Impact of Social Networks in the Tourism sector in Alto Alentejo: a case study

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1. Summary

This case study identify and analyse some factors that can influence the management and the relational methods in the area of Tourism, and their relation with social networks.

The research strategy of the study was based in relevant data from the national statistics centre, as well as the design and the launch of a survey focused on the main aspects influencing the management and relational marketing techniques in Tourism units.

The main outcome of the study is the evidence of the core importance of social networks on the final customer and the service provider relationship, proportional to the customer information on the available offer.

2. Introduction

Tourism is a sector with big growth all over the world. Tourist use more and more new communication forms, and the digital world is increasing its importance in this area of business. (Silva, 2018)

We live in a global and competitive world and, in Tourism, that globalism and competitiveness assume a special relevance in the relation with the consumers of tourism. (Moadias, 2017)

We can define Tourism as "a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure." (World Tourism Organization, 2020)

We can find an intimate relationship between tourism and geography as the location of the geographic space where different spaces require different planning and strategies. (Lopes Jr., 2011)

The region of Alentejo, specially, Portalegre district, is a depopulated area with historic places, beautiful landscape, and certified local products.

> "The Alentejo is situated in the south of Portugal, between the River Tagus (Tejo) and the Algarve. To the east, its frontier is with Spain and to the west it is bathed by the Atlantic Ocean. It is an extensive region, essentially rural and thinly populated, occupying a third of the whole of continental Portugal. The beauty of its landscapes and the quality of its archaeological, monumental, architectural and ethnographic heritage and, par excellence, its gastronomy and wines, provide it with exceptional legacies to be discovered through nature tourism and cultural tourism". (Alentejo, Tourism of, 2020).

The region of Alentejo has 22,4 inhabitants per Km^2, in 2018 (Pordata, 2020), versus a population density of 111,5 of inhabitants per Km^2,in Portugal. Alto Alentejo, where Portalegre is located, has 17,5 inhabitants per Km^2, in the reference year, a value even lower than the value of Alentejo.

We can establish a very challenging relationship etween Geography, Tourism and Marketing where as there is an increased fragmentation of the consumer market and where geography plays an important role in tourist response, but many variables may occur. (Oppermann, 1997)

Social networks have become a very powerful marketing tool capable of determining the influence of Management and Relational Marketing practices. So the Tourism sector, in the geographical space of Alto Alentejo (Portugal), reflects practices of this type. It is this analysis that serves as the basis for this case study

In a scenario of increasing densification of networks of relationships between companies, it is increasingly important to reach the majority of target

customers, in a simple, effective and efficient way, that is, promoting their capture and retention at the minimum possible cost.

In this context, the Internet has several advantages for companies. Social networks are a very attractive tool for companies, and can be used as a Front Office tool for them, with regard to managing the relationships established between people, namely, customers.

This type of tool can help managers in the critical task of informing all the company's stakeholders, and also to use social networks as a tool for Management and Relational Marketing, a means of advertising and a privileged vehicle for promoting accessibility.

Taking into account the arguments presented, it is necessary and pertinent to develop a case on the topic of social networks, insofar as these may provide an important source of knowledge for the design of competitive strategies of service companies, namely, in the Tourism sector, especially in low-density territories, as seen in the Region of Alto Alentejo

3. Aims

The objective of this project is to determine how social networks may influence the Management and Relational Marketing practices in the Tourism sector, having the geographical area of Norte Alentejo (Portugal) as the unit of analysis.

In this sense, the present study focuses on the preparatory study, under a Management and Relational Marketing approach, of the future creation of a social tourism network in Norte Alentejo, making it necessary to identify and analyse the factors that influence the practices of Management and Relational Marketing applied to the Tourism sector.

In this case study, we aim to identify and analyse factors that may influence the Management and Relational Marketing of Tourism activities in the Portalegre District.

4. Literature Review

The term network is used to study the structure of relationships between actors, within a social system and objects, and these actors can correspond to people or organizations, among others. (Nohria & Eccles, 1992)

Relationships are all the more influenced, the greater the density of common aspects and interests. This situation occurs, for example, when two

organizations need both to develop a certain product, which presupposes an interdependent relationship. (Kadushin, 2004) and (Kadushin, 2012).

Social networks are essentially based on similar patterns between people, called relationships. These standards correspond to data that are common to individuals and organizations, therefore, and referring to the same authors, there are several types of networks, namely, social networks, communication networks, computer networks, Internet, etc., but all of them have a common link, that is, the nodes that connect them. (Wasserman & Faust, 1997)

Social networks have come to play a major role in terms of establishing and managing relationships.

