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**ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS BY CREATING AND  
PROMOTING VIRTUAL EXCURSION PRODUCTS**

N. A. Ustina (a)\*, E. V. Loginova (b), N. V. Ivanova (c)

\*Corresponding author

(a) Samara State University of Economics, 443090, Soviet Army str., 141, Samara, Russia, nina\_ustina@mail.ru

(b) Samara State University of Economics, 443090, Soviet Army str., 141, Samara, Russia,  
loginovaev1982@gmail.com

(c) Samara State University of Economics, 443090, Soviet Army str., 141, Samara, Russia, ivanovanv@land.ru

***Abstract***

The relevance of the research topic is associated with the increasing modern trends in the field of Internet technologies, which are becoming the object of attention of the excursion business leaders. Among many ways to demonstrate the tourist product (colorful texts, impressive photos, bright logos, etc.) video content is able to attract more attention of potential consumers. The purpose of this study is to develop and justify principles and technologies of interaction in social networks for all participants of social groups on the process of creation and promotion of virtual tours. The authors clarify and describe approaches to the development and promotion of touristic services tailored to the individual needs of customers, as well as the consumers' involvement in the process of creating new unique products. The authors use materials on the analysis of activities of different groups in social networks engaged in the promotion of excursion tours. According to the analysis of the specific content in social networks, the authors found out a relation between the communication way used by social group administrators and active participants of these groups while creating unique tourism products. The research results are of practical value for travel agencies. These results are presented in authors' proposals for managing groups in social networks, the implementation of which will allow SMM-managers to organize the development and promotion process of virtual tours with the active inclusion of potential consumers in this process. The effect will be an increase in demand for virtual tours and sales of tours.

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**Keywords:** Virtual tour, communication environment, SMM-management, digital economy.



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## **1. Introduction**

The modern market is not just a space of economic interactions between producers and consumers, but an independent communication environment in which a special value is created for the consumer – the opportunity to interact with other consumers, get acquainted with their consumer experience, share their own impressions.

In this environment, clients of the excursion business companies are sophisticated independent participants of the market of tourist services. They try to get access to services (make choices, get information) at the most convenient time, in a comfortable place, getting a unique experience. The most important factor in the formation of these unique experience is the ability of consumers of tourist services to take a direct part in the saturation of excursion tourist products with new information resources.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The Internet environment provides unlimited opportunities for building communications between consumers and producers of excursion services. More and more consumers are becoming active participants of various groups in social networks created by tourist companies to promote excursion services. For any company, the management of this communication environment is the most powerful way to form and promote its tourism product, providing access to an unlimited number of consumers (Chernova & Sariev, 2013; Dolnicar, 2019).

To make from websites and social networks of companies an attractive environment type for customers, partners, investors in the tourist business, it is necessary to saturate the Internet space with a variety of content, among which an important place is given to interactive excursions. A survey conducted in December 2017 by the multimedia company Wyzow (Ivanov, 2018) has shown that video content is best able to arouse interest in the proposed product or service. The role of virtual tours in the promotion of tourist products is determined by their interactive nature, the ability to take into account the individual needs of each client, and, as a consequence, the ability of such contents to significantly increase the demand of customers for real excursion services (Volobueva, 2017). In this research and further, we will consider possibilities of social networks in the creation and promotion of excursion products.

## **3. Research Questions**

Problematic aspects of communication in social networks resonate in the research of psychologists, teachers, sociologists, philosophers, linguists, philologists, etc. So, Karpova (2013) considers online addiction as a consequence of the possibility of continuous Internet communication; Bobkova (2012) and Mkrtychyan (2013) highlight the content risks of social networks and threats to the social security of the individuals associated with the intensive development of network communication. Obukhov (2008) considers the Internet as a social structure on the basis of the network communication model from the theory of M. Castells.

Issues on digitization of scientific content are described in the work of Kolesnikova, et al. (2017), who consider the possibility of implementing new principles of information dissemination, such as SMM.

Nowadays, it is important to analyze the state of existing platforms for managing online social networks (Al-Qurishi, Al-Rakhami, AlRubaian, Alamri, & Al-Hougbany, 2015). The authors of this article attempt to analyze the state of social media content.

