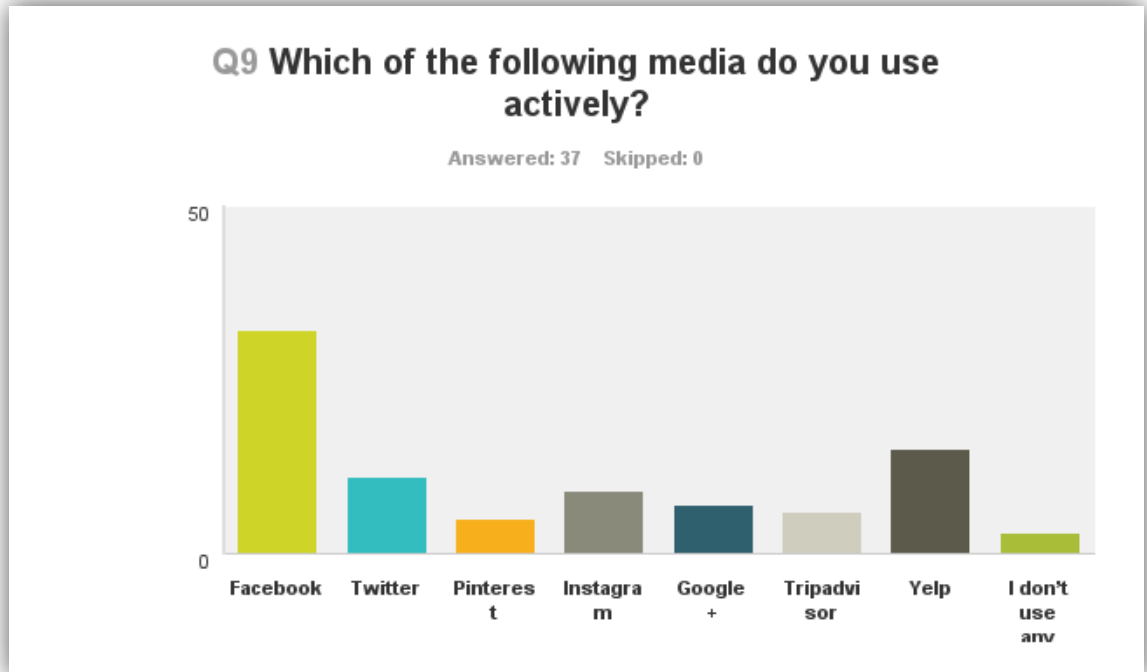


FIGURE 9. The respondents' social media usage

With the question 10, the author wanted to know whether the respondents were a fan of Bay Area Green Tour in any social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). Most of the respondents, 20 (54 %) were not fans of BAGT online, however 17(46 %) are fans.

The following question 11, "Are you satisfied with the content", might explain why the more than half of the respondents are not fan of Bay Area Green Tours. This question was optional and 14 (27 %) responded. For 6 (16 %) the content was satisfying although some suggestions were addressed, for example the length of the e-newsletter was too long. E-newsletter is one force on driving traffic to your websites. In the era of the social web, the e-newsletter subscription rate in the non-profit sector is actually growing-especially small non-profits like BAGT (Mansfield 2012, 14).

The content of Facebook was too confusing and there are too many articles that aren't relevant to Bay Area Green Tours which could even drive people away according to the respondents. It was also pointed out that Facebook content should include postings that are more entertaining like videos and photos. Some of the respondents said that less updates on Facebook would be better because they felt like BAGT is posting things just for the sake of posting instead of sharing something important. At the moment, BAGT is posting two environmental related articles every day, one posting in the morning and another one in the late afternoon.

Some of the respondents find BAGT websites somewhat hard to read, noting that it takes lot of time to figure out where to find the tour information because generally the information is spread around. Also, tour prices should be clearly informed on all the online channels. These results showed that there is a need for some improvements on the BAGT's Facebook page. At the moment the tour and price information is not clearly organized. With this question, the author gained valuable feedback and will use it in creating a social media strategic plan.

The question 12, "Does it make a difference if the tour operator has an active social media content or not?" For 25 (68 %) of survey takers it didn't make any difference and to 12 (32 %) it did make a difference. There can be various reasons for these results. Social media is a quite new online marketing tool, so it might take some time before customers and organizations will understand the beneficial sides of using it, even if it is rapidly been adapted in the tourism industry (Figure 10).

