Social Media - potential, perception and usage as a marketing tool:

The case of small and medium sized accommodation providers in Auckland

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

B2B	Business to business
C2C	Consumer to consumer
CCM	Consumer centric marketing
E-WOM	Electronic word of mouth
FTEs	Full time employees
GDP	Gross domestic product
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
MMCCs	Multi Media Content Communities
MED	Ministry of Economic Development
NM	Network marketing
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RVRSs	Review, Voting and Recommendation Sites
SMAPs	Small and medium sized accommodation providers
SMEs	Small and medium sized enterprises
SMTBs	Small and medium sized tourism businesses
SNSs	Social Networking Sites
TIANZ	Tourism Industry Association of New Zealand
UNWTO	World Tourism Organisation
WOM	Word of mouth

ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

Signed:

Christine Jonscher

Date:

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ABSTRACT

Although Social Media are a relatively new phenomenon, they have, are and will increasingly influence consumers' behaviours and their decision-making processes. In particular, information intensive service sectors – such as the tourism industry - will be affected by these changes, creating both opportunities and challenges for individual operators, and indeed for whole sectors.

Therefore, the overall objective of this research is to gain a greater understanding of the perceptions of and experiences with Social Media for marketing purposes by small and medium sized accommodation providers in Auckland, New Zealand. More specifically, the primary research investigated the *potential* compared to the *perceived* value of Social Media as a marketing tool. Furthermore, it was examined how Social Media are currently adopted and utilised and what barriers exist for a successful implementation. These objectives were accomplished through a series of in-depth face-to-face interviews with a selection of eight small accommodation providers in Auckland between September and October 2011. This exploratory study contributes to the emerging body of knowledge in this area and provides practical recommendations in regard to the selection of appropriate Social Media and their improved utilisation.

The research results indicate that there is a significant gap between the currently perceived value of Social Media compared to the potential suggested by various literature. While Review, Voting and Recommendations Sites are perceived to generate actual value in terms of increased visibility and positive word of mouth recommendations for the accommodation providers, the overall uptake of other Social Media for marketing purposes is still at an early stage and their potential to add value to the business is regarded sceptically. Apart from a lack of motivation, perceived barriers such as the lack of resources and knowledge further impede the uptake of Social Media marketing.

With this in mind, the study recommends a series of measures that might be implemented in order to improve the effective adoption and utilisation of Social Media for those small and medium sized accommodation providers that are interested in improving or extending their Social Media marketing. These include developing a greater understanding of the Social Media concept and individual channels relevant to the business; strategically selecting appropriate Social Media and specific tools; defining realistic, concrete and measurable Social Media marketing objectives and

consequently monitoring these activities by measuring their outcome in regard to the formulated objectives.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

1.1 Research context

It is widely claimed that through the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to what is known as the Web 2.0 and Social Media, consumers' knowledge, needs and expectations have changed in terms of their information searching and sharing as well as their decision making process (Ferguson, 2008; Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 2011). Furthermore, Social Media are progressively becoming an integrated part of peoples' day-to-day lives as a source of information, communication and purchasing (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Service industries, such as tourism including the accommodation sector, are especially affected by these changes, due to the intangible, inseparable and perishable nature of their 'products', which are inherently information intensive (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2007; Weaver & Lawton, 2006). The rise of Social Media sites, in which anyone can openly publish their opinions and participate in discussions, and therefore potentially make or break personal, product or business reputations, has dramatically changed the way companies should approach consumers and promote themselves online (Weber, 2007).

Although some researchers such as Frommer (2007) express scepticism towards user generated-content (UGC) due to the lack of expertise held by the majority of individuals who contribute content, the overwhelming belief is that the significance and influence of Social Media cannot be ignored if tourism businesses are to survive (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2008; O'Connor, 2008; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Schegg, Liebrich, Scaglinone, & Ahmad, 2008). Furthermore, in order to stay competitive, it has been emphasised that tourism businesses must understand and adjust to changing market conditions by embracing and harnessing the opportunities created through Social Media for marketing and distribution purposes (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009; Dwivedi et al., 2007; Litvin et al., 2008; Wynne et al. 2001; Constantinides, 2009).

As small and medium sized tourism businesses (SMTBs) account for the majority of businesses in New Zealand's tourism industry (TIANZ, 2011), they contribute significantly to the creation of economic and social value for communities and the entire country (Ministry of Tourism, 2007). New Zealand's tourism industry is one of the main sources of employment and the country's second largest export earner, contributing $9.7 billion or 16.8 percent to the country's total exports in 2011 (Statistics

New Zealand, 2011). International and domestic tourism combined contribute directly $6.9 billion and indirectly an additional $8.8 billion to the total gross domestic product (GDP).

Within the tourism industry, the accommodation sector is acknowledged as one of the largest drivers of employment and economic revenue (Statistics New Zealand, 2011; UNWTO, 2011). Therefore, it is not only interesting but important to obtain a greater understanding about how small and medium sized accommodation providers (SMAPs) in the New Zealand's tourism industry perceive the potential and current impacts of Social Media and how their use as a direct marketing tool could actually lead to improved businesses performance.

1.2 Definition of Social Media

Despite the hype and the ongoing praise of Social Media, there is commonly a lack of understanding of what these terms actually mean, which becomes obvious through the often interchangeable use of the terms Web 2.0 and Social Media and their widespread use as a marketing buzzword (O'Reilly, 2005). Perhaps the clearest definition of Social Media comes from Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61), who define Social Media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content."

Social Media comprises a wide variety of application types, which may be broadly grouped into the following categories:

1. **Blogs**, e.g. WordPress, Blogger, Live Journal and **Microblogs**, e.g. Twitter, Jaiku, FMyLife
   Short for web logs; A journal-style website of frequently updated information (microblogging - publishing brief text messages)

2. **Social Networks** (SNSs), e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace,
   Social networking sites (online communities) that enable meeting people, finding like minds and sharing content

3. **Multi Media Content Communities** (MMCCs)
   Sites where users share content, photo and video, music and presentations, e.g. Youtube, Flickr, Slideshare, Last.fm

4. **Collaborative Projects** (wikis), e.g. Wikipedia, Wikitravel, World66
   Content sites that are jointly and simultaneously created by many end-users

5. **Reviews, Voting and Recommendation Sites** (RVRSs), e.g. TripAdvisor, Yelp, Lonely Planet, Travelbug, epinions
   Sites where users vote on products/services/businesses and submit reviews

6. **Information Aggregation Sites**, e.g. Netvibes, suprglu, techmeme
   Sites where individual content and information from various Web sources are published in one place for the user

7. **Social Bookmarking Sites**, e.g. Digg, Delicious
   Sites that allow users to save, share and rate web pages and Internet links

8. **Forums/Bulletin Boards**, e.g. epinions.com, python.com, personaldemocracy.com
   Interactive sites for exchanging ideas, opinions and information around particular products and special interests

9. **Entertainment Sites**
   Virtual Game Worlds, e.g. World of Warcraft, Miniclip
   Platforms where a personalised movable icon represents a person in cyberspace that interacts with others just like in reality

   Virtual Social Worlds, e.g. Second Life, The Sims online
   Personalised movable icons representing persons "residents", who can choose their behaviour and actions more freely and interact with others without restrictions

(Adapted from Constantinides, 2009; Mackenzie, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, Anderson, 2007; Buhalis & Jun, 2011).

1.3 Problem discussion

Despite the absence of a commonly agreed definition and the paucity of sufficient research (Efthymios & Fountain, 2008), it is widely believed that Social Media have created great opportunities for businesses with regard to their marketing, communication and distribution processes (Laboy & Torchio, 2007; Litvin et al., 2007). It is further claimed, that this interactive digital media platform on which the increasingly empowered and sophisticated consumer connects, shares and collaborates, has fundamentally changed the rules of marketing (Meadows-Klue, 2008) and the way marketers will be able to influence today's customers (Singh, 2005). However, despite the potential, a simple presence in the Social Media landscape does not automatically guarantee a competitive advantage. On the contrary, its use is extremely challenging and could even weaken a company's competitive position, or result in a demotion of

reputation (Akehurst, 2009; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). As highlighted in the overview below, there are just as many potential benefits as risks and challenges involved in the use of Social Media for businesses.

Potential benefits

- Low costs and high accessibility of consumer information exchange
- High reachability (platform for electronic Word-of-Mouth [eWOM], which can reach extraordinarily high numbers of people, potentially creating new dynamics in the markets)
- Increased visibility in the marketplace
- Improved customer service and relationship through direct interactions
- Increased customisations/personalization at reasonable cost
- Enhanced efficacy and competiveness (due to comprehensive information accessibility)
- Improved understanding of customers' satisfaction and behaviour, as well as corrective actions for improvement by monitoring and analysing customer opinions, experiences, critiques and ideas
- Increased brand awareness and loyalty
- Reduced market research, communication and distribution costs (disintermediation, less commissions, less print advertising)
- Increased customer satisfaction and customer retention (through high availability, fast response, direct contact - Business is always open, 24/7/365)
- Improved segmentation, targeting and positioning strategies
- Potential to increase partnership building and networking opportunities within the industry
- Increased traffic to the business website
- Improved Search Engine Optimisation (ranking)

Risks/ challenges

- Problems may arise through the anonymity of the communicator, which could cause intentional false, misleading or out-of context statements
- Novelty and lack of research in this area (for example concerning actual effectiveness and strategic use)
- Only reaches certain target groups
- Requires comprehensive knowledge, skills and time for implementation and maintenance (engagement)
- Has to be tied into comprehensive strategic marketing planning
- Managing negative respond ineffectively, which could damage the company's image (or the brand)
- Travel products and services are particularly at risk from negative comments made in social online networks (word-of-mouth effect)
- Provision and continuous generation of sufficiently interesting content
- Ability to filter relevant content from the vastness of information
- Varying or contrasting cultural, legal and social systems in different countries

(Adapted from Litvin et al., 2007; Braun, 2004; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Schmallegger & Carson, 2007; Akehurst, 2009; Turban et al., 2008; Robinson & Deavoll, 2010)

Today, with more than 100 million blogs in the blogsphere (Kietzmann et al., 2011), about 140 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2011), 750 million active Facebook users (Facebook, 2011) and about 45 million reviews alone on Tripavidsor (Tripadvisor, 2011), it seems that corporate communication has been democratized and consumers are starting to realise that they have more power over organisations than ever before (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Ramsay, 2010).

Even though Social Media appear to have developed into a powerful platform, yet, or maybe for the same reason, many small businesses seem to be reluctant and uncomfortable to participate in a virtual world where they are increasingly losing control about what and whom consumers talk about so very openly (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Dwivedi, Shibu, & Venkatesh, 2007). Even of those who do recognise the need to engage with Social Media, many do not really understand how to do so effectively (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011).

Despite the continuing rise in popularity by consumers and the continuous praise of Social Media as the new marketing tool for many industries and business sizes, very little research has been undertaken to assess the impacts Social Media marketing actually has on the business performance of small and medium sized service providers, particularly in the tourism industry. More specifically, the emerging research in this area is significantly lacking attention to the adoption of Social Media by SMTBs and the strategic use of Social Media channels in order to turn their potential into actual value for the service provider. Thus, the knowledge about the perceived influence and potential of Social Media on the business performance is still very limited and rather speculative (Carson, 2007).

Considering the growing influence of Social Media, the make up and importance of New Zealand's tourism industry as well as the significance of the accommodation sector within the industry, it is important to investigate the adoption and perception of Social Media by SMAPs.

1.4 Research questions

In order to address the discussed issues and to achieve the study's objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do small and medium sized accommodation providers perceive Social Media as a marketing tool?

2. How are Social Media currently adopted and utilised by small and medium sized accommodation providers?

3. How could Social Media be used more effectively by small and medium sized accommodation providers?

The findings of each research question will be analysed and discussed in depth in a dedicated chapter.

1.5 Significance and contribution of this research

Although tourism marketing in general has become an important field for tourism studies (Li & Petrick, 2008), the existing research appears to have two major imbalances. Firstly, it seems that researching tourist perspectives and behaviour have received considerably more attention than organisational marketing practice, especially with regard to SMTBs. Secondly, as pointed out by Nodder, Ateljevic, Mason, and Milne (2003), there has been an overemphasis on quantitative research, which limits our understanding to the 'what' of the subject and prevents a deeper understanding of individual socially constructed knowledge (Fesenmaier, O'Leary, & Uysal, 1996), in this case, how the Social Media phenomenon is perceived marketing purposes.

This research contributes to the limited body of knowledge on qualitative tourism marketing research, focusing on the managerial perspective. Although the study focuses on the accommodation sector, it does contribute to the tourism industry overall, as SMTBs share many characteristics, challenges and overall business objectives across all tourism sectors. Furthermore, they all share the need to continuously adjust to changing market conditions in order to stay competitive, which in turn is important for New Zealand's economy as a whole. More specifically, the research aims to identify a potential gap between the views of researchers, consultants, industry observers and

trade literature on the perceived potential of Social Media to market tourism businesses, compared to the actual use and perceived value of Social Media by SMAPs. At a practical level, the research provides recommendations for SMAPs on the strategic selection of appropriate Social Media sites and how to increase the efficacy of their use.

1.6 Overview of this dissertation

Chapter 2: Literature review, this chapter provides an overview of literature relevant to the topic being studied, including the development of tourism and ICT, changing trends and consumer behaviours in the tourism context, marketing theories and strategies, as well as information about small and medium sized tourism and accommodation businesses. Furthermore, the growing importance, opportunities and challenges of Social Media (marketing) overall and specifically in the tourism context are discussed.

Chapter 3: Methodology, this chapter focuses on the research methodology and research design chosen and implemented to address the research questions and to achieve the study's objective. Furthermore, the issues of trustworthiness in qualitative research as well as ethical consideration regarding this research are discussed.

Chapters 4 and 5: Analysis and discussion, these chapters present the study's main findings, with respect to the research questions one and two. Chapter 4 includes a brief description of the interviewees and their businesses, followed by the analysis and discussion of the participants' perceptions regarding Social Media. Chapter 5 involves the presentation and discussion of findings concerning the adoption and utilisation of Social Media marketing based on the face-to-face interviews and the examination of the participants' Social Media presence.

Chapter 6: Recommendations, based on research results, especially on the identified barriers, recommendations are provided with respect to the strategic selection of appropriate Social Media channels and to a more effective use of Social Media for marketing.

Chapter 7: Implication and conclusion, the final chapter concludes the main findings and draws implications based on the research results. Furthermore, the study's limitations as well as recommendations for further research are highlighted.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2. Literature review

2.1 The development of the tourism industry, ICT and the Web

2.1.1 The rise of the tourism industry

The incredible growth of the global tourism industry is certainly one of the most extraordinary social and economic phenomena of the 20th century. The invention and advancement of modern technologies giving ease of accessibility to ocean and air routes, combined with other factors such as increased wealth, changing demographics, and the increase of leisure time has led to a tremendous rise of travel demand (Goessling & Hall, 2006). From only 25 million international tourist arrivals in the 1950's, the numbers have risen by almost 400 percent to 940 million arrivals in 2010 (UNWTO, 2011a). Tourism today is considered to be one of the largest industries globally and the biggest service industry in the world, having generated an estimated US$919 billion and contributed to approximately 6-7% of employment worldwide (UNWTO, 2010). Although the rate of growth has slowed down, according to the UNWTO's *Tourism 2020 Vision* forecast, the industry will continue to grow and will reach nearly 1.6 billion arrivals worldwide by the year 2020 (UNWTO, 2011b).

