



How U.S. state tourism offices use online newsrooms and social media in media relations



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the use of online newsrooms on U.S. state tourism websites. A content analysis of 50 state tourism websites was conducted to investigate the availability of online newsrooms as well as their contents and overall usability. The social media availability on the state tourism websites was also analyzed. The results revealed that most state tourism websites provide online newsrooms to media but many of them do not meet the needs of journalists in terms of usability, content availability, and information distribution. All of the websites integrated at least one type of social media; the most commonly used were Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr. The detailed results by state and implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has dramatically changed the media environment, leading journalists to gather news information online. This shifting trend also has changed the way organizations communicate with the news media. An increasing number of public relations practitioners are using various Internet technologies (e.g. e-mails, websites, multimedia news releases, online press rooms, RSS feeds, and social media) to better communicate with journalists and to enhance their media relations. In particular, growing numbers of corporate/organizational websites furnish online press rooms that provide journalists with access to essential organization information and media material such as press releases, fact sheets, backgrounders, newsletters, brochures, photographs and audio/video clips, and many downloadable collateral materials. According to Pettigrew and Reber (2010), 495 companies of the Fortune 500 companies have online newsrooms on their websites. More than 95% of journalists indicated that it is important for a company or organization to have an online newsroom available to the press (TEK Group, 2011). Clearly, online newsrooms are regarded as an indispensable communication conduit by public relations practitioners and journalists.

Despite the growing popularity of online newsrooms, journalists have repeatedly complained that they were unable to find the information they needed from corporate websites (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007), and have reported that poor website usability could reduce or completely eliminate positive press coverage of a company (Nielsen Norman Group, 2001). Further, a survey conducted by Vocus (2004) found a huge disparity between what journalists think is valuable online information and what PR professionals feel online information should contain. This suggests that many online newsrooms fail or fall short in meeting the needs or expectations of journalists. In this regard, it is critical for corporations to understand journalists' expectations toward online newsrooms, then revise and improve their usability and content to meet the needs of journalists.

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A number of previous studies have examined corporate online newsrooms but the evaluation approaches vary and the criteria used often do not reflect the needs of journalists. In addition, the previous findings are somewhat limited since the studies have focused largely on corporate online pressrooms, especially in Fortune 500 companies (Callison, 2003; Momorella & Woodall, 2005; Pettigrew & Reber, 2010). To broaden knowledge regarding online media relations, research should be conducted not only on corporate websites but also on other types of organizational websites. Further, given the increasing importance of social media and mobile devices, the status of social media use needs to be investigated.

To close this knowledge gap, the present study investigated the use of online newsrooms by U.S. state tourism websites. The websites were selected for the following reasons. First, tourism is a major sector of the U.S. economy (Swann, 2010). According to the U.S. Travel Association (2011), total travel expenditures reached \$813 billion in 2011, and the travel industry generated 7.5 million jobs which directly generated \$195.6 billion in payroll income for Americans. It also generated \$124.1 billion in tax revenue for federal, state and local governments. Despite its major impact on the U.S. economy, it is still an unexplored field of public relations research (L'Etang, Falkheimer, & Lugo, 2007). Second, official state tourism websites serve as major information sources for journalists and tourists. Despite the growing popularity in social media, the contents of social media are not yet considered to be as credible as government-sponsored tourism websites (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009). This means that it is important to understand the role of official websites in online media relations. Third, tourism destinations are dependent on the images portrayed in media due to their intangibility (L'Etang et al., 2007). A good number of previous studies have found that media plays a significant role in destination image formation and travelers' intentions to visit (Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007). This suggests that tourism PR practitioners need to carefully plan and implement media relations to build positive destination images.

One way to enhance media relations is the effective use of an online newsroom (Pettigrew & Reber, 2010) but there has been no study that investigates the use of online newsrooms on U.S. state tourism websites. The aim of this study is, therefore, to investigate the use of online newsrooms on U.S. state tourism websites. By analyzing the presence of online newsrooms and contents available, this study seeks to examine whether they meet the needs of media.

2. Literature review

2.1. Corporate/organizational newsrooms in online media relations

Many previous studies have found that a growing number of journalists search online and visit an organization's websites for their article research, story ideas, and information requests (Reber & Kim, 2006). To meet the changing needs of journalists, PR professionals are using various digital technologies and platforms like websites, email, online pressrooms, rich media contents and various social media. While all these technologies are important for providing a comprehensive online media relations service, the importance of the online pressroom as a centralized place or an official archive for media has been identified (Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Pettigrew & Reber, 2010; TEK Group, 2011, 2012). Esrock and Leichty (1999) insisted that providing a centralized place for media is necessary because often, the information that media may be interested in located on different pages within the websites. TEK group's surveys (2011, 2012) also found that 95% of journalists believe that it is important for an organization to have an online newsroom and more than 50% indeed visit corporate or organizational newsroom once a week.

The use of a newsroom has increased with the understanding of its significant role in online media relations. While only 39% of Fortune 500 companies offered online newsrooms in 2001 (Callison, 2003), 495 Fortune 500 companies operate online media centers in 2010 (Pettigrew & Reber, 2010). The journalists' expectations toward online newsrooms have been changed with the growing availability of newsroom and the evolving technologies. According to TEK group's surveys (2011, 2012), 98% of journalists said that the availability of PR contact information and searchable news archives are important to their work. Ninety-four percent of journalists prefer to receive news information via e-mail while 65% mentioned that the ability to receive news via their wireless devices is important. Thirty-five percent of journalists indicated that getting news via an online newsroom RSS feed is important. In terms of contents, journalists expected to find press releases (99%), photographs (95%), company background information (93%), product information (92%), crisis communication (89%), video files (75%), and audio files (63%). With a recent popularity of social media, high percentage (78%) of journalists said that it is important to provide the access links to an organization's social media sites from the online newsrooms.

Overall, previous studies have indicated the importance of online newsrooms as a centralized place for media relations, as well as the growing importance of social media and mobile technologies.

2.2. Media impact on destination image

The critical role of media in destination image formation and tourists' decision-making has been found in a number of studies (e.g. Gartner, 1994; Gartner & Shen, 1992). The studies discussed that media plays an important role in increasing awareness of a destination as well as in building the destination image. Gartner and Shen (1992) examined that media have a particularly great impact on destination image formation when the stories report about a distant country or depict a dramatic event. They explained that a message receiver's existing lack of knowledge and information of the destination enhances the influence of media.

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