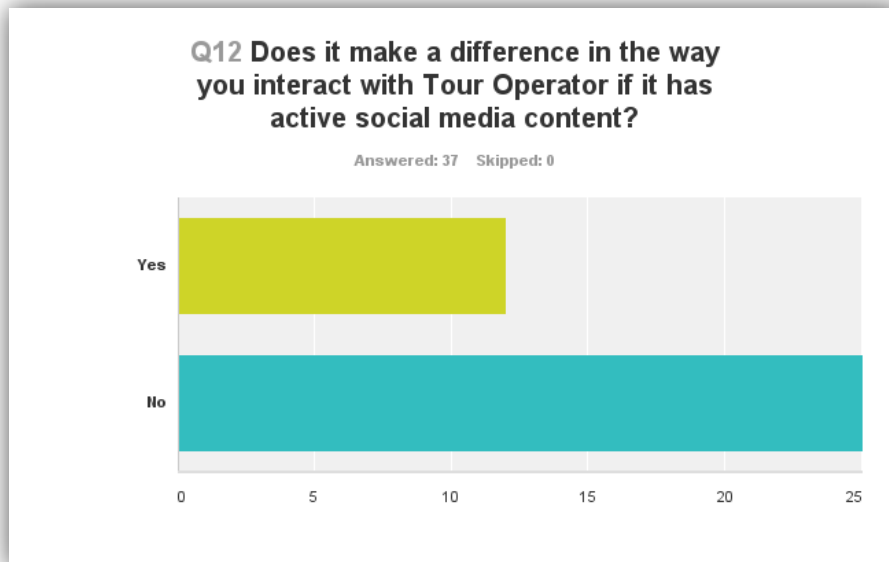


FIGURE 10. The difference having an active social media or not

The question 13 helped the author to get information on what expectations the respondents have related on the Facebook page. For 21 (57 %) of them it would be valuable to have the most updated tour information available. Sharing experiences of the tours and sales & promotion were equally as important to the respondents 17(46 %). For 14 (38 %) respondents Facebook page is not relevant that is why they do not have any expectations. For 12 (32 %) of them it is interesting to have articles related to the tour topic. Some of them 10 (27 %) wants to be entertained by the Facebook page and 8 (23 %) expect to have customer service via Facebook. Based on the results, respondents want to have the most updated information about tours and sales & promotion, and read about other people experiences. When you already have a social media page or you are just starting to create such a page, it is important for tour operator to know what their customers and potential customers expect from it (Figure 11).