2.1.2 The development of the ICT industry

Perhaps the only other industry that has experienced similarly impressive growth to the tourism industry is the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector (Buhalis & Law, 2008). There is little doubt that the entire global economy, from large to small businesses, has been revolutionised by ICT. The tourism industry is no exception and has been heavily influenced by the ICT development through innovations such as Computer Reservation Systems in 1970's, Global Distribution Systems in the 1980's and the Internet in the 1990's (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

There are now numerous ICT's for the tourism and hospitality industry that present solutions to increase the efficiency and effectiveness for almost all processes in the operational, tactical and strategic level (Main, 2002) and in terms of how the tourism product is promoted, produced, distributed and delivered (Buhalis & Jun, 2011).

The introduction of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW), perhaps the greatest of all ICT innovations and the most democratic mass medium ever (Cohen, 2006), has led to significant changes in terms of how people communicate, learn, search for information and make purchasing decisions. Consequently it is increasingly changing the way businesses is generated and conducted. Even now, after years of extraordinary growth in Internet penetration (from about 361 million in 2000 to 2.1 billion people worldwide in 2009 [Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2011]), the number of Internet users is still rising continuously.

On the business side, the Internet and the Web have supposedly reduced the importance of economies of scale and created great opportunities for small businesses. For example: to enter new markets and achieve higher visibility; to reduce marketing costs and gain higher margins through bypassing intermediaries; as well as to gain greater market knowledge and to increase direct communication with the customers (Loane, 2006). Today, the Internet is seen as essential and a precondition for small businesses (or any business for that matter) to stay competitive in a highly dynamic, globally networked and customer empowered market (Buhalis & Jun, 2011; Loane, 2006).

2.1.3 From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 and Social Media

The latest developments in ICT have led to a more social, collaborative and participatory Web, referred to as Web 2.0. The term Web 2.0 basically describes a number of Web-based services, processes and tools that enable applications such as content syndication, podcasting, multi-media sharing, content tagging services, wikis or blogs (Anderson, 2007). The figure below indicates the main differences between the Web 1.0 and the development to Web 2.0, which in simple terms progressed from a read/write tool to a network of online collaboration and interaction, which facilitates the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing of content via various Internet application tools (Anderson, 2007; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Buhalis & Jun, 2011).

Figure 1: Development from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0

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Source: O'Reilly, 2005

Currently, perhaps the most popular Web 2.0 based applications are Social Media, which represent the focus of this study.

2.1.4 ICT adoption of small firms in the tourism industry

A considerate amount of literature over the last 20 years has repeatedly emphasised that small businesses especially can benefit from ICT and the Internet (Lituchy & Rail, 2000; Leong, 2000; Matlay, 2004). However, the other side of the coin is that small businesses are often challenged by the continuous and fast development of ICT, for obvious reasons such as lack of resources, skills and knowledge (Martin, 2005; Schegg, Scaglione, Liebrich, & Murphy, 2007; Braun, 2002). These challenges combined with other barriers such as lack of training, limited understanding of the potential benefits or strategic planning (Hull & Milne, 2001; Main, 2002; Stansfield & Grant, 2003; Schegg et al., 2007; Murphy, & Kielgast, 2008), are considered to be the cause for a generally slow adoption of ICT and online trends by SMTBs, in comparison to larger organisations (Evans, Bohrer, & Richards, 2000; Braun, 2004; O'Toole, O'Marcaigh, & Cunningham, 2007).

While the uptake of ICT in terms of the use of computer, emails and the Internet in the case of New Zealand's small accommodation providers is close to saturation level (Nodder, Ateljevic, Mason, & Milne, 2003), the level of sophistication of use still varies

significantly compared to larger providers (Milne, Mason, & Hasse, 2004). The same appears to apply internationally for SMTBs, with various studies suggesting that the uptake and economic exploitation of (various) ICT by SMTBs compared to larger businesses is still lagging behind and is insufficient in order to operate competitively in an increasingly ICT-driven industry (Braun, 2004; O'Toole, O'Marcaigh, & Cunningham, 2007).

2.2 Changing trends and consumer behaviour in the tourism context

2.2.1 The consumer in a world of change

The tourism and hospitality industry has, is and will continue to face various challenges through its ever-evolving framework (Lohmann, 2004). Changing economic and political conditions, fragmentation of traditional media, technological advancements, changing lifestyles and demographics, and growing consumer scepticism are among many factors that have led to significant changes in consumer demands, perceptions and buying behaviours (Urban, 2005; Niininen, Buhalis, & March, 2007). There are so many trends that have and will continue to influence consumer demands and behaviours that it would far exceed the scope of this study to discuss all of them. However, the following table presents an overview and short description of what are believed to be the most influential trends.

Table 1: Impacts of trends on consumer demand and behaviour in tourism

Changes and trends	Impact on consumer demand and behaviour affecting the tourism industry
Economic and political changes	
Economic and political development of highly populated countries such as China, India and Brazil	Growing freedom of travel and greater choice of tourist destinations and activities, resulting in newly emerging markets and growing competition.
Other changes such as fluctuating exchange rates, taxation, environment, political stability, etc.	Influence peoples' decisions to travel.
Demographic and societal changes	
Increased longevity and health of populations	Rapid growth of the 'retirement' population - an increasingly important target market for the tourism industry.
Changes in values and lifestyle through rising education levels, increased disposable income, changing attitudes towards authorities, altering gender roles, declining number of children, etc.	Increased materialistic values of generation X (born between 1960-1979) and Y (born between 1980-1999). These generations have very high expectations and know what they want, to what price, and where to get it, making "affordable

	luxury tourism" flourish.
Generation X and Y are more active and participatory; looking for experience and authenticity of the tourism product, have a very low brand loyalty but a growing demand for greater accountability and transparency of businesses	Resulting in the growing influence of these generations. This in turn creates new challenges for tourism businesses and requires new ways gaining their interest and building relationship.
Time is becoming the most valuable commodity in a highly competitive world where work pressure is rising and leisure time becoming sacred	Travelers with little time but sufficient funds will prefer shorter but multiple holidays throughout the year, expecting high quality, efficiency and value for money.
Psychographic trends	
Lifestyles changes in terms of people's interests, activities and concerns, resulting for example in growing consumer awareness to environmental, health and well-being issues, openly living their sexual orientation, etc.	Growing demand for product diversification and niche markets such as environmental sensitive products and travel, health and wellness vacation, gay and lesbian tourism products, etc.
Changing family values through the delay of marriage, the rise of divorce rates, reluctance to have children, and the increase of single-parent households	Fewer people progressing through the traditional life-cycle stages, which reduces the value of the family life cycle as a predictive tool. Overall tourism demand may differ due to the growing importance of the demand patterns displayed by a higher number of traveling singles, single parents and childless singles and couples.
Technology Trends	
Technological advancements (e.g. efficiency improvements of airlines and cruise ships)	Cheaper, convenient and faster traveling.
The evolution of a new mass medium – the internet	Affects the way people search for and distribute information as well as the way people communicate with each other and make booking decisions.
Information and Communication Technology are becoming an integral part of people's life	Increasingly knowledgeable and sophisticated consumers. Furthermore, information overload and advanced ICT are significantly reducing the sensitive to traditional marketing messages by consumers.
Consumerism is growing rapidly as the networked society has easy access to information, prices, reviews etc.	Impacting the consumers' purchasing decision making process, leading to the growing empowerment of the consumer. Therefore, delivering high quality and exceeding consumer expectations becomes mandatory for tourism businesses.

Adapted from: Cetron, Micco, & Davies, 2006; Yeomann & McMahon-Beattie, 2006; Lohmann, 2004; Morrison, 2010; Glover, 2010

Furthermore, the seemingly paradoxical consumer trends of expecting a certain standard or quality but also a unique experience at the same time will increasingly challenge tourism businesses and marketers as it means having to invest greater efforts without necessarily having a higher demand (Lohmann, 2004). Overall, it can be summarised that future consumers will be significantly different from past and even present consumers. They will be more demanding, more time-driven, better informed and highly individualistic (Akehurst, 2009).

2.2.2 The empowered consumer

As mentioned earlier, it is believed that one of the greatest influences of consumer demand and behaviour in the tourism industry has been the introduction and development of the Internet (Morrison, 2010). Apart from the vast sources of information accessible online, people now have the choice to book or buy their preferred products from anywhere, independent from physical locations and travel agents. Furthermore, information needed is not only easily available; it is now also possible for individuals to share their opinions, thoughts and complaints (about various services and products) with a global community of Internet users (Dellarocas, 2003; Bailey, 2010). The new and more efficient ways of communicating, accessing and distributing information online are consequently leading to greater transparency of businesses and more control for the consumer in the purchasing process. This in turn is increasingly transforming the Web from a business-to-consumer marketing medium into a user-driven, peer-to-peer platform (O'Connor, 2008). In other words, the Web 2.0 is significantly contributing to "customer empowerment" in terms of "the power of knowledge" stemming from the enhanced ability to access, understand, utilise and share information (Conrady, 2007; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006).

Today's customer preferences and decisions are more and more based on inputs provided by others through peer reviews, referrals, blogs, tagging, social networks or online forums, which are largely beyond the control of online marketers. As a result, the new Web 2.0 has become a new marketplace component that further complicates the "traditional" buying behaviour process described in the Inputs-Processing-Response model as shown in figure 2, which illustrates the conventional influencer A (controlled marketing stimuli) and B (uncontrollable personal influencers) (Kotler, 2003). With the rise of the Internet, this traditional textbook model has been extended by another, more controllable factor, the Web marketing experience (C). Finally, the development of the Web to the interactive Web 2.0 (D) has led to further influence in the purchase decision-making process, uncontrollable by the marketer (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

Figure 2: Factors influencing the decision process in an information-based marketplace

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Source: Constantinides & Fountain (2008)

This advanced model emphasizes the increasing complexity of the customer purchasing decision-making process in the Web 2.0 environment, in which the effectiveness of traditional marketing practice (push strategies) has reduced dramatically. An additional challenge is the growing distrust of consumers for conventional, mass marketing messages (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Furthermore, there is evidence that customer reviews posted in different Social Media are much more powerful and trusted than expert product reviews (Gillin, 2007).

2.2.3 The "collective intelligence"– the power of electronic word of mouth

The popularity and use of, as well as the active engagement in social networks, are growing constantly and the ever-growing online communication between customers has turned Social Media sites into an important outlet for electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communications (Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Urban, 2005). While WOM has always been considered highly influential, the distribution of information through eWOM is even more influential and voluminous than traditional (offline) WOM (Chatterjee, 2001; Hanlan & Kelly, 2005). Therefore, eWOM can have an enormous impact on the success of goods and services (Hennig-

Thurau & Walsh, 2003). As consumers are increasingly suspicious of commercial sources of information, the numbers of consumers relying on online opinions and reviews from other consumers to support their buying decision is growing constantly (Mack, Blose, & Pan, 2008; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Cox et al., 2008). Consequently, Social Media are seen by many consumers as a more trustworthy source of information to support buying decisions than traditional corporate sponsored communication (Foux, 2006).

This is a critical issue for the tourism industry, as information intensive tourism products differ significantly to physical products in terms of their intangibility, inseparability and perishability (Weaver & Lawton, 2006; Litvin et al., 2007). Therefore, eWOM can have a significant influence on travel-related decisions, as consumers tend to trust and rely strongly on other travellers' feedback in order to reduce the perceived unpredictability of the product (Litvin et al., 2007; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Peterson & Merino, 2003). Moreover, customers' experience, feedback and recommendations are regarded as more credible by other consumers than information provided by marketers, particularly for high involvement products (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005; Park, Kim, & Han, 2007). As WOM cannot be controlled but managed, it becomes crucial for companies who decide to include Social Media in their marketing activities to manage those networks strategically and effectively (Looker, Rockland, & Taylor-Ketchum, 2007).

According to recent studies, not only do consumers' opinions about their experience shared online influence other people's perception about a business, they also impact their purchase intent (Barnes, Cass, Getgood, Gillin, & Gossieaux, 2008; Gretzel, Hyan-Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007).

2.2.4 Social Media in the tourism industry

As reported by Gretzel and Yoo (2008), different consumer studies have shown that one of the most popular online activities is searching for travel-related information and customer reviews. According to eMarketer (2008), 82 percent of online consumers have checked Social Media for travel-related purchasing decisions. Of those who read other travellers reviews, the majority search for them on virtual community sites (92.3%), followed by guidebook sites (60.6%), online booking agent sites (58.1%) and on search

engines (51.5%) (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Furthermore, Social Media sites already account for a substantial amount of travel-related search results on search engines, which indicates the growing significance for Social Media in the tourism industry (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The growing popularity of, reliance on, and communication through user generated content sites will increasingly influence travel consumer decisions (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Johnson & Kayne, 2003). Especially accommodation providers will be affected by these changes as studies have shown that eighty percent of consumers already are using Social Media, predominately review sites, when deciding where to stay (Gretzel & Yoo, 2007). It has further been suggested that of those people who book accommodation online, thirty percent have changed their mind because of reviews written by other travellers (Hills & Cairncross, 2009).

Since more and more travellers are drawn to this "collective intelligence" (Surowiecki, 2005; Litvin et al., 2008), it is essential for tourism businesses not only to understand the shift in consumer information searching, decision-making and buying behaviour, but to respond through the appropriate media depending on the target market, organisational objectives and available budget (Mack et al., 2008).

2.3 The evolution of marketing strategies and theories

2.3.1 The development of marketing approaches

As summarised by Li & Petrick (2008), several marketing theories and paradigms have evolved in the last two decades, for example from relationship marketing (RM), network marketing (NM) and real-time marketing (RTM) to customer centric marketing (CCM) and service-dominant marketing (SDM). These theories and paradigms illustrate the development of relationships between businesses and customers from a transactional to a collaborative approach, to a new customer- and service-centric, market driven and learning-oriented approach. The latter combines elements from earlier approaches but transforms the traditional focus ―on manufacturer-based, goods-centred adversarial competition, to a focus on customers' involvement, inter-organisational coordination, and knowledge management‖ (Li & Petrick, 2008, p. 239).

Changing customer behaviour, expectations and influence have led to significant implications for marketers and businesses as traditional marketing strategies (push/pull) are becoming ever less effective (Ferguson, 2008). It is no longer the marketer who determines when, how, and to whom to communicate their marketing messages it is more and more the consumer who decides which information to take in and to react to (Meadows-Klue, 2007). Consequently, marketers and scholars have continuously developed new marketing strategies and theories to adjust to these changing conditions (Evans, 2010), leading to latest stage of marketing, which has been described by Kotler et al. (2010) as "The Age of Participation and Collaborative Marketing" (p. 5) and "The Age of Globalisation Paradox and Cultural Marketing" (p. 12).