The experience of promoting events through social media is described in the work by Yoon and Chung, (2018) "Promoting a world heritage site through social media: Suwon City's Facebook promotion strategy on Hwaseong Fortress (in South Korea)" (p.7). Based on the key findings, the authors proposed their vision for the further development of the promotion strategy.

The issues on attracting attention to tourist products in social networks are described in the work by Ying (2018). The main attention is paid to the problems of information perception, characteristics of tourist facilities, estimates made by consumers. It is worth noting that over the past decade, research on social networks in this direction is growing exponentially. Many authors emphasize the relation between the study of social networks, methods used for analyzing them and improving the education quality. There are models developed for combining different studies on social networks and technological equipment forming the concept of intellectual education (Lytras, Visvizi, Daniela, Sarirete, & De Pablos, 2018). According to surveys, the format of the built-in interactive excursion is interesting and developing, in the opinion of Internet users (Paniagua & Huertas, 2018). The works of many researchers address the issue of the innovativeness of goods and services promotion through social networks (Klepek, 2017; Scuotto, Del Giudice, & Carayannis, 2017).

Until recently, most of the approaches proposed in the marketing theory to the organization forms of interaction with the consumer offered ways to promote ready-made or modular products and services and were based on generalized ideas about the customers' needs. Individual needs for goods and services in modern marketing models are taken into account in the framework of customization technology – changes in standard services in accordance with the customer's order (Kotler, Asplund, & Rein, 2005).

At the same time, modern competitive strategies in service companies in general, and in the tourism business in particular, are increasingly focused on fundamentally new approaches to the creation and promotion of services. At the heart of these approaches is the organization of direct inclusion of clients into interaction with producers and other clients on the creation of a unique value for each of them. Within this paradigm of joint value creation, it is emphasized that the unique service can be realized for a client only if we create an opportunity for this client to take action part in the creation process bringing own ideas and resources there (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2006).

A new perspective in the technologies of creation and promotion of unique services has caused a need to develop new ways of the interaction organization. One of these methods is in the environmental management paradigm (Lepsky, 2010). The environmental approach allows considering the organized communication (real or virtual) as the environment of the various participants' interaction providing the creation of a value unique for each consumer. Thus, the environment can be considered as a specially organized space where there always relationships between subjects of creation and promotion of excursion products. This environment is designed from different positions: architectural, landscape, household, cultural and network ones. But, in general, it is a communication shell surrounding the process of interaction.

The transformation of communication into an interactive environment creates conditions for identifying new consumers of services, including them into the interaction space, providing access to the experience of other customers (Rifkin, 2000). The main task of this environment is to create conditions so that future, but still uncertain, participants of the promotion process of a virtual Internet product can interact and create a new significant value for each of them. Thus, the current research level and gained expert experience in the field of SMM-management allowed to justify a new approach to the content and organization of tourism companies, aimed at the use of social networks for the creation and promotion of new tourism products by organizing an interactive environment of consumer interaction in the virtual space.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to develop and justify principles and technologies of interaction in social networks for all participants of social groups to create and promote virtual tours. The object of the study is social networks groups opened to promote excursion services. The authors consider different tools of the interaction organization between group members for the joint creation of new virtual tour content reflecting clients' unique needs and their own experience of purchasing other tour products.

#### **5. Research Methods**

To explore possibilities of the Internet space in the creation and promotion of virtual excursion products, we analyzed groups in social networks with the relevant content. The sample represented groups in the social networks with the number of participants more than 1 thousand people, these groups offer excursion services in Samara and the Samara region. Our limitations on the geography of excursions were determined by methodological approaches to the formation of communications about the creation and promotion of tours. These approaches are based on the establishment of a direct relation between the willingness of people to enter the communication, interact in order to create new values and the spatial accessibility of interaction objects. In other words, the greatest communication activity in the virtual space develops around the excursion objects that are maximally accessible to the majority of participants.