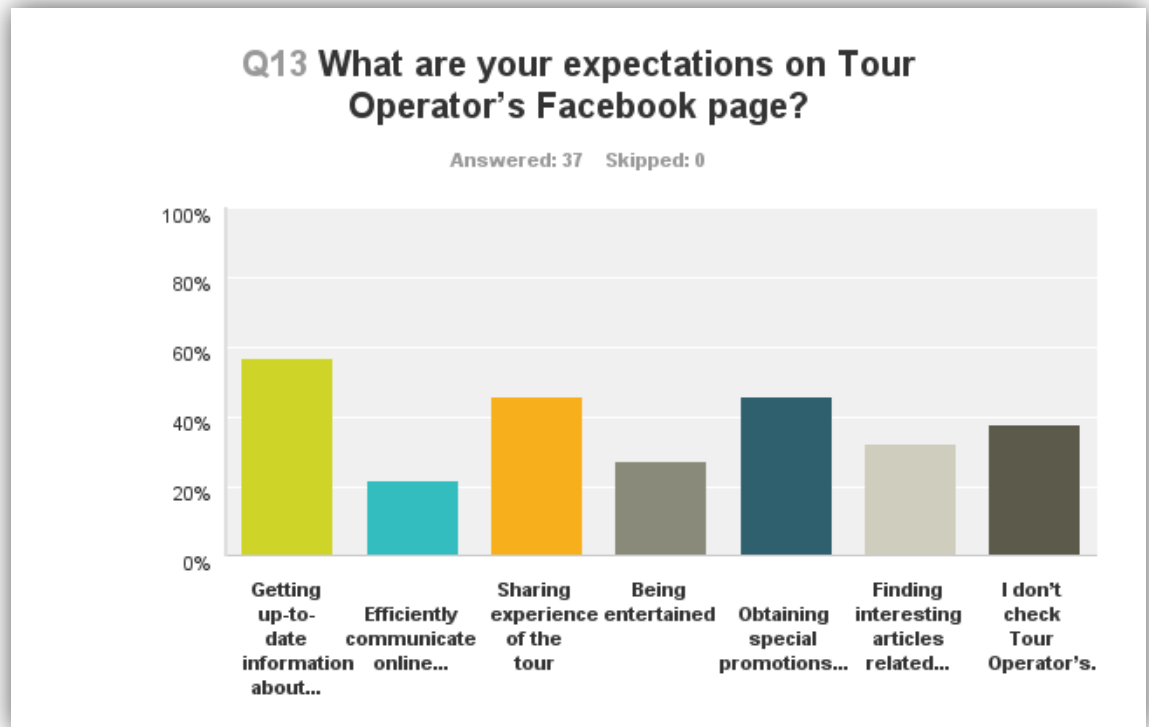


FIGURE 11. The expectations on Tour Operators Facebook page

The question 14 concerns whether the tour operators web presence has an influence in the purchasing decision. For 30 (81 %) of them the amount of the information is vital and 24 (65 %) of them appreciates good amount of reviews. 22 (60 %) of respondents state that the layout and look of the webpages are a contributing factors. This result also supports previous question number 11, when respondents gave feedback that the BAGT website was unorganized and slightly hard to follow. It crucial to develop the website since it can drive away possible customers. For 13 (35 %) of respondents a discount code might attract them or affect their purchase decision. A few of the survey takers 5 (14 %) mentioned that updated social media makes a difference and amount of the www presence has the least impact on it, only 4 (11 %) of them claim it is relevant (Figure 12).

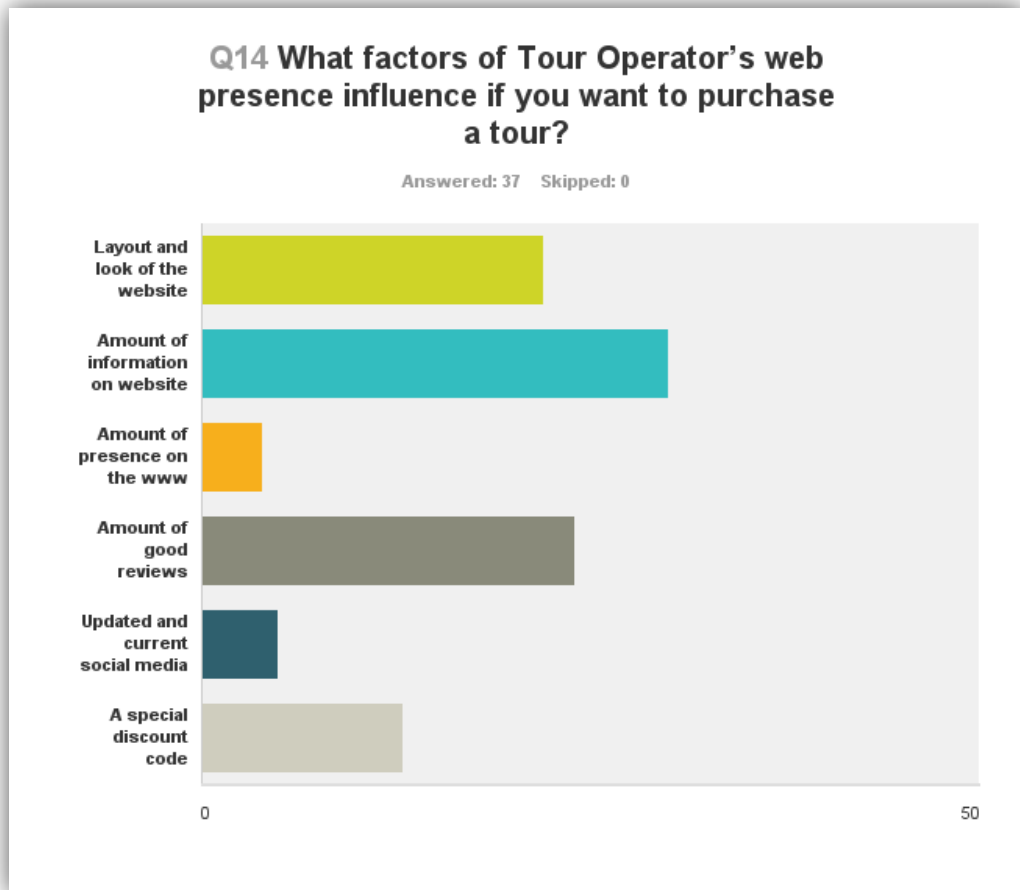


FIGURE 12. The possible factor that influences on the purchase decision

Question 15 was optional to those who were interested in having a discount code for BAGT's public tours. The author asked respondents to add their email if they were interested to receive the code, 8 (22 %) of them wish to have the code. The results showed how important internet is for people nowadays and how they are using it as part of their way to research information, but also what expectation they have related to social media and websites.

5 SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR BAY AREA GREEN TOURS

In this Chapter the author will use the results from survey research to identify the most useful social media platforms for Bay Area Green Tours. The author will present those platforms as well as explain why it is beneficial to use them. In addition, the author will compare social media to a cocktail party, which will demonstrate why it is essential to choose the right social media channels and how you can bring value in the content.