2.3.2 Marketing approaches in the tourism context

Tourism marketers and scholars are aware that the specific characteristics of tourism products require a special/distinct marketing process (as they are mainly service based). For example, Morrison (2002) has highlighted eight features, which make tourism and hospitality marketing unique. These incorporate the customers' shorter exposure to service, more emotional buying appeal, greater importance on managing evidence, greater emphasis on stature and imagery, more variety and types of distribution channels, more dependence on complementary organisations, easier copying of service, and more emphasis on off-season promotion.

According to Coviello, Winklhofer and Hamilton (2006), the concept of relationship marketing (combined with transactional marketing) has been adopted the most by the tourism and hospitality industry. It has been employed predominately as a promotional activity, which basically trades loyalty or relationships for incentives (e.g. frequent flyer/guest programmes). Although on a far lower level, network marketing (interfirm cooperation) has also been perceived as important, particularly in regard to a 'tourism learning system' and directly selling 'value added products' (Li & Petrick, 2008; Coviello et al., 2006). However, the development and adoption of those marketing strategies to customer-centric and service-dominant approaches seem to have received only little attention so far by SMTBs (Niininen et al., 2007).

Since customers are significantly less sensitive to marketing messages and are ever more irritated by them, new marketing approaches must aim to interact and connect

with customers in a more personal way (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Bernoff & Li, 2008). Due to the continuous rise of Social Media popularity and the change in consumer expectations and behaviour, tourism businesses will also have to adopt alternative marketing approaches, such as NM or CCM as the main foci of these strategies are to gain a greater understanding of individual customer characteristics like their motivations, habits and values and to utilise these information in order to create more customised, engaging service (Niininen et al., 2007). This proposition is supported by the growing acknowledgement by many scholars and marketers that knowledge is a major source of competitive advantage and economic growth (Li & Petrick, 2008), which reflects on one of the main advantages of Social Media, to access extensive information from and about consumers. A consumer-centric marketing approach has perhaps never been as important as it is today, since the consumer has more influence than ever of the offerings and success of a business (Niininen et al., 2007).

However, it has to be pointed out that while some principles of existing marketing theories are equally important for small and large businesses, many theories and marketing approaches have been developed based on the organisational context of larger firms and therefore have only limited relevance for smaller firms due to their contrasting framework and needs.

2.3.3 Social Media marketing

There is little doubt that Social Media will become an increasingly important element of marketing activity. Some even suggest that Social Media will transform marketing fundamentally and will once again revolutionise commerce, as well as the relationships between business-to-consumer (B2C), business-to-business (B2B) and now consumer-to-consumer (C2C) (O'Connor, 2008). Table 2 shows the fundamental changes from traditional to the new Social Media marketing approaches.

Table 2: Traditional marketing versus new marketing

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Source: Weber (2007, pp.33-34)

One of the main differences between old and new marketing strategies is the role and involvement the customer plays in brand building and purchase decisions (Larson, 2009). The traditional approach of sending out passive marketing messages and brand promises to the consumer (top-down-approach) appears to be less and less effective (Bernoff & Li, 2008). Instead, it is widely suggested that today's customer should be understood as the co-creator in the marketing and communication process (bottom-up-approach) and contemporary marketers must realise the shifting demands and values of consumers (back) to a more personal, interactive and relational experience (Radder,

2002). Embracing the empowered customer by using a bottom-up-marketing approach is essential as "billions of people create trillions of connections through social media each day" (Hansen, Schneiderman, & Smith, 2011, p.3), through which countless relationships and vast social networks are built based on the desire of sharing, connecting and collaborating. Therefore, instead of solely aiming to attract the attention of potential consumers through passive messages (reach), companies should attract **and** continue the attention through engaging, participating and creating experience within these networks in order to achieve the ultimate goal of attention and influence (Hanna et al., 2011).

Various studies have shown that the majority of large organisations worldwide appear to have quickly recognised the apparent need to manage this new customer power and engage in the Social Media phenomenon in order to turn it into a benefit for the organisation (Bursen-Marsteller, 2010; Cherecwich, 2010; Verma & McGill, 2011). Although the current use of Social Media is still in its infancy, it is increasing and developing at a fast pace, which is also reflected in many marketing budgets. The majority of larger companies are planning to significantly increase their Social Media activities, particularly in regard to networking and microblogging sites (Sullivan, 2009; Verma & McGill, 2011).

The same applies to the accommodation sector, where around 70 percent of larger providers already have a Social Media management in place and further plan to enhance their Social Media engagement and investment. By far the most preferred Social Media are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, (Verma & McGill, 2011) and Tripadvisor for the accommodation sector (Gretzel et al., 2007).

Considering Social Media are highly praised and promoted as the new marketing tool, it is tempting to assume that harnessing the power of Social Media is fairly simple and inexpensive if all that has to be done is talking and engaging with people. However, while the entry into the 'Social Media World' may be easy and fast, the effective engagement in Social Media sites (especially networking sites) is anything but simple. Especially since the lack of experience and systematic research on the actual potential and effect of active Social Media marketing leaves the engagement basically still a trial and error process for businesses (Constantinides, 2009). In particular small businesses with limited resources may be challenged by the basic questions of where to start, which networks to join, what to say, who to talk to and how often, how to engage people with and how to keep them interested.

Furthermore, as with most other marketing activities in order to utilise Social Media as effective marketing channels they should be integrated into the overall business/marketing strategy of the company. However, as various research has shown, the majority of SMTBs do not have the expertise and resources to plan their marketing activities strategically, which correlates to a high rate with businesses failures (Perry, 2001). This is especially the case within the tourism industry, where owner and manager is often the same person.

2.4 Small and medium sized tourism businesses

2.4.1 Definition of small and medium businesses

The comparability and study of small and medium businesses (SMEs) can potentially cause some confusion and limitations as their definition varies significantly in different parts of the world, depending on the number of full time employees (FTEs), invested capital, turnover and industry type, 'reflecting not only the economic but also the cultural and social dimensions of a country's (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004, p.10).

According to the Ministry of Economic Development [MED] (2008), SMEs in New Zealand are defined as having less than 19 FTEs and comprise around 97% of all enterprises. Moreover, 89% percent of New Zealand's SMEs employ 5 or fewer staff and 68% of them have no employees at all. Overall, SMEs account for 31% of the country's total employment, which has increased by 18% from 2001 to 2007.

This MED definition of SMEs is used throughout this study.

2.4.2 General characteristics

In most countries around the world the majority of tourism and hospitality providers are SMTBs, run by families or local entrepreneurs. Although individually seen they may be rather insignificant but collectively they are of great economic importance, firstly, in terms of their direct contribution to GDP, employment and local development and secondly because of their influence to the "image" of a country as SMTBs enable the

tourists to have direct contact with the local host population and therefore significantly contributing to the tourism experience (Main, 2002).

While it has often been claimed that smaller businesses have certain advantages over larger ones such as greater flexibility to market changes or specialization opportunities, SMTBs also face a range of disadvantages threatening their profitability. These are caused by various endogenous and exogenous challenges as summarized in the table below.

Table 3: Endogenous and exogenous challenges for small businesses

Endogenous factors	Exogenous factors
1. Management inefficiency due to Owners/mangers constellation (e.g. unbalanced experience, personal characteristics, limited knowledge)	1. Sales fluctuations for example due to seasonality
2. Undercapitalisation and poor finance management	2. Poor accessibility (peripheral location)
3. Lack of strategic management, planning and control	3. Unpredictable market development (economic or health crises, exchange rates, rising fuel costs)
4. Product pricing (low margins)	4. Financial issues (bank loans, interest rates)
5. Lack of skilled and experienced human resource	5. Laws and regulations by various governmental agencies
6. Focus on operational, short-term planning	6. Lack of regional promotion and tourism strategy by local government
7. Varying motivation for being in business, business growth and profit maximisation are often not the main motivators	7. General high dependencies on externalities
8. Family involvement may lead to organisational and service inefficiencies	
9. Failure to seek and use expert advice	

Adapted from: Hodgetts & Kuratko 2008; Scarborough & Zimmer, 2003; Cameron & Massey, 2003; Morrison & Teixeira, 2004; Getz & Carlsen, 2000; Buhalis & Main, 1998; Boehr, 1998)

Despite the many challenges, it is important to point out that based on various studies (e.g. Wason et al., 2007; Ateljevic, 2007; Getz & Carlsen, 2000), the prime motivators for SMTBs, particularly for small tourism businesses, are in many cases not of an economic (financial-growth, profit) nature but stem from the desire for personal fulfillment, independence and self-control, the challenge and increased status as well as the desired lifestyle. Consequently, some SMTBs are reluctant to encourage business growth, are resistant to change and long-term planning. This contrasts with the larger growth oriented tourism and accommodation firms (Getz & Carlsen, 2000; Jennings & Beaver, 1997). Furthermore, due to the nature and management style of SMTBs, they

often tend to have a rather pragmatic and intuitive approach to marketing (Moriarty, Jones, Rowley, & Kupiec-Teahan, 2008) and are extremely depended on WOM promotion (Stokes & Lomax, 2002).

Even though SMTBs may differ in their business objectives and management style, the performed marketing activities have a significant impact of any business performance and therefore must be chosen based on the specific requirements, conditions, environment and target market of the accommodation provider (Cizmar & Weber, 2000; Sin, Tse, Heung, & Yim, 2005).

2.4.3 Small and medium sized tourism businesses in New Zealand

New Zealand's tourism industry is predominately made up of small and medium sized businesses (Ministry of Tourism, 2007). Only a handful of businesses (2%) are publicly listed and are mainly found in the accommodation and carrier sectors (Wason, Sleeman, & Simmons, 2007). The majority of SMTBs (75%) employ fewer than 5 FTEs and a further 23% employ less than 49 FTEs. There are an estimated 13,500 to 18,000 SMTBs in New Zealand of which the majority are from the hospitality sector (accommodation, restaurants, etc.) and the transport sector (Ministry of Tourism, 2001 as cited in Wason et al, 2007).

Figure 3: Breakdown of tourism businesses by FTEs and tourism sectors

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Source: Ministry of Tourism, 2001 (as illustrated in Wason et al., 2007)

As the tourism industry is made up of diverse sectors, SMTBs present a heterogeneous group of businesses, varying considerably for instance in terms of their involvement in tourist activities, motivations, business operations and yield outcome (Ateljevic, 2007). However, consistent with international research, national research has shown that New Zealand's SMTBs share common key characteristics and challenges.

In regard to operational characteristics, it can be summarised that many SMTBs are family owned and operated and the majority of business owner/managers have very little or no previous experience in the sector. Overall, the main source of investment to establish the business comes from personal savings (60%). The predominately owner-operator management structure has been proven to often cause a lack of financial and human resources as well as limited management and marketing skills (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2004).

Although motivations to run a SMTB may vary and the prime motivator is in some cases not of economic nature, the majority of New Zealand's tourism businesses still aim to create a profitable business (Wason et al., 2007). Unfortunately, especially, the lack of skilled, knowledgeable staff, limited resources and seasonality issues appear to be significant barriers to becoming a profitable business (Ministry of Tourism, 2007; Wason et al., 2007; Ateljevic, 2007).

Another feature of the country's small tourism firms seems to be "informality" in terms of informal management and the lack of formal marketing considerations (Ateljevic, 2007). In particular the lack of long term planning appears to be prevalent. Although around 72% of SMTBs have a business plan for up to 12 months ahead, only very few plan their business and marketing activities for more than a year in advance (Wason et al., 2007). Due to the usually limited marketing budgets, lower-cost advertising approaches are the preferred marketing options (Ateljevic, 2007).

2.4.4 New Zealand's accommodation sector

Although the accommodation sector is only one of the many sectors that combined create the 'tourism products' (Morrison, 2010), it is a major component and regarded as being one of the highest contributors in terms of employment and economic revenue within the tourism industry (Statistics New Zealand, 2011; UNWTO, 2011). Therefore, the accommodation sector brings important economic and socio-economic benefits to

the country's rural and urban locations (Milne et al., 2004). New Zealand's commercial accommodation sector is estimated to consist of over 3,852 establishments, which are employing more than 32,000 FTEs (Statistics NZ, 2007) (the 2007 statistics have been used as the category 'hosted accommodation' has been excluded in recent years but is considered to be important in the authors view).

The accommodation sector in itself is also very diverse, made up of a range of segments. Establishments can vary significantly in terms of size, organisational structure, facilities provided or classification. The Ministry of Tourism (2009) has classified tourist accommodation types under the following five categories: hotels (including resorts), motels (motor inns, apartments and motels), hosted (private hotels, guesthouses, bed and breakfast and farm stays), backpackers/hostels, and caravan parks/camping grounds.

Like most other tourism sectors, around 80% of accommodation providers employ less than 5 FTEs and 95% employ fewer than 20 staff. Only 0.5% of all the establishments in New Zealand have more than 100 employees. While the larger accommodation providers are predominately found in the major urban centers, the more peripheral rural regions are heavily dependent on smaller establishments (Milne et al., 2004). The total capacity (available units) has risen continuously from 125,000 in 2004 to 141,000 in 2009, representing an increase of 12% over this period. Overall, holiday parks provided the largest share (36%) of the total accommodation capacity in 2009, followed by hotels (23%), motels (21%) and backpackers (19%) (Statistics NZ, 2010). The smallest capacity is supplied by hosted accommodations, which accounts for around 2.3% (Statistics NZ, 2007).

Unsurprisingly, being New Zealand's largest urban area and the main hub for education, commercial and tourist arrivals, the Auckland region receives the highest number of visitor nights (23.1 million) and provides the second largest commercial accommodation capacity (390 accommodation providers) compared to the country's other regions (Auckland Regional Council, 2009).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Justification of methodology

The intention of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the Social Media phenomenon in the business context from the practitioners' perspective. The research questions therefore investigate the individual experiences and perceptions of SMAPs regarding the use of Social Media marketing. As this requires an interpretive understanding ("verstehen") of the phenomenon from participants' viewpoints in the organisational context, a qualitative research method has been applied (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994; Morse & Richards, 2002). Based on the purpose of this study and the limited theoretical framework available concerning the perceptions around Social Media marketing by SMAPs, this research is considered to be exploratory.