According to the relevant criteria, 12 groups were found out. The identified groups were systematized depending on the degree of the communication interactivity. The degree of interactivity was determined by the presence of participants' posts in the social group, their comments containing materials for creating new excursions and saturating excursions with new elements. Depending on the interactivity degree, all considered social groups were divided into three categories. The first category is 'interactive communications'. This group includes social groups where participants are active, both in posting new posts and in comments. The second group ('active communications') includes social groups whose members are active in the comments, but do not participate in the creation of new content (new posts). The third group is 'one-sided activity'. In this group, all posts are placed only on behalf of the administrator, and comments of participants are absent.

The analysis of groups in social networks, offering various excursion content, showed that the greatest interest among group members and visitors is aroused not by ready-made tours, but those that are configured for the interactive interaction and the creation of new excursion products, saturated with

constantly updated content, forming virtual tours (everyone can become a participant of these tours). The number of posts from group administrators and their activity in the group do not always determine the strength of the participants' response. At the same time, the low publication activity of social groups administrators does not allow them to implement the declared interactivity. For example, the posts of the groups "Excursions in Samara and the Samara region" and "Ecotourism" did not find a response from subscribers.

In general, we can say that the Internet space is a favorable environment for the development and promotion of the virtual tour content through groups in social networks, configured to actively include subscribers in joint activities to create a tour product. At the same time, when studying technologies for communication organization in the social groups, it is noted that most administrators use one-way communication, do not support and do not organize communication with group members or communication situations that encourage participants to be active in creating new excursion content.

The analysis of the activity of modern potential consumers of excursion services in the social networks actualized the development of new excursion products. Unlimited access to these products can be provided via the Internet space. The most promising is the use of digital economy technologies in the development and promotion of virtual tours, excursions in real time, as well as any other tourist products, including training courses.

## 6. Findings

The main task that should be faced by the administrator of a social group when promoting excursion services is to create situations of the virtual interaction, activating the communication processes of the participants. As a management technology for the organization of the communication environment, we propose to consider 'scripting', which involves the development and implementation of a communication scenario. In this scenario, each participant gets a role depending on his goals, entering into the communication (Pine & Gilmore, 2005).

Tasks that are solved in the process of scripting situations are set by their main purpose – to solve the problem of interaction, identify and activate stakeholders who are ready to participate in the creation of new excursion content. The role of the scenario approach in the construction of this communication environment is determined by the formation of unique impressions, the consumer's access to the generalized experience of receiving services that is generated due to feedback from a large number of clients of tourist firms, their feelings that they are willing to share in the communication space. The main principles of the scenario approach realization for the organization of the communication environment are:

- situational communication, defined as a contradiction in the existing information about the excursion object and encouraging members of the social group to search for and discuss new data, facts;
- role-based nature of the interaction, which is based on administrators' clear understanding the role of each participant in the interaction process and the communication organization that allows participants to choose their roles based on their own values (acting out the situation);
- openness of interaction processes, as a result of which participants can join the creation of virtual tour content at any development stage of a tourist product, saturating it with new information, photo and video materials;

- contextuality of the communication (the intensification of communication processes in the social group occurs in the context that is formed by the main organizational elements of the situation, role positions of the interaction participants in the information field, the communication structure and organization, which is the content of the administrator's activity when scripting the scenario of the interaction situation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2006).

The result of the implementation of these principles is the formation of unique tour content that meets the individual needs of each participant and can serve as the basis for the development of a virtual tour, its placing on the market of tourist services as an independent tourist product. It can be also a promotion tool for real excursions and increase in the demand for them by potential customers.

## 7. Conclusion

The growing demand for tours that meet the customers' individual needs actualizes the introduction of new approaches to the development and promotion of tourist services. The greatest interest among modern consumers of excursion services is caused by virtual excursions, which are now becoming not only a tool for promoting tourist products, but also an independent content, greatly expanding the access of customers of tourist companies to unique excursion objects. The most important advantage of virtual tours is the ability to attract an unlimited number of potential consumers, saturate the tour with new information content that reflects their individual values. Unlimited opportunities for this are provided by the technologies of the digital economy. The study of the experience of e creation and promotion of tours in the social networks revealed the relation between the interactivity degree of the excursion content posted in social groups and the number of participants' responses, reflecting the participation of potential consumers in the creation of a product. One of the tools of communication management in the social groups, allowing to involve consumers in the process of creating and promoting virtual tours, is the 'scripting' technology, proposed in the framework of the concept of the "experience economy".

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