5.1 Social Media Is a Cocktail Party

Social media can be compared to a cocktail party. The person at a cocktail party who listens, who tells great stories, who is responsive, authentic, passionate, and grateful, will be the hit of the party time after time and will derive the most value from the party. The person who is direct and transparent, who knows how to keep it simple and always has a surprise up his sleeve, is the one worth hanging around. The guy who can go with the flow (adapt) and knows how to behave in a group is the guy you will want in your circle. The same person will be successful in the giant cocktail party as the business potentially world. In today's social media- driven world, possibly business is more like a cocktail party on a reality show instead of a private party, because the whole world is watching (Kerpen 2013, 201–202). The way you behave or the way you present yourself in the party is related to how you deliver your message in the social media platforms. The popular people on the cocktail party circuit make friends and as, we know, people like to do business with people they like and are eager to introduce their friends to each other.

5.2 How Do You Act in a Cocktail Party?

When you participate in a cocktail party it is important to remember that you are presenting your entire organization. The following questions are helpful to people who are still defining their social media strategy (Meerman 2013, 55–56).

- Do you go into a large group filled with tons of people you don't know and shout, "Buy my product"?

- Do you go into a cocktail party and ask every single person you meet for a business card before even talking with them?
- Do you listen more than you speak?
- Are you helpful, providing valuable information to people with no expectations of getting something in return?
- Do you try to meet every single person, or do you have a few great conversations?
- Do you avoid the social interaction in the cocktail parties because you feel uncomfortable in such situations?

These questions highlight issues or possible mistakes that organizations make or do not really take into consideration. These questions clarify what kind of image a person wants to give to others or how the person would present the organization's brand in the cocktail party/ social media platform.

5.3 When You Can Not Go to Every Cocktail Party

There are thousands of social media sites out there, and it is simply impossible to be active in all of them. Once you choose a few parties to attend, you cannot meet and have conversation with each and every person there. For most people and organizations, it is better to be active in a few social networking sites instead of creating profiles on dozens of them and being too busy to spend much time on any one. Since you cannot go to every party, you need to pick and choose. Where do you want to be? Where you can be most helpful? (Meerman 2013, 269–270)

Bay Area Green Tours is a small organization and all the employees must use their time reasonably by prioritizing their tasks. By taking their time into consideration and analyzing the survey results, the author has come up with three main focus platforms for Bay Area Green Tours; Facebook, Yelp and TripAdvisor.

5.4 Facebook

Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. Facebook is the world's most popular social networking website, with over a billion users worldwide and it was founded 2004. Every day there are about 250 million photos uploaded, and 2.7 billion "likes". Around 425 million users use Facebook also on a mobile device such as phones and tablets. One of the most useful aspects of Facebook is the ability for people to like and tag the things that you do on the social media networking site, by liking something your friends are able to see it as well and if you tag someone or something it will appear to them and they will get a notification (Facebook 2013).

5.4.1 Facebook Success Story

Tour operators can have a great success story in Facebook if they are use it well. One success story is about Luxury Link. They are a travel company, which offers a high-end hotel travel packages. By running ads on Facebook, the company increased their travel package sales 100 % by increased monthly website visits by 30 % and received 90 % new customers. Their goal was to drive engagement and increase brand visibility. They encouraged people to share their unique travel experience and they offered relevant deals to their community to reach that goal. As their community continued to engage and grow, they saw their revenue increasing month after month (Facebook for business: Luxury Link 2013).

5.4.2 Targeting the Right Audience

It is crucial that the organization make their Facebook page locally relevant. There is no point in spending time marketing to the entire social sphere when only the local community (and occasionally vacationers) can respond (Reid 2013). You can target your audience in varies ways in Facebook. You can target your specific audience by their interests, for example "environment or health". Facebook will give you multiple options for interest topics and you select the ones that you share with customers. So basically, you try to reach out to people who will most likely like your business.

Secondly, you can target your audience by their area of residence. If you are looking to run a physical marketing campaign or meet-up, this data offers terrific awareness. While exploring where your audience currently lives, researching where they have visited is important as well. This search is particularly valuable if you are looking to expand in a new location. By making this research even more helpful is a map full of indicators highlighting the locations.

Thirdly, you can target your audience by their age if that is relevant your business. One way to learn more about your customers is to see if they are part of any specific groups, such as wine or photography groups. Facebook also allows you to add your favorite games onto your page. Knowing what games your audience is comfortable with could help guide the “gamification” efforts of your websites or upcoming contest, like puzzles, action, sports etc. All this information is useful when you are targeting your audience but it is important to remember that people do not put all the information in their Facebook profile (Cooper 2013).