With this in mind and considering the phenomenon's contemporaneous business relevance, a case study approach has been found to be the most appropriate strategy for this research. This decision is reinforced by the opinion of several researchers, acknowledging the appropriateness of case studies for conducting exploratory research (Collis & Hussey, 2003; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

The concept of a 'case' is still a subject for debate, it may for instance be an individual, an organisation, a process, even an event (Yin, 2003) or a 'phenomenon specific to time and space' (Johansson, 2003). Case studies are not limited to a particular type of evidence (qualitative or quantitative data sources) and neither do they imply certain data collection methods, instead the importance should be on examining the case from different angles (Yin, 1981). Critical to a case study is that it 'investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin, 2003, p.13). In this research, the case to be studied is the phenomenon of Social Media and its use as a direct marketing tool for SMTBs, focusing on the accommodation sector. The chosen methodology is believed to offer the greatest potential to analyse in depth the complexity of this phenomenon in its natural (organisational) context in order to contribute to the theoretical framework, assess practical implications as well as suggesting future research opportunities (Jennings, 2001).

The chosen research methodology reflects the researcher's underlying interpretive-constructive perception of reality and knowledge creation, which is based on the ontological and epistemological assumption that reality and knowledge are socially constructed through the individual perceptions and social experience and is therefore

subjective (Crotty, 1998). Thus, the researcher acknowledges that the knowledge gained from this research is co-created by the researcher and the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). However, although subjectivity is valued, as it is the main purpose of qualitative research to gain an understanding of individual perceptions and experiences in the context of the studied phenomenon, the 'trustworthiness' of the research must be ensured and will be discussed in a later section.

3.2 Data sources

Although it has been argued that using multiple sources of evidence would enhance the credibility and reliability of the data (Yin, 2003; Tellis, 1997), due to the time constraints for this research and its objective with regard to the first and second research question, it was decided to focus on one-on-one interviews as a source of primary data. This has the advantage of providing the richest, deepest and thickest source of information from the individual within the restricted time frame (Iacobucci & Churchill, 2010). More specifically, the technique of semi-structured face-to-face interviews, predominately consisting of open 'how and why' questions, was chosen to ensure that all participants provide answers to certain groups of questions, while still remaining a flexible interview process that explores individual participant's experiences and perceptions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It has been argued that semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to maintain the focus on the interview and therefore, allow the interviewer to explore the phenomenon of interest even deeper by asking additional or follow-up questions that elaborate on what has been said (Collis & Hussey, 2003).

In order to examine the potential, perceptions and adoption of Social Media as a marketing tool for SMAPs, it was important to firstly analyse the framework these businesses operate in, which is based on the interrelated and perpetually changing market conditions and consumer behaviours. To form the theoretical framework of this study and to investigate the third research question in order to provide practical recommendations for SMAPs, multiple sources of secondary data relevant to the research topic (such as peer-reviewed journal articles, statistics, reports, books, the Web and others) have been analysed. As well as enhancing the understanding of the relevance and potential of the studied phenomenon (Maxwell, 2005), the secondary literature review also assisted in forming questions for the primary data collection stage.

3.3 Sample selection

Due to the time constraints of this research, the sample size for tourism businesses studied had to be limited and was therefore confined to be a sub-set of the sector that met the following criteria:

(i)   Is present in sufficient numbers within a discrete area, to provide a robust and easily 'measured' basis for the interview aspects of the study

(ii)   Has sufficient evidence of the use of Social Media in marketing, at a wider level to enable meaningful research and comparisons to be conducted

(iii)   Has a sufficient degree of homogeneity, to enable comparisons to be drawn between and across individual businesses, and to ensure that the businesses focused on in the study are – at least theoretically – in competition with one another.

Based on these criteria, it was decided to study small and medium sized accommodation providers in Auckland. This group was considered to satisfy all of the above criteria.

To define a sample frame of participants, a purposive stratified sampling technique was applied based on four specific criteria. Firstly the accommodation providers had to be located within a defined geographic area (Auckland), secondly be independently owned, thirdly employ less than 19 FTEs, and lastly they had to be found on at least 2 different types of Social Media channels. Purposeful sampling allows the selection of participants that can provide more "information rich" insights about the phenomenon being studied, compared to randomly selected samples (Patton, 2002).

While a significant number of SMAPs were identified as meeting the first three criteria, it came as a surprise how limited the number of SMAPs was that met the fourth criterion to use at least 2 different Social Media. Only twelve SMAPs in the entire Auckland area were identified to fulfil all four criteria, which presented a serious threat to the research project. Fortunately, eight of the twelve SMAPs agreed to participate in the research, providing a sufficient number and therefore enabled this research to proceed. However, this in itself presents an interesting finding in relation to the uptake of Social Media by SMAPs.

3.4 Primary data collection process

The process of collecting primary data started by contacting potential participants by phone in order to introduce the research purpose and the researcher. After expressing interest and willingness to participate in this study, official invitations were sent out by email, which included an information sheet to introduce the research project and to ensure that the purpose, framework and procedure of the research was clearly understood. This was followed up with a phone call to agree on a time and date for the interview most convenient for the participant. All participants chose to be interviewed at their place of work. After developing the initial interview questions, a pilot interview was conducted in order to refine the questions, assess interviewing skills and to test data recording techniques (Fox, 2006; Seidman, 2006). The in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted between September and October 2011 in Auckland.

At the commencement of each interview, the research background and purpose was repeated, together with a brief conceptual description of the investigated phenomenon, in order to ensure that all participants had a basic understanding of the concepts and terminology used. The interview then started off with introductory warm-up questions around the demographical and personal background. For the remaining part of the interview, the open-ended questions were structured loosely around the research questions, allowing the interviewer to maintain the focus of the interview and for the interviewees to answer freely, in their own words and without any interruption. The length of the interview varied between 50 – 90 minutes.

3.5 Data analysis

The interview data was analysed based on the technique of thematic analysis, which can be described as a 'process of encoding qualitative information' in a systematic manner (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4). As indicated by Fox (2006) and others, thematic analysis is a common method to analyse interview data by identifying themes related to the phenomenon without predetermined codes or categories (for the inductively explorative approach). As in most other qualitative analysis methods (such as content analysis or grounded theory) the process of examining the data is the coding of data, categorising and interpreting patterns, identifying themes and comparing these patterns/themes with

other data sets in order to identify potential trends, similarities and differences (Boyatzis, 1998).

Although thematic analysis is somewhat similar to many other qualitative analysis methods, such as grounded theory or discourse analysis, it does have its own distinct characteristics. The main differentiations are that no initial set of codes or coding templates are necessarily required as thematic analysis is not as dependent on theory and requires only limited theoretical background knowledge. As codes and themes are inductively developed while analysing the data, it presents a suitable method of analysis for exploratory research (Howitt & Cramer, 2008).

3.6 Trustworthiness of the research

Perhaps the main criterion for evaluating the quality of qualitative research is its trustworthiness (rigour), which is defined by how the researcher shows integrity and competence regardless of the research methods and analysis type employed. As suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1994), trustworthiness is demonstrated through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These terms are analogous to internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity, which are used to assess quantitative research.

The credibility of qualitative research depends on the ability and effort of the researcher to design the study and to analyse the results (Golafshani, 2003). As suggested by Shenton (2004), the credibility of this research has been strengthened through the careful and accurate reproduction and filing of information collected, as well as by reassuring the voluntariness and the right of the participants to withdraw at any stage. Many forms of qualitative analysis share the major threat of projection; to potentially impose meaning onto another person's statement that is the researcher's own value or judgement (Boyatzis, 1998). This risk was minimised by repeatedly questioning the decisions made in terms of created codes and themes as well as by constructing them predominately based on the participants own words as well as by using supportive quotes ("thick descriptions"). Furthermore, the participants were offered an opportunity to view the interview transcripts for validation in order to avoid any potential misinterpretations of the information and to guarantee its accuracy.

Although an exact replication of this study is not possible, dependability (and confirmability) can be enhanced through the construct validity of the research by maintaining and illustrating a clear chain of evidence. As suggested by Yin (2003), this was achieved through the use of case study protocol (which links to the research questions), by creating evidence through citations, by treating all data equally and unbiased to the greatest extent possible and finally by creating a case study report.

To allow transferability of the study results, the boundaries of this study have been set and described clearly in terms of participants, location, data collection and analysis methods and limitations. Furthermore, providing 'thick' descriptive information will enable the reader to decide if the findings are applicable to their own situation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

3.7 Ethical considerations

While this research has no ethical focus and is considered to be of low risk, there are several ethical considerations that needed to be taken into account, incorporating the Treaty of Waitangi's universal principles of *partnership* (Truthfulness and professionalism), *participation* (Voluntariness of participants and informed consent) and *protection* (Harm to participants).

In order to protect and respect all participants' privacy, anonymity was offered to each of the interviewees (however, it was not requested by any of the interviewees). It has further been reassured that all information given can be verified or withdrawn by the participants at any stage. The principle of informed consent also relates to the issue of harm to participants (Bryman & Bell, 2007), which includes the emphasis on the voluntariness of the participation and information about the purpose and process of the research in appropriate language. Furthermore, it was aimed to create mutual benefits for both parties involved in the study, firstly by valuing and reflecting on the participants input as unbiased and accurately as possible. Secondly, by providing a report of the research and practical recommendations for the participants.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
PART 1:
Participant characteristics and perceptions

4. Findings and discussion – Part 1: Participant characteristics and perceptions

This chapter contains a brief description of the participants' characteristics, followed by the presentation and discussion of the interview findings with respect to the first research question "How do small and medium sized accommodation providers perceive Social Media as a marketing tool?".

4.1 Participant characteristics

Although the participants have not asked for anonymity, it has been decided to assign a pseudonym to each interviewee in order to protect their identity as most of them are in direct competition and personally know each other. In the subsequent analysis and discussion, the individuals will be referred to as "participants", "hosts", "providers" or "interviewees". Table 4 summarises the key background information about the participating accommodation providers.

Table 4: Participant characteristics and main marketing foci

Participant	Role	Age Group	Operating since	Number of beds	Number of staff	Target market	Main marketing foci
1. Lisa	Owner-operator	55+	1996	1	Only Lisa and partner	Generally any market but particularly international guest. No further segmentation.	Online presence; Auckland -iSite
2. Bob	Owner-operator	55+	2003	5	Bob and wife, plus 1 permanent staff and temporary, part-time staff	Would prefer the domestic market but receive predominately international guests. No further segmentation.	Website and the Internet; Connection with international wholesalers; Networking (Trenz, travel agents, etc.)
3. Monica	Owner-operator	55+	1997	8	Monica and husband, plus 1 full-time staff and temporary, part-time staff	Would prefer the domestic market but receive predominately international guests. No further segmentation.	Website; Referrals collaborations (domestic and internationally); direct marketing (business to business)
4. Ruth	Owner-operator	55+	2001	8	Only Ruth and temporary staff	International customers in the summer and domestic guests in the winter. No further segmentation.	Website and the Internet, Connection with international wholesalers (sends out virtual tour); guidebooks
5. Eddie & Craig	Owner /Manager	55+	2004/Early 2011	4	Only Eddie and Craig	Not defined.	Website and the Internet
6. Clarke	Owner-operator	35-54	2001	12	Clarke and wife, plus temporary, part-time staff	Young internationals, no further segmentation.	Internet, search engines, websites; commission based booking agents (online)
7. Matt	Manager	25-34	Early 2010	31	Matt and partner, plus part-time and temporary, part-time staff	Young internationals, no further defined	Websites; Internet; commission based booking agents (online)
8. Paula	Owner-operator	55+	2001	4	Only Paula and 4 temporary, part-time staff	Domestic and international guests, luxury seeking guests or event bookings	Website, Internet; travel agents, print media

Interestingly, the only accommodation providers found meeting the criteria of "being found on at least 2 different types of Social Media" were either small (less than 5 FTE) or large (more than 19 FTE) providers (MED, 2009).

Overall, the majority of the hosts are older than 55, have completed tertiary education and are owner-operators, generally only supported by one permanent and/or temporary part-time staff. All participants attract predominately international travellers, although of different age brackets depending on the accommodation type. Overall, it can be concluded that none of the hosts have segmented and defined a specific target market.

With regard to their marketing foci, tools and efforts differ notably. However, all of them stated that their main foci are their website and the Internet, particularly commission-based online booking agents. This is reflected in the high quota of guests that have chosen the particular accommodation based on information searching through the Internet. According to their customers' feedback, the majority first identified the host using search engines and then sought reassurance of their selection on review sites. Most participants considered print media to be either of very little or no value at all. As mentioned by Monica

"Investing in print media is a total waste of time and money." (Monica)

Furthermore, all interviewees indicated that their future marketing foci will remain on their Website, the Internet (particularly search engine optimisation) and commission based online booking and review sites. For the majority, Social Networking Sites (SNSs) were very low on their priority list. Only three participants expressed the intention to extend their engagement in social networking and blogging sites.

4.2 Perceptions about Social Media use

4.2.1 Motivation for adoption

Initial motivation and expectation

The reasons for and expectations of initially getting involved with Social Media among the interviewees are wide ranging. From being personally challenged by aspiring *"to be one of the first to use it* (Lisa, talking about Facebook)" or "*to promote our business as a main player in Auckland accommodation sector* (Bob)"; to being socially influenced "*because we were told it would be a good idea* (Monica, talking about Facebook)" or "*just because it was the new sort of thing that was there and a huge amount of people use it* (Eddie)", to the desire of creating a more personal customer contact by giving the accommodation " *a more personal touch* (Matt)" or by keeping "*people connected … when they move away they are still part of our family* (Craig)".

Despite the variety of answers, three main motivations have been identified as they were mentioned by almost all of the participants. Firstly, it was believed that Social Media could greatly increase their business exposure. The term "to be out there" has been mentioned the most, followed by expressions like *"to get awareness"* (Paula) *and "to let the whole world know we are here"* (Lisa).

Secondly, it was thought that Social Media could enhance the reputation of their business.

> *It is an excellent site for getting reviews and feedback* (Lisa.)
>
> *To increase brand awareness* (Bob).
>
> *To get good reviews and word of mouth recommendations* (David).

Thirdly, the awareness of changing consumer behaviours and power has also influenced the decision to get involved with Social Media.

> *To try and get the younger generations interested to come here … because people's behaviour in terms of information search and communication has changed (Paula).*
>
> *People aren't going to travel agents as much as they were. They are finding their information on the web and they are comparing prices more and going for cheaper (Monica).*
>
> *The customer has a lot more power in terms of prices and bookings; they compare and try to push the prices down (Ruth).*

Interestingly, none of the participants identified the increase of customer numbers or the improvement of their business performance as one of their motivations. Although it can be argued that all the expressed motivations ultimately aim to enhance the business performance, it appears relevant to point out that it has not been directly mentioned once.

Current Motivations and goals

According to the participants, none of them perceives that the current use of Social Media has met their initially high expectations. Other studies have shown similar results, highlighting that at least half of small businesses using Social Media have not achieved or met their initial goals and expectations (UMD & NS, 2011; Leitch, 2011). Furthermore, half of the participants admit to initially have set unrealistic expectations considering the novelty and their lack of comprehension of these new Media.

> *In my naivety I thought it would be so easy but I didn't really how to use it* (Lisa).

> *Initially I wanted people joining us on Facebook and write something on our wall but it just hasn't happened* (Clarke).

Although, all interviewees agree that they could significantly improve their Social Media performance, only half of them showed willingness to do so, even though they were unsure of how to proceed.

