

EFFECTS OF ONLINE REVIEWS ON PROSPECTIVE MEDICAL TOURISTS

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Abstracts

Increased effectively of electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) in process of decision making, has motivated investigations to evaluate the influence of online reviews in medical tourism. Present study is aimed to identify the factors responsible in making a review strong. Medical Tourism Facilitators (MTFs) who, in most of the cases, perform their role through websites consider reviews as an input in their marketing strategies. The results indicate helpfulness and value of a negative review more than positive and neutral review. Credibility and truthfulness in reviews increases positive influence while subjective and sponsored reviews are perceived with low strength. Responses describing experience of treatment and care, and use of modern equipment in narrative form were found more influential in its value in term of influence.

Keywords: Medical Tourism, Online Review, Impacts, Evaluation, e-WOM

Introduction

Web 2.0 and social marketing have created online platform where former and existing consumers frequently communicate their experiences about services and products (Walsh and Gremler, 2004; Dellarocas, Zhang and Awad 2007, Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, , Buhalis and Law 2008;) and as a results importance of e-WOM importance is growing rapidly. Reviews and ratings being its major component attracted researchers (Chatterjee, 2001). e-WOM may include “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former consumers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Serra Cantallops and Salvi (2014) and Sparks and Browning (2011) stated that it effects consumers purchasing decision and buying behavior. Marketing professionals and researchers have been attracted towards the analysis of reviews (Chen and Huang 2013; Sparks and Browning 2011; Purnawirawan, Pelsmacker and Dens 2012) because of consumers’ habit of relying on comments of users (Liu 2006; Jang, Prasad and Ratchford 2012; Ögüt and Tas 2012). The same is true in business of medical tourism, which has expanded to more than 50 countries (Gahlinger, 2008; Woodman, 2008; Shult, 2006). An important member of health profession named as a “Medical Tourism Facilitators (MTFs)” who make arrangement

for patients while traveling overseas, do business through website portals. Patterson (2007) stated that internet was second most reliable source after friend recommendations for general tourist but in light of nature and unique characteristics of medical tourism, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) plays more important and central role. Most of the MTFs market their products through websites (Cormany, D., and Baloglu, S., 2011). No doubt, friends and family are top influencing factors (Bornstein et al., 2000; Harris, 2003; Tu and Lauer, 2008) but its also truth that patients do not rely on only single source of information (Tu and Lauer, 2008). Ferguson, (2002) stated that e-WOM provides them more wide and connected platform with more comments and reviews of former users. More recent studies like Detz et al., (2013) and López et al., (2012) have done context analysis of reviews used by patients in selection of doctors. But extensive survey of literature indicates very little work on the impacts of websites on MTFs business. The present study is a modest effort to focus on the reviews i.e. feedback of former users and investigates the impacts of these reviews on their business. This study in its first section analyzes on-line review, its nature and types, effects of reviews on performance of web portal and second section is devoted to devise some recommendations to make a positive and effective use of reviews. The study uses secondary data collected from various journals, thesis and books of tourism and medical sciences.

On-line Reviews: An Introduction

The quality of a review depends upon comprehensiveness, relevance, accuracy and timeliness (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). The researchers have classified its impacts into volume and valance. Volume has been investigated by (Floh, Koller and Zauner, 2013) with remark that it has been less investigated area while valance has been studied by Floyd et al., (2014) and Kostyra et al (2015) with a focus on effects of reviews on purchase decisions. According to Park et al. (2007), the reviews with relevant to products, facts and figures, simple, and easy to understand influenced the purchase decision more than the reviews with subjective feelings. The likelihood to adopt a review was also found associated with its comprehensiveness and relevance (Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn, 2008). Hur, Ryoo, & Jeon, (2009) also concluded that comprehensive, correct and coherent information availability in reviews was effective in adoption of products and services. Literature consist many studies which focused on valance (Floh et al., 2013) and credibility of information (Schindler and Decker, 2013) because user can easily understand star ranking given at site (Siering and Muntermann, 2013). Racherla and Friske (2012) stated that valance of reviews can be positive, neutral, negative, or absent (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Liu 2006; Tang, Fang and Wang 2014; Duan, Gu and Whinston 2008; Ye et al. 2011). Generally accepted

perception that positive feedback encourage prospect customer to adopt while negative reviews can demotivate them to do so was found in researches (Dellarocas, Zhang and Awad 2007; Floyd et al. 2014). No doubt, valance is related to helpfulness of consumers in their decisions (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). However majority of literature survey suggests that negative reviews are more influential, strong and difficult to oppose (Baumeister et al. 2001; Xie, Zhang and Zhang 2014; Casalo et al. 2015; Cui, Lui and Guo 2012; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Papathanassis and Knolle 2011; Maheswaran and Meyers- Levy 1990). Duan, Gu and Whinston (2008) found positive review with no or negligible effects. In several other studies negative reviews were useful in purchase decision than extremely positive reviews (Racherla and Friske, 2012). Herr et al., (1991) stated that purchasers pay more attention to negativity or negative review than positive review and during decision making consider negative information importantly. In studying the valance, one should consider the existence of negative biasness of e-WOM.