5.4.3 Facebook for BAGT

The News Feed— in the center column of your home page— is the most meaningful part of Facebook, to BAGT. News Feed stories includes likes, status updates, app activity, photos, videos, and links. There are multiple ways to make the BAGT Facebook page more colorful and more interesting than two simple articles per day. They are entertaining ways to engage customers like polls and trivia questions: What is your favorite spot in the nature? Who is your favorite green leader?

Tours is all about being educational, so small contests about environmentally related issues could be fun way to reach out customers. While asking these questions, respond and comment yourself, to keep conversation going on (EdgeRank 2013). People want to know that you care about them, so do not wait days before you get back to them. It is important to create the sense of belonging, and there is no quicker or faster way than social media (Stoessel 2013, 97).

Adding links, photos and videos to all your posts increases visual interaction, making it more likely that users will view/watch, share, like, comment and browse. Bay Area Green Tours has the most amazing pictures and videos in their database so now it is the time to start using them. A picture tells more than a thousand words (EdgeRank 2013). Whether you are posting videos, educational articles or questions it is all about timing. People are often online in the mornings around 9 am and 5 pm in the late afternoons.

5.5 Yelp

Yelp has come onto the social media marketing scene in a big way. First launched in 2004, Yelp helps people find information on specific business. Having good reviews on Yelp can help increase your client base and give your business credibility. Yelp has an average of approximately 108 million monthly visitors and you can find over 42 million local reviews from Yelp. Moreover to reviews, you can use Yelp as a tool to find events, lists and connect with other Yelpers. While a business owner or manager can set up a free Yelp account, there are paid Yelp ads packages that can help you to change or re-order the reviews. Yelp is a pioneer with mobile apps as they have 10 million mobile devices connected to them in a monthly basis. You can communicate with customers privately in Yelp or publicly by responding the reviews. You can also get statistics of how many people went to your Yelp page etc (Yelp 2013).

5.5.1 Yelp for BAGT

BAGT can set up Yelp account and ask their previous customers write a review of their tour experiences, but it also needs to consider that not all the reviews, are necessarily good ones so BAGT needs to be careful with the negatives reviews since nothing can be deleted from Yelp, in a sense customer is always in charge. In additional BAGT could cooperate with their partners and mutually recommend each other on yelp. All of BAGT's social media channels should be linked to Yelp.

The second option is to pay for some extra features. Yelp ads appear above top search results and on competitors' pages for similar services. Customers searching for a nearby tour operator would see the BAGT ad first. BAGT would receive an enhanced profile

that includes a photo slideshow, -and competitors' ads are removed from BAGT Yelp listing. You can also highlight a user's review that you liked the most. You can target your audience while they are making decision about where they are going to spend their money on a business. Here are some ad prices listed below (Yelp 2013).

- \$300/month- promotes you to 1500 people in your area looking for a business like yours
- \$500/month- promotes you to 4000 people in your area looking for a business like yours
- \$1000/month- promotes you to 10000 people in your area looking for a business like yours

5.6 TripAdvisor

TripAdvisor is the world's largest travel site, enabling travelers to plan and have the perfect trip. TripAdvisor offers trusted reviews and advice from real travelers and multiple travel choices. TripAdvisor branded sites make up the largest travel community in the world, with more than 260 million unique monthly visitors, and over 100 million reviews and opinions covering more than 2.7 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions. The sites operate in 30 countries worldwide. TripAdvisor draws a diverse international and domestic audience with one thing in common: they plan to travel. Customers often read reviews from TripAdvisor before they make a decision on whether or not to purchase a trip. In addition, companies are able to respond on the reviews and interact directly with the clients (TripAdvisor 2013).

According to a survey made by TripAdvisor in January 2012, out of 35 042 total participants, 92 % of people refer to online sources when planning and researching their trip, showing that online platforms are the main source of travel information. Travel review websites are the most popular information source (69 %), followed by web based travel agencies (57 %) and travel operator websites (56 %). Less than a fifth (18 %) -turn to an offline travel agency to plan their last trip. Among those who use reviews to plan their last trip, over eight out of ten (85 %) said that other people's comments, videos and photographs on social media influenced their plans (TripAdvisor 2013). Online reviews are changing customers travel behavior, so it is crucial for BAGT to sign up for a business account on TripAdvisor and become more visible to 260 million people.

5.6.1 TripAdvisor for BAGT

By signing up for up a business account on TripAdvisor the company can update their latest deals for free and showcase the company with great pictures. It is also easy to follow-up what it going on through email notifications when you get new reviews from customers and you can instantly reply to them. You are able to promote your company with widgets and badges which can be placed on you company's websites, and you can monitor you competitor's performance as well (TripAdvisor 2013).