> *I'm not using it to its full advantage, it is still untouched for me, I need to know more about it* (Lisa).

> *Certainly ... but I'm not exactly sure how to do that yet* (Eddie).

The other half responded rather unenthusiastically with comments like

> *I suppose I could look at it ... it's just the time ... I don't have much time* (Monica).

> *Probably but for now I'll just wait and see* (Clarke).

Consequently, participants' motivation and expectation seem to have lessened in most cases to a rather passive approach, basically using Social Media as another advertising channel and aiming to accumulate good reviews. Overall, motivations and objectives for Social Media marketing were rather unspecific, vague and not quantified.

The prime motivator of developing a higher market exposure by using Social Media is concurrent with the findings of a UMD & NS (2011) study (survey) involving 500 small businesses. However, while their survey identified 'attracting new customers' and 'staying engaged with customers' as the next most important goals, these have barely or not at all be mentioned by the Auckland accommodation providers.

This could be seen as an indication, that the concept and the potential of Social Media marketing are insufficiently understood and that although the participants are among the early adopters within their sector and location, the majority is -in spirit- still following a traditional marketing approach. However, it does seem to support studies suggesting that income maximisation and growth are often not the main goal for SMTBs (Wason et al., 2007; Ateljevic, 2007; Getz & Carlsen, 2000).

4.2.2 Time and knowledge required

All interviewed accommodation providers agreed that it required very little time and knowledge to set up their Social Media sites (SNSs being considered a little bit more challenging). On the other hand, the maintenance of social networking and blogging sites was perceived by everyone as extremely time consuming. Especially the SNSs appear to *"require quite some knowledge and time" (Bob)*, which is therefore perceived as *"... almost impossible in my kind of business"* (Paula).

> *It's easy to set up but it's hard to maintain. ... It's very time consuming and It's hard to know how to do the right things. ... If there is a lack of knowledge of what is effective and what is not, it's really hard (Clarke).*

> *There is so much you need to know and to keep updated. ... The biggest thing in this industry is time. If you had time you'd learn a lot more and faster (Matt).*

Moreover, all of the respondents acknowledged to have underestimated the time, knowledge and commitment required to benefit from the use of SNSs.

> *It's is a lot more time consuming than I realised ... I didn't expect that it would be this tricky and time consuming to use (Lisa).*

According to other literature, this appears to be common issue. For example the study of UMD & NS (2011) reveals that at least half of all small businesses underestimated the time required to manage Social Media sites.

4.2.3 Potential benefits

The perceived potential benefits of Social Media as a marketing tool varied among the interviewees, from *"gaining a competitive advantage"* (Matt), to the growing importance of Social Media as an information and communication channel,

> *In the future they are going to be even more important and useful because more and more people are going to using them, like the young people that are coming up now that's all they know (…) the children we have staying with us at the moment will be our future customer* (Craig).

> *I think Facebook is certainly the way the backpacker industry will go. The first thing a backpacker does when he arrives and sits down is to go on Facebook* (Matt).

to the improved credibility and influence through personal recommendations.

> *It's that personal recommendation from someone we know, when a friend, someone you trust says I have been here, it's fantastic you don't question that … you believe them and then you act on it* (Eddie).

> *People who don't even know the other person believe more what they are saying than what we are saying … and as much as I don't like it [Social Media], I grind my teeth in I bear it …* (Clarke).

However, by far the most frequently mentioned potential, mentioned by all participants, was the opportunity to raise great awareness and *"great reachability"* (Lisa) for the business.

Overall, the perceptions of the main potential benefits of using Social Media vary significantly between the few studies found on this subject, from 'no-cost' market research and 'no-cost' sales (Hills & Cairncross, 2011), to attracting new customers and improving external collaboration (UMD & NS, 2011), to increasing website traffic and engine ranking (Au, 2010). Interestingly, in none of the research, have small businesses considered increasing direct customer contact, enhancing relationships, improving reputation or building networks as main potentials of Social Media marketing.

Unsurprisingly, there appears to be a relation between the perceived potential and the level of activity. The greater the perceived potential of Social Media marketing, the higher the activity level on the chosen site. No relationshaip however was found between the personal interest and the potential seen in the use of Social Media. Almost all participants expressed their personal disinterest towards SNSs and blogging sites but

acknowledged the potential of them as a marketing tool (although to a varying degree and depending on the type of Social Media).

4.2.4 Actual Value

As mentioned earlier, in accordance to other research, this study confirms (although to a larger extent) that for a great number of small businesses the impacts of Social Media marketing on the business performance is significantly less than initially expected.

Influence of business performance

All interviewees individually agreed that being on SNSs and blogging sites has offered no value to their business performance so far. On the other hand, RVRSs have been proven to enhance the business performance for all participants, although to a varying degree.

> *Not at all, only Tripadvisor, we got a hell of a lot from it, a lot* (Monica).

> *Tripadvior and online booking agents have certainly improved our business, Facebook not really* (Matt).

Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth

Based on the success of their RVRSs presence, it is the positive recommendations given by the customer that appears to be the greatest advantage for the small accommodation providers of using Social Media.

> *The recommendations are great to build a reputation and therefore attract more customers long-term* (Bob).

> *The Word of Mouth recommendations we get are fantastic and you'll never beat Word of Mouth* (Matt).

Advertising

As mentioned by all the participants, an additional advantage associated with the use of Social Media is the opportunity to raise awareness and *"to be out there"* (Ruth). Therefore, it appears that Social Media are predominately seen as another advertising medium by most of the participants.

> *Tripadvisor is great for promoting and advertising us* (Lisa).

The more sites you are on the more effective you are going to be in terms of advertising (Eddie).

The present findings demonstrate a significant gap between the currently perceived value of Social Media by small accommodation providers compared to the potential suggested by various literature. On the other hand, it can be argued that the great potential proclaimed by the media is in relation to an effective utilisation of Social Media as a marketing channel, which has clearly not been the case among the participants. On the contrary, instead of actually utilising all the new media with all their tools and functions, they are predominately used to enhance the market presence of the business (further discussed in the next chapter), which cannot be regarded as a true marketing asset (Murphy & Kielgast, 2008).

4.2.5 Barriers

Through the conversations with the accommodation providers, three main barriers to the use of social media were identified: the lack of resources, the lack of knowledge and the lack of motivation. Although most of the responses referred to the use of Social Media in general, they related predominately to the social networking and blogging sites.

Lack of resources

By far the most critically perceived issue is the lack of time for small operators, generally mentioned several times by all participants throughout the interview.

> *The time aspect is turning out to be a huge problem for a small operator like myself ... How in heavens name do I find the time for this type of thing, when I'm the manager, accountant, cook, gardener, hostess, etc.* (Paula)?

Another obstacle for a more effective use of Social Media appears to be the limited capital available, which restricts the opportunity to employ more staff or to invest in better technology.

> *If I had a better phone, a smart phone or an iPad, then I could be on it all the time (and not stuck in the office), rather than catching up with somebody you would just twitter them ... then I would find it a lot more useful* (Craig).

> *Although theoretically we get the same opportunity as larger places to be clicked on ... we can't employ somebody who knows what they are doing and we really don't have the time to permanently update and engage on these sites*

(Clarke).

However, limited financial resources were only mentioned by every second interviewee and not nearly as emphasised as the lack of time.

Lack of knowledge

The second most frequently given response regarding the barriers of utilisation was the lack of knowledge, influenced by four main factors as described in the following.

The first sub-theme identified was the novelty of Social Media, which basically represents responses relating to the issues arising from the unfamiliarity with these new Media, such as

> *It's such a new medium no one really knows where it is going ... there is just not enough feedback if what we doing are correct ...* (Bob).

> *To tell you the truth, I don't have a lot of knowledge of how the Facebook pages work it's just all so new* (Lisa).

It appears that at least half of the participants do not understand the basic functions of the different social networking or blogging sites. In the case of Facebook for example, although the key words "friend", "like" or "wall" were familiar to the interviewees, their differentiation and functionality were not. The limited understanding of Social Media is further shown through questions such as *"How do you get people to like you?"* (Monica), *"How do you build up networks and make them your friend?"* (Lisa) and *"How do you make people follow you?"* (Clarke).

The second issue identified leading to insufficient knowledge, is the dynamic development of Social Media, which makes it hard for small accommodation providers (or anyone for that matter) to keep up to date. As described by Bob,

> *We have to look realistically at where Social Media is going and how to develop it as they are moving so fast ... personally I think it's beyond one person looking after it, because it's gotten so dynamic that you can't keep up, it's much bigger now than making occasional tweets and comments.*

Furthermore, four participants raised their concerns about the unproven effectiveness of Social Media marketing as well as the inability to measure its success.

> *How do we actually measure the effect of Social Media, we know our guests are*

spending time on it but how do we convert this into an economic benefit, I don't know (Clarke).

Lastly, several comments made throughout the different interviews left the impressions that an additional reason for the non-or ineffective use of Social Media marketing is the insufficient understanding of the concept of Social Media in general.

> *I signed up to Linkline* [she means LinkedIn] *and now I have all these strange people wanting to be linked with me. But why would I want this. What would these people who sometimes tell me what area they are in give me? … I look at it and think what good are you and then I read some of the comments they made and then I definitely think what good are you? … Why would I want to keep in contact with these people and how the hell they find me I don't know* (Ruth)?

> *All this stuff on Facebook is only there so fleetingly, only for one day or so and when you get to the bottom of the page it's all gone … I don't want to read all this stuff somebody else puts up so I'd imagine that if we put something up it would be exactly the same and they would think I'm not going to read this (Monica).*

However, the other four participants seemed to have a better understanding of the Social Media concept, shown by comments such as

> *Social Media is not about selling a product, it's about the social interaction with others and that's where it becomes time consuming* (Bob).

> *I don't think the page is the marketing tool, I think it's a way of connecting people, the people themselves are the marketing tool, so it's just a matter of keeping on of top of their minds that we are still here* (Craig).

Lack of motivation and interest

When asked about their opinion to why the majority of small accommodation providers do not use Social Media (except RVRSs) for their marketing yet, several comments have led to the conclusion that the lack of interest presents another important barrier for an effective Social Media marketing. The lack of interest and motivation could be ascribed by various factors such as the aversion to ICT,

> *I also think you must like technology and the computer and keeping up date but many people aren't* (Lisa).

the lack of economic motivation,

> *Maybe it's also the lack of economic motivation to have full occupancy as they are well off enough and don't need to* (Clarke).

or the long-term commitment that is required.

> *It would have to be instant* [positive results], *I would have to able to look at it and think yup that's good, otherwise not worth my time* (Ruth).

Lastly, it is believed that the unproven economic effectiveness of Social Media marketing, particularly for small service providers, is causing an overall reluctance for many small firms to engage in Social Media.

> *It's not the lack of awareness, we know that Social Media is out there, we have kids, ... it's the lack of time and the proof that it actually works that most others are not using it* (Paula).

While these opinions are only subjective and speculative by the participants and have yet to be confirmed through future research, it does however reflect and suggest the lack of motivation of some interviewees, which hinders a more committed adoption.

Interestingly, in contrast to most other studies, none of the interviewees mentioned the potential of receiving negative reviews as a barrier to initially getting involved with Social Media or to continue the use of it. Only when asked directly if they would associate any risks with being on Social Media sites, six respondents agreed that negative reviews may be damaging to their reputation, which does not mean however that they actually feared them as the following comment show,

> *It doesn't concern me though [bad reviews], on the contrary, it encourages me to keep the standards up* (Lisa).

> *I'm not concerned about it [negative critique]. It's like winning the lottery if you don't get a ticket you are not going to win anything but if you get a ticket you may have a chance of winning something* (Eddie).

These perceived barriers are comparable to the findings of earlier studies worldwide concerning the adoption and exploitation of different ICTs by SMAPs. The individual owner-manager motivations and attitudes towards ICT adoption (Culkin & Smith, 2000; Chong, 2004; Levy & Powell, 2002) combined with the challenges of insufficient training and resources (Davis & Harveston, 2000; Hull & Milne, 2001), the lack of knowledge and advice about ICT (Locke & Cave, 2002; Stansfield & Grant, 2003), the

focus of operational instead of strategic planning as well as the limited understanding of the potential of technology have been identified as some of the main reasons to have initially caused a reluctance to the ICT adoption and are still hindering its full exploitation (Hull & Milne, 2001; Main, 2002; Schegg et al., 2007).

Especially the lack of time and the limited understanding of potential benefits appear to be a great hindrance for SMAPs to adopt and effectively utilise ICTs, including Social Media. As time is generally restricted for small businesses, they can often not afford to experiment much and keep up with the rapidly changing technologies and consumer demands (Braun, 2004). Therefore, it is critical for SMAPs to be convinced of the benefits (Mehrtens, Cragg, & Mills, 2001), which proves to be difficult as SMTBs often struggle to appreciate the value of intangible benefits, adding even more uncertainty of the value and impact of ICTs (Marshall, Sor, & McKay, 2000).

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

PART 2:

Utilisation of Social Media

5. Findings and discussion – Part 2: Utilisation of Social Media

This chapter presents and discusses the research findings with regard to the second research question "How are Social Media currently adopted and utilised by small and medium sized accommodation providers?". The chapter is based on the information received through the interviews and the examination of the participants' Social Media presence.

5.1. Social Media adoption

Low uptake

Based on the fact that at the time of selecting potential participants, only twelve SMAPs in the entire Auckland area could be identified to be on two or more different types of Social Media channels, the uptake of Social Media by SMAPs is considered to be very low. While many SMAPs were found on Review, Voting and Recommendation Sites RVRSs, very few appear to embrace social networking and blogging sites or other Social Media for their business.

Experience and training

None of the participants had any noteworthy experience or knowledge about Social Media, let alone about the use of Social Media for marketing purposes prior to setting up their first account. Furthermore, none of the hosts had undergone any professional training and instead learned by experimenting "*through trial and error*" (Bob) or through the help of friends.

Types of Social Media

As mentioned earlier, the greatest uptake of Social Media by SMAPs has been found to be RVRSs, which all have a commission-based booking function. All participants were found on various RVRSs such as Tripadvisor, Travelpod, Venere, Hostelworld, or Virtual Tourist. However, the most popular RVRS appears to be by far Tripadvisor. The overall popularity of this particular site can be confirmed by the finding that the majority of Auckland's accommodation providers are listed on Tripadvisor (based on 390 commercial accommodation providers [Statistics NZ, 2008]).

The second most commonly found type of Social Media used were SNSs, however of the multitude of existing SNSs, only Facebook and Twitter were used by the accommodation providers. However, even blogging or micro blogging were found to be of very little interest to the SMAPs. Although 5 interviewees had set up a Twitter account only two of them were or have been actively micro-blogging. Lastly, only two of the hosts have attempted to make use of the Multi Media Content Communities (MMCCs) by sharing a couple of short videos. Overall, apart from RVRSs, the most preferred Social Media by Auckland's SMAPs seems to be Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, which is consistent with various other research in relation to SMEs and Social Media use (e.g. Stelzner, 2010; UMD & NS, 2011; Luchter, 2011).