Effects on Prospect Medical Tourists

Travel related online reviews have been investigated by numerous papers (Ye et al., 2009) studied effects of reviews on hotel sales while Vermeulen and Seegers, (2009) examined reviews influence on consumer awareness which affects their attitude to hotel. Filieri and McLeay (2014), Vermeulen & Seegers (2009) and, Sparks and Browning (2011) evaluated reviews affect on purchasing intentions. "Helpfulness and trust" on on-line reviews were studied by Park and Nicolau, (2015), Filieri et al., (2015) and Gretzel, Yoo, and Purifoy (2007) revealed the use and importance of online reviews at different phases of holiday purchase decisions. Above studies indicates the impacts but now users trust on the review and most importantly factor responsible to make reviews more effective in purchase decisions are discussed. In this study "a trustor's expectations about the motives and behavior of a trustee" (Doney & Cannon, 1997) is an element of construct credibility. Non-commercial, sincere, honest and true review is perceived as trusted review while fake, sponsored, false and promotional review is treated as deceptive review (Dellarocas, 2006); Ott, Cardie, and Hancock, 2012). Manipulated reviews are problem for tourism and have been investigated by a few studies (Jindal & Liu, 2008; Hu, Bose, Koh, & Liu, 2012; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009; Ott et al., 2012). However, it needs detailed research (Cantalops & Salvi, 2014; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009). Credibility includes reputation, expertise, trust, consistency, plausibility and quality. When customers are unfamiliar to product or services, rely more on experts and unbiased reviews. Brown and Reingen, (1987) and, McGinnies and Ward, (1980) found trust and credibility as strong influencing factor in acceptance of message. In case of WOM literature,

ample examples exist where e-WOM came with effective results (Zhang and Watts, 2008). Reviews have effects on consumer purchase behavior. Following are some factors which influence the helpfulness of reviews.

Trust: Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, and Fesenmaier (2009) stated that in travel related reviews, expertise and credibility are important trust predictors. But for accurate measurement, tourism is using items developed for WOM instead of e-WOM. In case of online, the nature is different, as it can be viewed by many readers at many points of time. With repeated exposure to each other develop trust. Personal disclosed interest also effects perceived trustworthiness. The same is true in case of medical tourism. The need to inculcate trust and credibility through reviews is always prominent and its responsibility lies with MTFs.

Quality: In perception of reviews is important but the question of contents' effects on purchase decisions needs to be elaborated. Contents (argument), density and diversity both effect impacts of reviews (Willemsen et al. (2011). The nature and intensity of impacts of these factors are found different for products and services. In case of products, the review statements can be about use or values while for services it becomes hard to identify the variables. Research conducted by López et al. (2012) found that arguments related to personal experience of treatment, equipments' technical dimensions, treatment process, health care and nurses service quality, waiting time, ambience and other non-medical activities or processes were prominent in reviews. The language more specifically in its style affects the strength of review (Petty et al., 1994). The review statement with some explanation regarding evidences was found more influential. The effect of same review also of differs for former users and potential customers in term of its impacts on purchasing decisions of medical tourism products.

Adequate information: The depth of information is linked with helpfulness of reviews (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010) and it boosts user's confidence in his/her decision. The existence of relationship between adequacy of information and its effects was not linear. On this issue the literature can be divided in two parts i.e. method one simply counts total number of words (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010; Siering and Muntermann, 2013) in review while the second counts the number of total reviews (Schindler and Bickart, 2012; Willemsen et al., 2011). It is true that information rich entries in reviews significantly increase its usefulness. Presentations of review also carry weight in evaluation of its effect on user. Addition of photo, capital letters, emoticons and highlighting of major parts are important to address.

Negative style used in writing, grammatical and spelling mistakes, and unstructured reviews can reduce its value for readers (Crotts et al., 2009; Schindler and Bickart, 2012; Ludwig et al., 2013). The use of different signs with repetition has different impacts and a question to future researches. Adoption of messages is affected by User Generated Contents (UGC). Broadly two types of styles are prevalent in reviews. More than 25% of the reviews were found like personal and emotional stories in a research conducted in Australia. These reviews, in case of medical tourism certainly will increase the affectivity of reviews. Strong narrations consisting dialogues, stories and questions act as persuasive factor. The second type of narration in review consist humor and rhetoric questions. This again is considered a strong style if written in effective manner.

Responses of service providers: An adequate answer at appropriate time affects the purchasing behavior of viewers. Schindler and Bickart (2012) indicate that responding business entity also influence the value of reviews positively as well negatively. The response from the providers even if it is attached with single review affects all the users positively if handled carefully while with number of unattended questions in review column can create overall negative impression on viewers. However, a repeated negative response from a reviewer also decreases its strength of influence. The area needs deep research so that medical tourism facilitators can provide their services effectively.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Website users usually search information from all available sources in case of medical tourism. Online reviews provide them a platform which works as e-WOM. The effect of a review depends upon its volume and valence. The study results that objective review supported by fact and figures have strong influence than subjective reviews. Negative reviews were found stronger than positive and neutral reviews. Description of experience during and after treatment, advanced technology, quality nursing care and travel services with sufficient and in-depth information were strong reviews in influencing the purchase decisions of potential medical tourist. Review writings in form of stories, using humor and asking questions were with different impacts. Using capital letters, emoticons and grammatically correct sentences was other concern area which needs an address. Unattended questions of former users, increase negative while correct answers from service providers side creates positive influence on value and helpfulness of a review. The study advocates that medical tourism facilitators needs to collect users' input from reviews and should respond quickly and responsibly. The research also highlights the need of more empirical research from different settings.

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