In order to market BAGT on TripAdvisor, the company needs to register with management center and have access to free resources which will help them to make the most of the website. On the company's TripAdvisor page there will be detailed information about BAGT's services & products. By having breathtaking pictures and interesting videos, the tours will naturally sell themselves. The main point is to get good reviews so it is fundamental to encourage customers to write a review. Your company will show up on the business list by traveler ratings on, "how satisfied they were to your product". BAGT would show up under the sections called "Things to do" in one of the cities in the Bay Area. What is a nice capability is that BAGT can promote their TripAdvisor page on their Facebook page, so a TripAdvisor applicant can be added to the Facebook page and the fans of the page can read the review from Facebook as well.

These social media tools that were pointed out are free online marketing tools that the author would highly recommend for Bay Area Green Tours. Those platforms have huge potential, and they are already well adapted and recognized in the tourism industry. The visibility could provide a significant difference in sales for BAGT. As soon as BAGT has more tour activity as well as enough staff, another social media platform can be added to the strategy plan.

5.7 Social Media Is Like Exercise

How do you find the time to do all of this social media stuff? Finding the time to participate in social media is just like finding time for exercise. You have to choose to exercise regularly to stay fit. An effective way to do this is to make exercise your routine. Success comes from engaging in the activity regularly. The ideal would be that you do

not have to specifically find time for it. It is important part of your life so you don't have to think about it. Whatever your social networking site of choice is, don't hesitate to jump in and see what you can do (Meerman 2013, 276–278).

6 SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

This chapter of thesis explains how Bay Area Green Tours can bring value to their social media content by following the 11 principles of the Likeable Business model by Dave Kerpen. This chapter will describe a strategy for how to utilize those three main social media platforms (Yelp, TripAdvisor and Facebook) that were identified in the Chapter 5. In addition, the survey results are used to support this section.

6.1 Step 1: Listen

Start by listening to your customers who took the survey. Their feedback is extremely valuable and it should be taken seriously. Social media offers a forum for customers to be heard, address issues, concerns and different kinds of questions, so really take advantage of what they have to say. They are giving you free ideas and suggestions, which will only make your work easier since you are able to provide the exact product and services that they desire. Instead of guessing, start to monitor what your customers are saying. Also monitor what your competitors are offering and how they are delivering their messages.

6.2 Step 2: Share you story

Everybody wants to hear a great story. That's how they can relate to you and get to know you. According to the survey results, people consider reviews as an important source of information. Since, Yelp and TripAdvisor are all about sharing experiences and stories. BAGT needs to be on those channels to teach people about their amazing products. Similar to how we like to hear our customer's experiences, BAGT needs to start sharing their story. Organization should not simply allow any employee to speak behalf of the organization, so who is the best person to share the story? BAGT should call on the person who feels the most passionate about their products and who is the best story teller. The person should share a meaningful story about BAGT's journey on a monthly basis, using a friendly conversational tone. Facebook is an especially effective platform for socializing online; so it is better to keep dialogue casual and sociable, rather than stiffly informative.

6.3 Step 3: Be Authentic

Being authentic, genuine and real will help create a bond between you and customer, and that is a nonintrusive way to build trust. People like to do business with the people they trust. Even when you make a mistake, keep it real and be humble about it. You should apologize and be sensitive, and they will forgive you. If you are trying to hide your mistakes or you are not true to who are, it will only raise suspicions and then you can say goodbye to sales. Authentic is about showing your true colors and who you truly are, so give your company a personal voice when sending a message to customers through Facebook or other platforms. For example, instead of sending greetings from Bay Area Green Tours, send greetings from the Sales Manager or Executive Director. That makes the message a lot more unique and powerful.

6.4 Step 4: Be Transparent

Transparency is the way to make it as clear as possible to customer what kind of products and services you are selling. According to the survey respondents, clear tour and price information wasn't available on the websites or on the Facebook page and rest of the information was slightly unorganized. BAGT needs to add clear tour descriptions with prices to all it is online platforms. It is essential to show customers what they are buying and what kind of value they are getting for their money, especially for non-profit companies like BAGT. Also, it is important to be clear about where donations funds goes from your sponsors or partners.

6.5 Step 5: Build Your Team

Facebook can be utilized for team building by making your whole team be part of it. Facebook can be used to recognize the great work of your employees. Facebook provides a great opportunity to share your teams "behind the scene" pictures or do other kind of internal interactions like send birthday wishes to your team members. You can even use Facebook as a test platform for trying new ideas by encouraging your team members to create new ideas and post them on Facebook and monitor what kind of responses you get. As it is known, success comes from experimentation.