Future Intentions

Asked about their plans and interest to get involved with any other Social Media, most of the participants appeared to be rather reluctant, responding with a lacklustre "maybe". As further commented by Craig "It all depends on what comes up next". However, by far the most frequently expressed (and basically only) future intention was the use of YouTube. Three participants expressed that they had no intentions to take part in any other Social Media. Only one respondent mentioned to potentially engage in Twitter, mainly because he believes that many tour operators are using it, which could potentially lead to more collaboration. Overall, the majority of the interviewees displayed a negative attitude towards Twitter as they neither have a personal interest in it nor do they see any value in it for their business.

Table 5 provides an overview of the different Social Media used by each participant, the year of set up, potential future use other of Social Media and brief comments concerning their current use, which are further elaborated on in the following sections.

Table 5: Overview of participants' Social Media usage

Participant	Social Media Types	Since	Comments	Linking of sites	Potential use
1. Lisa	RVRSs (e.g. TA, TP, LP) SNSs (FB)	2006 (TA) 2010	Never replies to feedback. Very low activity level.	Website is linked to FB.	"Maybe YT, not Tw"
2. Bob	RVRSs (e.g. TA, VT, HW) SNS (FB, Lin) Blogs (Tw and blogs on website)	2008 (TA) 2008/10 2009/11	Rarely replies to feedback. Very high activity level (daily), mainly cut and paste from the web. Decent activity level on Tw (every few days), new website blog every few month.	FB has links to all his other main sites (TA, Lin, Tw, YT. WS) but Website is only linked to FB (TA is just mentioned).	"Definitely YT"
3. Monica	RVRSs (e.g. TA, TP, hostels.com) SNSs (FB) MMCC (YT) Blogs (Tw and blogs on website)	2004 (TA) 2009 2009 2009/?	Rarely replies to feedback (and if they do it is via email). Very low actively level, mainly upload of pictures. Site dormant since December '10. Upload of 2 short videos. Tw set up but never used. Long blogs on WS.	None of their sites are linked to each other.	"Nothing else"
4. Ruth	RVRS (e.g. TA, TP, LP) SNSs (FB, Lin)	2004 (TA) 2011	Only replies to negative feedback (3 times). No activity since the initial upload of pictures and basic information.	Only Website is linked to TA and LP.	"Probably YT"
5. Eddie & Craig	RVRSs (e.g. TA, VT, venere.com) SNS (FB) Blogs (Tw)	2005 (TA) 2010 2011	Only reply to negative feedback (3 times). Initially active-slowed down-currently unused. Tw set up but never used.	Only Website is linked to all their Social Media sites (not vice versa)	"Maybe YT"
6. Clarke	RVRS s(e.g. TA, HW, VT) SNSs (FB) Blogs (Tw)	2005 (TA) 2009 2009	Never replies to feedback. No activity since the initial upload of pictures and basic information. Initially very active, now only a few tweets/month.	Wensite is linked to Tw. All the others sites are not linked to each other.	"Probably nothing else"
7. Matt	RVRSs (e.g. TA, HW, VT) SNSs (FB)	2006 (TA) 2011	Never replies to feedback. Fairly active (posts every few days).	Only Website is linked to TA and FB.	"Maybe YT and Tw"
8. Paula	RVRSs (e.g. TA, VT, venere.com) SNSs (FB) Blogs (Tw) MMCCs (YT)	2006 2009 2009 2009	Never replies to feedback. Very low activity level, dormant since April 2011. Very low activity level, unused since August 2011. Upload of 2 short videos.	Website links to TA (although rather hidden). None of the other sites are linked to each other.	"Nothing soon"

Abbreviations: RVRSs: Review, Voting and Recommendation Sites; SNSs: Social Networking Sites; MMCCs: Multi Media Content Communities; TA: Tripadvisor; TP: Travelpod; LP: Lonely Planet; VT: Virtual Tourist; HW: Hostelworld; FB: Facebook; Lin: LinkedIn; YT: You Tube; Tw: Twitter

The overall adoption of Social Media among businesses seems to be consistent with the uptake of ICT in general. While studies indicate that many larger businesses have quickly recognised not only the potential but also the apparent need to manage the new customer power arising from the Social Media phenomenon (Bursen-Marsteller, 2010; Cherecwich, 2010; Verma & McGill, 2011), small businesses appear to progress much slower (Constantinides, 2009). Although, various international studies have shown that the Social Media uptake (University of Maryland and Network Solutions [UMD & NS], 2011; Hueber, 2011] and the intentions to increase their Social Media marketing spending (eMarketer, 2010; Au, 2010) among small firms have increased significantly over the last two years, they are still far behind their larger counterparts. In contrast, the findings of the current study show that while all participants mentioned their recent decrease in offline marketing expenditure, the majority do not intend to invest more time or money towards Social Media marketing instead. Their main marketing foci will remain on their Website, the Internet (particularly search engine optimisation) and commission based online booking and review sites, which has also been found the case in other studies (Singh, 2011; Luchter, 2011).

The results from this study appear to support the general consensus that SMTBs tend to be slower adopters of technological trends compared to larger organisations (Evans, Bohrer, & Richards, 2000; Nodder et al., 2003; Braun, 2004; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2006).

5.2 Social Media management

Frequency of use

While the majority of participants check their RVRSs fairly regularly (on average once a week), their Facebook and Twitter sites are getting significantly less attention, which seems paradoxical as the latter enables a much higher interaction, requiring a regular involvement. However, as going to be discussed in the next chapter, most SMAPs state that they do not have the time or the interest to constantly engage on these channels.

It should be pointed out that for most of the interviewees the word "management" in relation to their Facebook and Twitter activities might be inappropriate or misleading, as it could be understood as a frequent involvement. In fact, the participants' level of

activity varies significantly from having a dormant site, over sporadic updates, to daily postings. With regard to Facebook, five participants have not had any recent activity on their sites, Lisa updates intermittently (once a month), Matt aims to post something new a few times a month and the most active was Bob who posts almost daily. Of the five parties identified to have a Twitter account, only two actually make use of it, the other three have basically abandoned their site after the initial set up.

Although the use of Social Media sites among the participants' varies considerably, there appears to be a common pattern. Many have voiced that initially they have been very interested and invested valuable time in these new media. However, it usually did not take long for them to realise that the use of Social Media was not meeting their expectations in terms of instant benefits. Therefore, interest has been lost quickly and the sites have been left dormant.

Responsiveness to feedback

The popularity of RVRSs among SMAPs is hardly surprising considering the nature of review sites, to provide feedback by consumers for other consumers, which requires very little engagement from the service provider with the customers. As stated by Bob,

> *They all should be using Tripadvisor, it's that simple* (Bob).

While RVRSs do not require any direct engagement by the accommodation provider, there is the option of responding to the feedback given by the consumer. Interestingly, only half of the respondents made use of this opportunity by (exclusively) responding to negative feedback. However, none of the participants' associated great value in responding to customer reviews, as shown by the comment of Monica

> *I don't see the point of postings for everyone to see* (Monica).

One participant was not even aware that the opportunity exists.

Even more interesting were the explanations given by the interviewees when asked why they do not reply to any feedback,

> *The downside can be way greater than the upside. ... I don't go near it, I see it as an absolute minefield ... and risky ... there are so many idiots out there, you never know what they are going to say back* (Clarke).

No, never. The bad ones you can't really help it anyway. I don't have the time to reply to feedback and it's not expected either (Paula).

These findings are in keeping with other research on SMAPs (UMD & NS, 2011; Sigala, 2008; O'Connor, 2008). As pointed out by O'Connor (2008) and Sigala (2008), the lack of engagement and responsiveness is of great concern and could be harmful for maintaining and building long lasting relations as well as for the reputation of the service provider.

Encouragement to leave feedback

When asked about encouraging their guests to review their stay on Social Media, either before their departure or afterwards, most participants appeared to be reluctant or unsure about the appropriateness of doing so. While three hosts approach their guests at least sometimes before they leave (depending on the personality and nationality), others hardly ever ask their guests to leave reviews on Social Media.

> *I find it a bit too pushy and fear that this may intrude on their* privacy [about contacting guests through Social Media after their stay] (Lisa).

> *Very rarely but mainly no, you kind of feel creepy…where do you draw the line on privacy* (Clarke).

> *No. People who want to leave a review know about it and will do it anyway and also if you push for that you might not get the right results* (Ruth).

Only two participants seemed to have no concerns in this regard and regularly ask their guests to review their stay (before and after their departure).

Customer engagement – communication

The way in which Social Media are used has been found to be very similar among the participants. Uploading pictures about the accommodation, the hosts and the guests appeared to be the most common activity, followed by providing some general information about the accommodation and referring to their reviews on Tripadvisor. While half of the interviewees attempted to be somewhat personal on their sites (by mentioning their guests, recommending upcoming events and things to do around Auckland or for instance posting personal comments) the other half did not see any value in posting comments or even engaging with people.

I don't see the point in engaging with people through that [Social Media] if I don't see anything that is advantageous to me (Ruth).

Only, two providers aimed to provide a mix of information and to include postings of special offers on their sites to catch peoples' interest.

Although very little is known about the use of Social Media by small tourism firms, the few existing studies confirm the low level of customer engagement by small firms (Ridley, 2010; Sigala, 2008). As emphasised by various media, the interactive functions of the Web, particularly Social Media, provide great opportunities for enhanced customer support, direct communication and relationship building with the consumers, yet a great number of tourism firms neglect this potential (Leung & Law, 2011; Sigala, 2008, Schmidt et al., 2008).

5.3 Strategic vision and planning

The majority of participants do not appear to have a strategy or vision of their future Social Media use, nor do they seem to be overly interested in increasing their Social Media activities. Instead, a wait and see approach has been adopted, which can be supported by comments made in regard to potential future uptake of other channels or their improvement intentions of currently used ones,

> *Not really. Let's see what will happen next and what others are doing* (Clarke).

> *Not any time soon, as long as I don't see proof that this it is actually beneficial it's not worth my while* (Paula).

Only two of the participants appear to have a strategic vision for their Social Media marketing, based on statements such as,

> *When they [the guests] stay here we hope they feel like part of our family for the time that they are here and when they move away they are still part of our family, so things they have happened in the house they can share it like a movie made in the house or TV shows made here, that they wherever they are in the world they can click to the site, watch the show, see the house again. I'd like to try and help them connect to that* (Eddie).

Of these two, only Bob actually appeared to be aware of the importance of a long-term orientation and plans his Social Media marketing in a more strategic manner by aiming to connect Social Media activities and sites with each other.

You have to have a plan, it's too big, it's like going swimming in the ocean looking for an island, that's not the key. … If you don't have the time to really plan it, you are basically just throwing money out of the door. You have to have an aim, a goal where you want it to go.… So I re-strategized [after realising its use was not effective] and have taken on a permanent staff member whose job it is to basically look after this sector, setting up new channels and connecting the existing one with each other (Bob).

While most of the participants have linked their Website to at least one of their Social Media sites, only one interviewee has linked all his other sites with each other (Bob). None of the participants have attempted or even mentioned the possibility of integrating and linking their Social Media activities to their other marketing activities.

5.4 Market research

The interviews revealed that while most of the participants use Social Media to increase their exposure and to raise awareness, none of them make actual use of it in terms of gaining a greater market insight. Half of the interviewees stated to have looked at the Social Media sites of their direct competitors before setting up theirs, however most of them did not find it very useful. When suggested that by "following" similar businesses around the world that are seemingly doing well with their Social Media activities, one could potentially gather ideas for improvement, the overall attitude by the participants was rather disinterested and sceptical as shown by the following comments.

Well the majority of businesses like mine are not on social media, except from maybe writing a little blog but that is not the answer. … There is very little interest either, who would I mimic … I don't have the time for that (Paula).

How do you know if they are using it successfully (Monica)?

Only one of the interviewees indicated that he occasionally follows consumer conversations' in relevant blogs, in order to understand what the latest trends or customer demands are.

We use Social Media more in a searching and monitoring sense, for example through tweet tags, to get an understanding of what people like or hate (Clarke).

For the majority of interviewed accommodation providers, ownership interests, management and day-to-day operations lie with only one or two people. Consequently,

it appears that most of the participants are predominately concerned with the operational management and ongoing activities, with little focus on strategic aspects, market research and long-term success of the business, a characteristic that has been revealed in other studies (e.g. Ateljevic, 2007; Moriarty et al., 2008; Wason et al., 2007). Furthermore, the interviews revealed that in accordance to previous research the participants have a rather pragmatic and intuitive approach to marketing planning as opposed to a comprehensive and formally composed marketing plan (Carson, 1999; McCarton-Quinn & Carson, 2003; Lancaster & Waddelow, 1998). Nevertheless, the absence of marketing planning, efficiency and market orientation has often be claimed to be one of the main reasons for small business failure (Perry, 2001; Murdoch, Blackey, & Blythe, 2001) and other studies demonstrated the positive correlation between market orientation/planning and business performance (Rodriguez-Cano, Carrillat, & Jaramillo, 2004; Pulendran, Speed, & Widing, 2003; Stokes & Lomax, 2002; Brooksbank, Kirby, & Taylor, 2004).

Overall, with a couple of exceptions, most interviewees did not have a clear understanding or vision of how their Social Media presence and involvement should look and be like in order to benefit from it. As pointed out by Murphy and Kielgast (2008), SME operators must have some 'vision' for their online appearance and deliberate whether a website will add some value to their marketing activities and has a clearly defined value. If a media presence on the particular channel seems valuable, then it should be managed and utilised professionally. If, however, it is merely a "presence" that has no marketing functionality, then it is not a true marketing activity and will most likely not result in any advantages. The same can easily be applied for Social Media channels.

5.5 Social Media monitoring and measuring

Only half of the participants seem to recognise the need to monitor Social Media activities and to measure the outcome of their Social Media activities regarding its return on investment (ROI). However, none of them appear to have a clear understanding of how to do so. As stated by Clarke

> *If you can't measure something it's really just a game … but that doesn't mean I'm doing it the right way … you just have to experiment with it and see how it*

plans out.

The identified lack of monitoring and measuring the Social Media performance by the SMAPs matches other research is this area. For example, according to Mzinga and Babson's Executive Education study (2009), around 80% of professionals do not take into account the ROI for their Social Media programs for their business. This is of little surprise considering the lack of strategic planning and defining concrete and measurable marketing objectives by the accommodation providers. Although the exact benefits of Social Media marketing may be impossible to measure in terms of traditional ROI as the results are rarely immediate and often indirect (for example in terms of image, relationship, eWOM), however individual marketing sub-goals, activities and metrics are measureable and are therefore essential to establish (Li & Stromberg, 2007; Srivastava, 2011).