The concept of Relational Marketing is a new approach focused on building long-term relationships and interactivity and not so much on product / service transactions. In this sense, this relational approach aims to ensure greater interactivity so that the different entities get to know their stakeholders better, in order to gather more information about them and guarantee the satisfaction of the needs of each of them. The introduction of the concept of Relational Marketing in the literature on service marketing is attributed to (Berry, 1995). Relational Marketing allows to attract, maintain and strengthen customer relationships. The attraction of new customers is an intermediate step, where the final objective is to ensure the solidification of relations with these customers and, ultimately, their loyalty.

The emergence of this new concept is intrinsically linked to the limitations of the traditional concept of marketing, focused on the transaction and the customer, and not so much on the customer and the relationships that are established with him. (Antunes & Rita, 2008)

5. Method

This case study is a collection and analysis of indirect data of touristic offer and touristic visits in the North Alentejo region .A survey was presented to students of Polytechnic of Portalegre that are in the last year of graduation and local SMEs that are members of NERPOR- Núcleo de Empresas da região de Portalegre (Business Nucleus of Portalegre).

6. Results

In Portalegre district there are several big events that receive people from all the country and abroad. They are the Flower festival, in Campo Maior, Chestnut Fair, in Marvão, and Carnival in Elvas. These events, however, are

locally announced. Also, the flower festival only occurs once in every five or six years (the last ones occurred in 2015), and both the Carnival and the Chestnut Fair only occur once a year. The amount of events and their frequency is not enough to have a number of visitors during all seasons.

Official data allows us to better know the reality of this region regarding number of visitors and their preferences in lodgement.

Alentejo, in 2018, had 377,6 number of nights in hotels per 100 inhabitants, where foreign tourists stay, in average, 1,9 nights. (Estatística, 2018). In Alto Alentejo, tourists stay 359,7 nights in hotels per 100 inhabitants, and the average time they stay here was 1,7 nights.

The number of nights in Alto Alentejo is a little bit lower than the number of nights in Alentejo, and tourists stay less time in this region.

Regarding lodgements, in 2018, in Alentejo, there are 625 accommodations, where 132 are hotels, 180 local lodgements and 313 rural or habitation hotels. (Estatística, 2018). In Alto Alentejo, we find, for the reference date, 125 accommodations, where 27 are hotels, 25 local lodgements and 73 rural or habitation hotels. (Estatística, 2018)

Concerning the average of nights per type of accommodation, tourists stayed 1,7 nights in hotels, 1,7 nights in local lodgements and 2,0 nights in rural hotels.

The preference of tourists in that period was to stay in rural hotels. We may assume that tourists prefer to stay in the country and not in towns.

As it concerns cultural offer, there are 24 museums in District of Portalegre.

Regarding number of visitants, Portalegre District has received 99 448 visitors (INE, 2011) and the county that has received more tourists is Elvas (40.812), Marvão (25.621), Campo Maior (22.282), and Castelo de Vide (21.031). From all of these, Marvão is the one that has received more foreign tourists (16.654).

In the survey, we ask people about social networks, knowledge of Tourism in Alentejo, and habits of the consumer. In 241 respondents, 99% of them say that they know the term "social networks", although 11% of the total are not in a social network. Those that have a social network prefer Facebook (95%).

Regarding the use of the social networks, 30% say that they are important for developing activities of leisure or sports.

The respondents were asked about their knowledge of the regional products of Alto Alentejo, where 60% say they don't know them.

For 77% of the respondents, the existence of a social network is very important in order to better know the touristic offers and products of this region. We must considerer that 91% of these are not hotel owners or connected to any structure of tourism.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

It was found that social networks have a decisive influence on the relationship between the service provider and the end customer, and the greater the customer's knowledge of the offer, the greater the importance of social networks in deepening the relationship above.

Most respondents know the term social networks, and that registered respondents look for the products and services of Tourism in the District of Portalegre, but not everyone knows the products that this district offers, which signals the importance of creating a specific social network for o Tourism, in the sense of creating an integrating platform that allows to make known the existing products and services, as well as to provide alternative acquisition mechanisms, by the end customer

In this study, we tried to enlighten the importance of social networks for strengthening the competitive capacity of this region, with low density, but endowed with an historical and cultural heritage that ensure the differentiation of the offer of Tourism in the North Alentejo.

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