6.6 Step 6: Respond

Customers need to know that you appreciate their opinions, comments and concerns, so you need to show them that you care. It is crucial to respond quickly. If you do not respond at all, that is one way to say that the customer wasn't worth your time and she/he just wasn't important enough. Organizations need to be really careful since feedback is given openly and everybody is watching. One bad customer experience can be spread to hundreds of people throughout social media in one day. Answering quickly you can even impress your customers because it will make them feel important. Also, when customers are talking about you, be part of their conversations. Considering the research survey results, BAGT needs to show their customers that they were heard and respond to them by making some improvements.

6.7 Step 7: Be Adaptable

To be adaptable is the key to success if you are willing to try anything new or take any risks, it is the riskiest thing you could. When you see that something is not working you should welcome the new chance to do something differently, instead of sticking to your old habits. According to the research survey, respondents said there was a need for new pictures and videos, so BAGT has an amazing collection of great pictures, so why not to start use them now?

6.8 Step 8: Show Your Passion

Facebook provides a great way to share your passion and find people with common interests. It is important to educate people and tell them what you do, but instead of doing it in a really informative and stiffly way, make it a fun learning experience. Some of the survey respondents pointed out that there are too many postings that are not relevant to BAGT, so BAGT should add more value to the postings. In addition, people who love what they are doing and not thinking about work as: "just a job" are the right people to creating the postings.

6.9 Step 9: Surprise and Delight

You can give special rewards to customers by surprising them. For example, if a customer writes a great tour review on Yelp or TripAdvisor that she/he just had with you, contact her or him personally and give them something in return. If a customer makes a comment on your Facebook page, or you can see that someone constantly likes your postings, contact and thank them and give them something. That will add value and give a nice personal touch to your service, and it will brighten their day.

6.10 Step 10: Be Simple as Possible

When you have too much going on and too many things to focus on, you really don't have a focus. Your mission needs to be clear and simple. Simplicity can be attained to choosing the right social media platform. If you give out too many options to customers, this will only confuse them. Some of the survey respondents said that BAGT e-newsletter has too many things to read. BAGT needs to find a way to make it simpler and shorter and more suitable for customers need. When you simplify things, you are able adapt and move forward faster and more efficiently.

6.11 Step 11: Be Grateful

Lastly, be grateful and recognize those people who have helped and influenced on your business. Show your gratitude, post thank you letters to your employees for the great work they have done, write a thank you letter to your sponsors, partners and fans. Write a thank you letter for even your lessor for providing a great working place for team. You can post your reasons to be thankful on your Facebook. To make the message even more powerful, have the Executive Director write the letters or greetings that demonstrate care and humility. Try to find a few reason every month why you are grateful and share it.

7 CONCLUSION

The choice for thesis topic was easy since social media and generally marketing are extremely interesting topics. Gladly, Bay Area Green Tours needed a new social media strategy and gave me the opportunity to create one. The biggest challenge for me was to find all the necessary research materials and have enough time to read them all since there was lots of fascinating literature. The thesis was started in June 2012, four months prior to the presentation day. Thesis project included practicing research skills, writing skills and condense skills. In general, it was a great learning experience.

Creating the survey was another challenge. First it was a bit difficult to find the right questions but having a discussion session with five experts, made it easy to narrow down the questions and select the right ones. The survey results truly clarified the most relevant social media platforms for Bay Area Green Tours and the content expectations for those platforms. The results showed that some improvements need to be done and BAGT needs to add a profile to two new social media platforms Yelp and TripAdvisor. Those are the most suitable platforms for BAGT and they are already well recognized in the tourism industry.

Another crucial platform for BAGT is Facebook. It was interesting to see what expectations customers had related on the content versus how BAGT has used Facebook in the past. So instead of just educating people with interesting environmental related issues, BAGT should add meaningfulness into their posting as well as organize their tour and price information and have it available clearly to everyone. In addition, it is more important to share postings when they are relevant to BAGT, so there is no need to post two postings each day.

The recommendation is that BAGT would focus on these three main platforms Yelp, TripAdvisor and Facebook for now. After having public tours in a regular basis and more activity, they should add another platform to their social media strategy. Moreover, by knowing that BAGT does not have enough staff currently to handle many social media platforms, they should prioritize and focus on the most relevant ones until they get more staff members and more public tours. Some personal social media platforms can be still used to support the three main platforms. For example, the Executive Direc-

tor's LinkedIn account is useful for networking, sharing links and meeting buyers, it is the world's largest professional networking site and it is great for business-to-business marketing.

Social media has become a significant part of online marketing and especially having an efficient social media strategy is essential in tourism industry. Effective social media helps to reduce the amount of questions and understand specific needs of customers. Price, quality and service are always primary concerns across customers, but there are more than likely other concerns as well. It is crucial to listen customers and competitors in the industry by monitoring the various social media platforms.