Overall, it appears that most of the participants have a rather passive, one-way approach to communicating through their Social Media sites, which is reflected in the extremely low activity level on their Social Media sites by the customers.
Furthermore, based on the interviews and the examination of their Social Media sites it can be concluded that the potential of Social Media for marketing is underutilised by Auckland's SMAPs, as almost none of the various tools (e.g. creating events, contests, ads, bulk messages, etc.) are adopted.

Furthermore, concurrent with other research, it appears that small firms tend to associate marketing predominately with advertising and sales (O'Briens, 1998). Although all participants were familiar with the rising importance of conversing, engaging and interacting with customers, very few seemed to really understand this concept and act on it. The findings support other research claiming that many small accommodation providers still follow a traditional and transactional approach to marketing by treating Social Media like conventional marketing channels (such as print media), focusing on deriving a predictable outcome on established critical aims in marketing (e.g., awareness, recall, purchase) (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011; Coviello et al., 2002).

CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS

6. Recommendations

This chapter is directed at the third research question "How could Social Media be utilised more effectively by small and medium sized accommodation providers?". Based on the research findings, particularly on the identified barriers, two main sections of recommendations have been developed. The first section addresses the lack of knowledge in relation to the different Social Media channels by providing information about the varying functionalities and user profiles of the currently most adopted and important channels, in order to assist the strategic decision making regarding about which Social Media are the most appropriate for the individual business.

The second section considers the deficient understanding of the new 'social' approach to marketing through Social Media, by describing the main features of the concept as well as by providing practical recommendation about the utilisation of and engagement in Social Media. Both sections will incorporate the emphasis and suggestions for strategic marketing planning, which appears to be a common shortfall among small businesses and was also confirmed in the present research.

It has to be pointed out that the following recommendations are aimed at businesses that are interested in improving the utilisation of Social Media for their marketing use. For those who are not genuinely interested or lacking the motivation to understand and utilise Social Media marketing it can only be advised to be aware of the potential risks that could result from having a Social Media presence that is not managed. Therefore, it may be in the company's best interest <u>not</u> to be present on those Social Media channels that do require a high level of involvement and constant engagement.

6.1 Define target markets, business goals and objectives

Consistent with other research, this study has identified a lack of strategic marketing by SMAPs in terms of segmenting and defining specific target markets or establishing clear and measurable business and marketing goals. However, in order for marketing activities to be successful, it is essential to have some form of strategy. Without a formulated strategy, measurable objectives cannot be identified; and without measurable objectives, it is difficult to know what the appropriate tools are that should be used. Therefore, the initial step should be to define a target market that company's

marketing activities will aim for, followed by determining concrete and measurable marketing goals such as:

- To attract x % more customers
- To increase repeat customers by x%
- To increase revenue and profit by x%
- To reduce expenses by x%

Once the business goals are defined, they should be broken down into action items that are measurable and specific. For example attracting x% more customers could be specified to increasing customers for the first quarter of 2012 by 15% by (action points) for instance:

- Using Facebook and/or Twitter to populate information about major events between January and March (e.g. Splore, Volvo Ocean Race or Pacifica Festival) 3 weeks before and 1 week after the event
- Initiating conversations with your friends and followers about the events
- Using Facebook and Twitter to share specials in combination with the events
- Participating in specific blogs around the events

(Kingston, 2010)

As Social Media marketing is only one part of online marketing, which in turn is only a part of the overall marketing mix, it must be ensured that Social Media activities are consistent with other marketing activities and integrated into the overall marketing plan. Furthermore, defined objectives and action steps must be realistic in terms of resource availability and expertise (Zimmerman & Sahlin, 2010).

6.2 Choose Social Media channel(s) strategically

As emphasised by various academic and trade literature, there is little doubt that Social Media will increasingly influence the decision-making process of consumers and will therefore impact the way businesses will have to interact with their customers in order to stay competitive. However, it does not imply that businesses, especially small firms, should adopt and participate in as many Social Media channels as possible. On the contrary, considering the long-term commitment required for successful Social Media marketing compared to the identified time constrain by SMAPs, it can be suggested that SMAPs should focus on a limited number of RVRSs and perhaps only one SNS instead of a half-hearted, non-committed presence on various sites.

Furthermore, as the abundance of Social Media channels can vary significantly in their functionalities, demographics and expectations of users, requiring a different level of engagement, a careful and strategic selection of appropriate Social Media tools is essential (Bernoff & Li, 2008). The strategic decision must be based on the time and talent available for their maintenance, the defined target market and must be in accordance with the overall business objectives. This in turn requires an understanding of the specific target market characteristics as well as of the differing Social Media features that the defined target market engages in.

Based on recent research, including the present one, the following channels have been identified to be currently most popular and important for online marketing within the accommodation sector, each for different reasons.

Figure 4: Social Media channels in the hospitality industry

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Adapted from Tourism New Zealand (2011)

In order to support the strategic decision-making process of selecting the most appropriate channel(s) for marketing use, the main functionalities and their implications, as well as the different user demographics of those Social Media (excluding flickr) will be presented in the following sections.

6.2.1 Understand Social Media functionalities and marketing implication

The above identified Social Media channels have been compared and contrasted in relation to their main functionalities and their implications according to the 'honeycomb framework' by Kietzmann et al. (2011). This model is based on seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. While the first cluster in figure 5 examines the specific characteristics and experience of the user (consumer), the second cluster indicates the varying implications of each block to the marketer.

Figure 5: Honeycomb framework: Functionalities and their implications of Social Media channels

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Source: Kietzmann et al. (2011)

Based on the above concept, figure 6 illustrates the individual functionalities for each of the selected Social Media channels. The different shades of grey used in each cluster demonstrate the strength of the functionality, the darker the levels of shading the stronger the functionality and thus representing the main purpose and distinct characteristics for each channel.

Figure 6: Individual honeycomb frameworks for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Tripadvisor

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Adapted from Kietzmann et al. (2011).

As the above figure demonstrates, all of these channels require a different level of engagement and strategic management approach and must therefore be based on the available resources for their maintenance, preferences of the defined target market and a realistic evaluation of the business owner/manager's own creativity and commitment for a continuous involvement, in order to utilise the chosen channel successfully. Furthermore, the honeycomb framework offers ongoing assistance for evaluating the changing Social Media landscape (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

6.2.2 Understand target markets and Social Media user demographics

In order to choose the appropriate channel(s) and to enable conversations with the right target market, it is not only important to understand the main functionalities and purpose of the different Social Media sites but also to know their varying user demographics (and psychographics for advanced marketers). This of course implies that the business has a defined target audience. The foundation of successful Social Media marketing is knowing who the existing and potential target markets are, in which channel they socialise and what they are doing in the those communities (Evans, 2010). Based on an analysis of Google Ad Planner and Google Insight statistics by Ignite Social Media (2011), figure 7 illustrates the example of Facebook's user demographics, including their age, gender, income and education distribution. While statistics have to be viewed critically and should only be seen as an indication, different studies around the world have shown very similar results.

Figure 7: User demographics of Facebook

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Source: Ignite Social Media (2011)

Appendix 1: User demographics of Twitter
Appendix 2: User demographics of LinkedIn
Appendix 3: User demographics of YouTube

The comparison between the above figure and appendices 1-3 confirms that the user profile varies considerably between the different Social Media channels. It further shows that Social Media are currently not used to a large extent by older generations. However, it also disproves the common misperception that Social Media are dominated by the youngest generations but rather by the "middle age groups". On average, individuals between 35-44 years old appear to be most frequent user group.

Understanding the audience and their engagement needs depending on the Social Media channel will help the decision making process for businesses in regard to the selection of the appropriate Social Media channels for their marketing communication. At the same time, it also shows which socio-demographics are not very likely to be reached though Social Media and therefore must be targeted in another way.

6.3 Social Media marketing

Although the research has identified a considerable lack of knowledge with regard to the basic functions and tools of Social Media by the participants, this does not present the greatest challenge as the required knowledge can be gained relatively easy and quick. It is the adoption of the new ways of thinking and communicating that is proving to be even more challenging and perhaps creates one of the if not the greatest barrier for successful Social Media marketing. Therefore, it is vital for a successful Social Media marketing campaign to embrace and to understand the new approach to marketing and communication based on the perpetually changing consumer demands and decision making processes related to the ICT developments. The following section aims to support SMAPs to gain a greater understanding of Social Media marketing.

6.3.1 The Social Media marketing basics

1. 'Social Media' is the social act of talking, interacting and engaging with people online, using Social Media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. Social Media is a dynamic form of communication, where users are both receiving and giving their message, opinion and point of view. Therefore, businesses must remember that Social Media are conversation not broadcast channels, which require actual engagement with people (listen-engage-act)

2. Being social on Social Media means being active, interesting, humble (understand before acting), creative and honest

3. Marketing must break through clutter of the new 5P's of marketing
   - Paradox (creates opportunity, e.g. "Four start hotel, two star price" or "Affordable Luxury")
   - Perspective (relationship with the customer, e.g. what need is satisfied, how is the need satisfied, what are points of differentiation)
   - Paradigm (new business processes, from product [features] to brand [who are you]
   - Persuasion (Effects change, firm must have a credible voice, relevant content and must appeal to traveller's emotions)
   - Passion (creates connection, communicates excitement, encourages dialogues, creates relationship)

4. Technology is only a tool to support the strategy
   - Firms should not be seduced by all the new technologies and select the right tool for their business

5. Fix guest experience before using Social Media
   - Communicate on guests' preferred terms and channels (go where the customers are)

6. Travellers are seeking three core attributes – simplicity, originality and authenticity, therefore hospitality marketing must be guest-centric. Guest interactions needs to be personalised and the degree of guest participation must be on guests' terms. Guest engagement should take place throughout the full travel cycle.

7. Be well differentiated from competition

(Cole, R. 2009; Kaplein & Haenlein, 2010)

6.3.2 Strategic Social Media marketing

As mentioned earlier, Social Media marketing is far more than a presence in the Social Media landscape, it's all about engagement by enabling conversation with the target audience (Safko & Brake, 2009). But what exactly does that mean? The Social Media marketing strategy can be seen as a platform supported by four main pillars, which are all needed in order to stabilise the foundation. Those four pillars are:

1. Listening (listen to the right conversations, opinions, experience, etc. and strategise)
2. Engaging (communication, collaboration, education and entertainment)
3. Acting (act on the information you have received through listening and engaging)
4. Monitoring (measure the Social Media performance)

For all four pillars there are countless tools to choose from, therefore, as mentioned earlier, it is essential to understand the different sites, functionalities and user profiles in order to adopt the right tools based on the individual marketing strategy.

Become familiar with the chosen channel/community

After selecting the appropriate Social Media, the operator must become familiarised in depth with the tools and applications for the each channel (e.g. Facebook polls, creating events, links or custom tabs, etc.) in order to actually utilise the channel for marketing purposes. There are various books (e.g. Social Media Marketing for Dummies or The Social Media Bible) and (online) seminars that give practical and easy advice on how to do so.

As it takes time to build communities, particularly for small businesses, it is recommended to engage with the online communities that already exist. However before attempting to engage in the chosen channel the marketer must take the time to first gain an understanding of the sites and each community the business aims to participate in. This could be done though the following steps:

- Read the rules and regulations of a site or forum (generally part of your agreement when opening an account)

- Observe, look, listen and learn (observe what is being talked about and what is considered to be interesting; have an open mind and listen to opinions and experiences, understand the tone of language, norms, etc.)
- Learn the pecking order (identify who are the true influencers in the communities)
- Slowly and carefully engage in the community (for example with a brief introduction, by providing only information that is sought, or offering suggestions on a discussed problem, etc.)

By taking this approach, the business can slowly establish trust within the community and build a solid foundation of a customer relationship on which can be built on (Evans, 2010).

Monitoring of Social Media activities and measuring objectives

One of the most essential but at the same time greatest challenges for companies involving in Social Media marketing is the measurement of effectiveness. The ability to assign cause and effect directly can be difficult when it comes to measuring business outcomes through Social Media engagement like increased sales, reduced costs or profit growth, as the Social Media phenomenon is still in its infancy. While a quantitative evaluation (visitors, page views, time spent, friends, page rank, etc.) is fairly easy, the qualitative assessment (conversation share, customer referral value, brand advocacy quotient, etc.) is much more difficult. Furthermore, there are already so many options to monitor Social Media activities available that is can be confusing for businesses to select the right tool. Figure 8 presents a brief overview of various monitoring tools (from free to affordable), which are considered to be the most popular and capable Social Media monitoring tools currently available.

Figure 8: Social Media monitoring tools for small businesses

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Source: Mendelsohn, Fennell, & Fitton, L. (2011)

Even more challenging than finding the appropriate monitoring tools is to analyse and make sense of the acquired data. Unfortunately, many Social Media activities do not lead to an immediate result and require longer-term commitment. Therefore, it is difficult to define the return on investment (ROI) for individual actions, which in turn requires a new way of measuring the success of marketing activities. Based on a suggested three-step process by Li and Stromberg (2007), the first step to enhance measurability of marketing activities should be to break down the main business goals into sub-goals, assigned to different Social Media channels and activities. The next step is to quantify benefits with standard metrics followed by allocating them to each metric. A matrix developed by Forrester Research Inc. (2007), as illustrated in figure 9, will exemplify how to quantify and assign value to the key benefits of blogging. Although this matrix is rather applicable for larger companies, it can serve as a starting point and indication for businesses to develop their specified metrics.

Figure 9: Quantifying and assigning value to the key benefits of blogging

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Source: Forester Research Inc. in Li & Stromberg (2007)

6.3.3 Practical Social Media marketing tips

Inform, engage and interact

Once actively participating in the communities, there are certain aspects to consider in order to increase the success and to minimise the risk of Social Media.

- Define a 'brand' (what the business represents) and ensure that the character profile and online presence accurately and consistently reflects that brand
- Address and reply to any feedback and posts, especially if they are negative; but do not reply emotionally to negative feedback
- Be aware that the most successful networkers are those with the most collected 'friends' (establishing these connections takes time and requires responding to posts)
- Do not push your marketing message too hard into conversations and don't be too self-promotional in your posts – individuals do not want to be marketed to while 'socialising'
- Instead provide constant and relevant updates and information that is useful, interesting or entertaining to the audience

- Be honest and authentic
- Avoid using all capital letters in posts or tweets as this is considered to be 'shouting'
- Generate many good, quality, relevant links, which can help a site to perform better in the search results
- Help to forge relationships. Not necessarily relationships with potential clients, but with those who help to influence potential client decisions i.e. indirect sales
- Encourage 'friends' to post reviews, your special offers, etc. by offering incentives
- Show benefits to people who visit the business sites and reward the loyal 'friends ' or 'followers'

(Berkley, 2007; Evan, 2010; Zimmerman & Sahlin, 2010)

The following figure elaborates and specifies on these considerations by the individual Social Media channels.

Figure 10: Social Media etiquette in different channels

This figure has been removed by the author of this dissertation for copyright reasons.

Adapted from: Ramsay, M. (2010)

Due to the scope of this study it is not possible to provide detailed marketing strategies for the different Social Media channels. However, appendices 4-6 will provide more practical recommendations for three of the five identified channels, as they require the highest engagement level (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn).