The aim of the thesis was to help Bay Area Green Tours to find the most suitable social media platforms for them as well as to identify different ways to add value to the content by creating a social media strategy. Wishing BAGT will find this work helpful and useful. Special thanks to Executive Director Marissa LaMagna for all the support and help she gave along the way.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Social Media Survey Letter

Hello Everyone,

I am a Bachelor student in the tourism program in TAMK University of Applied Science, Finland. As part of my Bachelor thesis, I am conducting this survey and based on the results of this questionnaire my aim is help Bay Area Green Tours improve their online marketing strategy. I would greatly appreciate if you would fill out this short survey.

Your responses are kept anonymous and will be used for research purposes only. Please fill out the survey before Monday, August 26th 2013.

At the end of the survey, respondents will receive a 10% off discount code to be used towards a 2013 public tour with Bay Area Green Tours.

Here is a link to the survey:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=3i3Zho6fr3q3_2bB9wWIHrVg_3d_3d

Thank you for your time and consideration. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

I apologize for the random links that have been included in this message by survey monkey.

Best Regards,

Jenna Silander
Tour Sales Intern
Bay Area Green Tours
2150 Allston Way, Suite 280
Berkeley, CA 94704
(510) 280-4364



Appendix 2. Social Media survey

Receive Discount for Social Media Survey
<p>*1. Are you male or female?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Male</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Female</p> <p>2. What is your age?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 15 to 17</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 18 to 24</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 25 to 34</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 35 to 44</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 45 to 54</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 55 to 64</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 65 to 74</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 75 or older</p> <p>3. In what city do you live?</p> <input type="text"/> <p>4. On average how many times per year you do go on a one day tour organized than a tour operator?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1 to 2</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3 to 4</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5 or more</p> <p>5. Do you mostly travel for:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Leisure</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Business</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Educational</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> To see family/friends</p> <p>Other (please specify)</p> <input type="text"/> <p>*6. What sources do you use when looking for information about tours?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Friends/ or family</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Internet Tour/trip webpages (Expedia, Viator)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Webpages of the destination (For example SF travel)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> General social media (Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, Instagram)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Reviews social media (Tripadvisor, Yelp)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Books or guides about the destination</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Travel fair</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Tourist information office</p> <p>Other (please specify)</p> <input type="text"/>

Receive Discount for Social Media Survey

***7. Is it important to you that the Tour Operator;**

- Has a website
- Has a Facebook page
- Has a Tripadvisor or Yelp page with customer reviews
- Has a Twitter account
- Has a Pinterest account
- Is on a booking webpage (viator..)

***8. What are your expectations on Tour operator's websites?**

- Customer service via email
- Customer service via instant chat/messenger
- Online booking system
- Detailed information about the tours (prices)
- Pictures of the tours

Other (please specify)

***9. Which of the following media do you use actively?**

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Pinterest
- Instagram
- Google +
- Tripadvisor
- Yelp
- I don't use any

Other (please specify)

***10. Are you fan of Bay Area Green Tours on any of these social Media platforms?
(Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc...)**

- Yes
- No

11. Are you satisfied with the content? If not please explain why.

***12. Does it make a difference in the way you interact with Tour Operator if it has active social media content?**

- Yes
- No

Receive Discount for Social Media Survey

*** 13. What are your expectations on Tour Operator's Facebook page?**

- Getting up-to-date information about tours
- Efficiently communicate online with the customer service
- Sharing experience of the tour
- Being entertained
- Obtaining special promotions and sales
- Finding interesting articles related on the tour topics
- I don't check Tour Operator's Facebook page

Other (please specify)

*** 14. What factors of Tour Operator's web presence influence if you want to purchase a tour?**

- Layout and look of the website
- Amount of information on website
- Amount of presence on the www
- Amount of good reviews
- Updated and current social media
- A special discount code

15. Thank you so much! If you would like to receive 10% off a 2013 public tour with Bay Area Green Tours, please include your email address here.

Appendix 3. Thank You Letter

Good Afternoon,

Thank you so much for completing the survey! Here is the discount code; OTTPT.
At the moment we are offering an amazing farm tour to San Mateo on September 28th, 2013.
Please feel free to use the discount code to buy a ticket! You can learn more about the San Mateo Tour on our webpages.

<http://bayareagreentours.brownpapertickets.com/>

If you are not able to participate in this tour we will have San Francisco walking tours coming up in the near future and we will keep you updated!

Here is a link for booking the San Mateo Farm Tour.

<http://bayareagreentours.brownpapertickets.com/>

Have a wonderful day!

Warmly,

Jenna Silander
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