Appendix 4: Practical tips for Facebook marketing
Appendix 5: Practical tips for Twitter marketing
Appendix 6: Practical tips for LinkedIn marketing

6.4 Additional recommendations

Consider extending to other market segments

As most of the participating accommodation providers seem to attract predominately international customers, there may be significant potential to capture more of the domestic market through specific Social Media activities, particular for the 'low season'.

As the latest statistics show, New Zealanders' participation in Social Media is increasing at a rapid rate and becoming mainstream (Nielsen, 2010). In total, around 1.8 million New Zealanders are interacting via Social Media and 1.92 million have already searched for product and service related peer reviews on Social Media, reinforcing the growing importance of eWOM. The results further show that more than forty percent of those online users are engaging with businesses through Social Media, which demonstrates the openness of New Zealanders to interact with businesses online. The size of the country's population and its low degree of separation combined with the increasing popularity and participation in Social Media communication, presents great opportunities for small service businesses who are depended on social interaction and recommendations.

A more detailed overview of the use of Social Media in New Zealand (for example by channel and age group) is illustrated in Appendix 7: The state of Social Media in New Zealand.

Stay up to date

Web 2.0, including Social Media is a very dynamic and fast moving domain. What may be up to date and popular today in the virtual landscape might be irrelevant tomorrow (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Therefore, for those who do intend to improve and/or increase their Social Media marketing, it is important to keep up with the latest developments in the online market place in terms of where their customers are and why they are using these particular channels.

One of the biggest consumer trends for the tourism industry over the next five years will be finding relevant information and booking of holidays through new technologies such as smart phones or tablets. It is estimated that by 2015 the majority of consumers will book their holiday and accommodation through the Internet (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006) and furthermore, around 50% of European travelers will be using smart phones to find travel information and/or make bookings by 2015 (stikkymedia, 2010). According to Google, smart phone bookings already rose by 69% in 2010 (European Travel Commission, 2011). Therefore, it is highly recommended for tourism and accommodation businesses to upgrade their website to a mobile website by optimising its design in order to adjust to the very small screens of and functionalities for mobile phones and tablets. This will enable access by the target audience at any time and could also improve the user experience by providing special features such as integrations with GPS, Click-To-Call or SMS.

Furthermore, considering the importance of search engines in the travel planning process and the potential of Social Media to optimise the company's search engine rating, resulting in increased traffic to the website (the foundation), it should be of top priority for businesses to ensure that the website design, navigation and performance are appropriate in order to convert internet surfers into buyers (Hudson & Gilbert, 2006). If the Website does not offer relevant and interesting content, has an unpleasant presence, is difficult to use or has no direct booking function, it will most likely result in the loss of interest by the consumer (Hashim, Murphy, & Law, 2007).

CHAPTER 7

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

7. Implications and conclusion

7.1 Summary of key findings

Based on the analysed data conducted through in-depth face-to-face interviews and by examining the participants' Social Media presence, the study's key findings were identified as summarised below.

7.1.1 Perception about Social Media use

With respect to the first research question 'How do small and medium sized accommodation providers perceive Social Media as a marketing tool?', the interviews have revealed the following insightful findings.

Motivation for Social Media use:
Although motivations varied significantly, the main motivations appear to be:

- To increase exposure and awareness for the business,
- To receive good reviews and
- To adapt to the changing information search process of travelers.

Perceived potential:
Despite differing responses such as great reachabilty, gaining competitive advantage, community building and improved credibility and influence through personal recommendations, the most frequently mentioned potential, has been:

- The ability to raise awareness and
- To achieve greater exposure for the business.

Perceived real value:

- Only RVRS (mainly though positive recommendations) have been proven beneficial to the business performance, although to a varying degree
- Overall, the opportunity to raise awareness (increased visibility 'advertising') has been perceived as highly valuable
- SNSs, MMCCs or blogging sites are predominately perceived sceptically and unavailing to enhance the business performance

The present findings demonstrate a significant gap between the currently perceived value of Social Media by small accommodation providers compared to the potential suggested by various literature.

Perceived barriers:

Three main barriers to the use of Social Media marketing have been identified as:

- Lack of resources
  (time and capital)
- Lack of knowledge
  (deficient understanding of the Social Media marketing concept or the basic functions and tools of the different channels) and
- Lack of motivation
  (personal disinterest, unproven effectiveness of Social Media, long-term commitment versus operational focus for most SMAPs)

7.1.2 Adoption and utilisation of Social Media

With regard to the second research question 'How are Social Media currently adopted and utilised by small and medium sized accommodation providers?', the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Very low uptake and ineffective utilisation of Social Media
- RVRSs (Tripadvisor), SNSs (Facebook), micro blogging sites (Twitter) and MMCCs (YouTube) are the most commonly used Social Media among New Zealand's SMAPs
- With few exceptions, participants show little intention to improve or to further invest in Social Media marketing in the near future (wait and see approach)
- Overall low commitment to Social Media marketing, predominately seen as another advertising channel to enhance exposure by being "present"
- Very low customer engagement, minimal responsiveness to feedback
- Little strategic planning of or vision for Social Media activities
- Lacking awareness of the numerous tools available for marketing activities (e.g. events, bulk messages, ads, contests, etc.)
- No or insufficient monitoring or measuring of Social Media activities and outcomes

- Overall, very low application of the basic Social Media concept: Listen-engage-act-monitor

7.1.3 Recommendations for Social Media use

The third research question sought to provide practical advice on 'How could Social Media be used more effectively by small and medium sized accommodation providers?'. Therefore, based on the research results, particularly on the identified barriers for the effective use of Social Media, recommendations on the main areas have been formulated as summarized below:

- Embrace and understand the new approach to marketing and communication (consumer and conversation focused, long-term commitment)
- Develop an understanding of the Social Media concept, what it means to be 'social' on these channels (listen-facilitate-participate-collaborate-evaluate)
- Define target markets
- Define realistic, concrete and measurable business and marketing objectives
- Strategically select appropriate Social Media and specific tools (based on business goals, target markets, characteristics of the different target markets as well on the specific functions and requirements of the chosen channels)
- Obtain an in-depth understanding of the selected Social Media channel(s) in terms of the usability for marketing purposes (functions, tools, rules, etiquette, etc.)
- Monitor Social Media activities and measure objectives
- Consider extending to other market segments (e.g. domestic or business segment)
- Stay up to date in the dynamic and fast moving virtual landscape
- Be aware of the risks involved with an 'unmanaged' Social Media presence

7.2. Implications

7.2.1 Implications for tourism organisations and associations

According to the present research findings, the adoption and effective use of Social Media for marketing practice among Auckland's SMAPs is still extremely low, which could present a potential threat for the future competiveness of the sector based on the rapidly growing popularity and use by the consumers. Considering the make-up and importance of the tourism industry for New Zealand's economy, it is essential that regional and national tourism organisations enhance their policies, initiatives and associated communications, in order to increase the acceptance and effectiveness of Social Media marketing within SMTBs (including SMAPs). Therefore, it is important to understand the perceptions and obstacles for SMAPs of implementing, evaluating and monitoring Social Media marketing activities. However, owners or managers of small businesses, like many other consumers nowadays, are increasingly resistant and sceptical towards advertisements or marketing messages, as substantiated through several comments by the participants such as *"Every day we get so many* [emails and advertisements] *and I just go delete, delete, delete. Everybody and their dog is trying to get a buck out of you"* (Ruth). Therefore, in order to successfully promote the benefits and create assistance for a more effective Social Media marketing use, tourism organisations, industry associations, and consultants will themselves have to take a new approach to gain the attention of and to communicate with small businesses.

7.2.2 Managerial implications

As discussed in this study, research has shown that Social Media are increasingly impacting travel consumers' information, communication and purchasing behaviours, beyond the direct control of the accommodation provider. As further highlighted, the rapidly growing popularity of, reliance on and communication through user generated content for travelling planning (particularly RVRSs), combined with the growing empowerment of consumers, leaves little doubt that Social Media will increasingly influence the decision making process of consumers (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Johnson & Kayne, 2003; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This is particularly important for the accommodation sector as (e)WOM can have a remarkable influence on travel-related

decisions since consumers tend to trust and rely strongly on other consumers' feedback in order to reduce the perceived unpredictability of the product (Litvin et al., 2007; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Peterson & Merino, 2003). Recent studies already indicate that not only do consumers' opinions about their experience shared online influence other people's perception about a business or product, they truly impact their purchase intent (Barnes et al., 2008; Gretzel et al., 2007; Barksy & Nash, 2009; Ye et al., 2009).

Therefore, it is essential for SMAPs and other tourism businesses to not only understand the shift in consumer information searching, decision-making and buying behaviour, but to respond and interact effectively through the appropriate media depending on the target market, organisational objectives and available resource (Mack et al., 2008). As time is generally one of the major constraints for SMTBs, it is vital for managers who are interested in the use of Social Media to choose strategically a limited number of channels based on their target market, specific functionalities and tools, consumer expectations and marketing objectives. Once a Social Media channel has been found to be appropriate and selected for marketing use, it is important to commit to it by providing continuous information, engagement and interaction. As mentioned earlier, simply being "present" in the Social Media landscape, for example by having a Facebook profile page, has no marketing functionality in the social Web and will most likely not add any value to the business performance.

It can be argued that while implementing an effective Social Media strategy could still lead to a competitive advantage for New Zealand's SMAPs, but more importantly it will most likely result into a competitive disadvantage in the future if used ineffectively or not all.

7.3 Limitations

The scope of this research was limited in terms of the variety of sectors and locations, which has been forced by time and resource constraints to complete this dissertation. However, the limited scope in terms of participant numbers has been predominately caused by the very low uptake of Social Media marketing among SMAPs.

Restrictions for this area of research were also presented by the infancy of the topic, which resulted in limited literature available. Furthermore, due to the perpetually and fast changing nature of the Web and Social Media, the research results with respect to

uptake and adoption only present a snapshot in time. However, the first part of the findings (participant perceptions) contributes to the overall body of knowledge and theoretical framework particularly in regard to adoption barriers of ICT.

This research has not aimed to explain in depth all the different Social Media tools and networks, and how to use each of them effectively (which would be close to impossible as channels emerge or disappear almost daily), but to give practical recommendations for the currently most commonly used sites within the accommodation sector, in order to create a foundation for a strategic use of Social Media for marketing purposes.

7.4 Recommendations for further research

As this study sample is relatively small and based on a particular tourism sector in Auckland, it would be beneficial to test the insights gained in this research against other small accommodation providers in different regions and/or other tourism sectors, in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the Social Media adoption by SMTBs in New Zealand.

Due to the rapidly changing social media landscape, future research must perpetually and frequently assess trends and developments in order to provide contemporary value and insights for accommodation marketers. While it is important to continuously investigate the adoption level of Social Media, it is even more important to determine the sophistication level of usage in terms of measurable benefits.

Another interesting and necessary area of future research is to further examine the industry specific real impact of Social Media marketing on different marketing objectives such as sales, branding, repeat business, or customer loyalty. This could contribute to the much needed proof of actual benefits of Social Media marketing for small businesses. Furthermore, another significant area to investigate is why the majority of small accommodation providers are still reluctant to implement Social Media as a marketing tool.

7.5 Concluding remarks

The tourism industry will continue to go through major changes in its framework, due to external factors such as changing consumer demographics along with economic and political modifications, technological advancement and new markets. Furthermore, changing life-styles, rising educational level, information availability and growing consumer scepticism are leading to a more demanding, more time-driven, highly individualistic and skilled future customer (Akehurst, 2009; Lohmann, 2004; Costa & Buhalis, 2006; Hall, 2005), which makes effective marketing and meeting consumer expectations more important than ever before (Morrison, 2010). However, the development of the Web has led to a user-driven, peer-to-peer platform (O'Connor, 2008), significantly contributing to the empowerment of customers (Conrady, 2007; Pires et al., 2006), which in turn has significantly reduced the effectiveness traditional marketing practice (push strategies). Being a social phenomenon itself and of an highly information intensive nature (Law, Leung, & Buhalis, 2009; Shuai & Wu, 2011), the tourism industry and especially accommodation businesses will potentially be heavily impacted by the social Web and the growing reliance on online opinions and reviews from other consumers to support the buying decision (Mack et al., 2008; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Cox et al., 2008).

Therefore, in order to turn these changes into opportunities and advantages for the business, SMAPs should rethink their approach to marketing and communicating to the consumer (Ferguson, 2008), and enhance their understanding of the Social Media concept. Instead of trying to attract the attention of potential consumers through a simple Social Media presence or through passive messages, Social Media marketing activities should aim to not only attract consumers' but to continue the attention through proactively engaging, participating and creating experience within the social networks in order to achieve the ultimate goal of attention and influence (Hanna et al., 2011).

It should be noted however that Social Media are neither a substitute for traditional marketing, nor does every channel suit or benefit all types of businesses (Weinberg & Pehilvan, 2011). On the contrary, advantages will vary significantly dependent on the sector, size, experience, aspiration and goals of the business. Therefore, the decision of implementing and engaging in Social Media must be based on to the specific conditions and capabilities of the business, the needs and expectations of the defined target market as well as on the continuously changing virtual environment.

Considering the identified slow uptake, the deficient understanding of and the attitude towards Social Media marketing, as well as by drawing comparisons to the initial ICT uptake by SMAPs in general, it is questionable whether New Zealand's SMAPs will succeed in capturing the potential benefits of Social Media marketing or if the barriers will dominate, threatening to leave individual businesses and indeed whole sub-sectors and geographic areas behind in this highly competitive market. Future success will not only depend on the competence of understanding and implementing these new tools, but more importantly on the ability to adopt new and creative ways of thinking and communicating.

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APPENDICES

Appendices 1 - 7 have been removed by the author of this dissertation for copyright reasons.

Appendix 8: Interview Guide

Indicative questions for accommodation providers

Background

What is your role in the business?

Age range? a)18-24 b)25-34 c)35-54 d)55+

How long has the business been operating?

What is your main target market?

What market segments are you currently attracting?

What is your main marketing strategy/focus?

What kind of promotional channels do you intend to utilise the most in the near future (social media, web advertising, WOMM, magazines, radio, newspaper, direct mail, others)?

Perceptions about Social Media as a marketing tool

Why did you initially consider getting involved with Social Media?

What were you trying to achieve by using Social Media (desired outcome)?

Do the actual benefits equal your initial expectations? (if not, why?)

How do you perceive time, knowledge and financial resources needed to set up your Social Media accounts/sites?

How do you perceive the time, knowledge and financial resources needed to maintain your Social Media presence?

How do you perceive the overall potential of Social Media marketing for small and medium sized accommodation provider?

In your opinion, what are the actual benefits (value) for you so far of using Social Media for marketing purposes?

Which of the Social Media channels that you are using appears to be the most effective in terms of your desired outcome?

In your opinion, are there any risks or disadvantages involved for businesses in using Social Medias for marketing? (if yes, please elaborate)

In your opinion, how well do you think you understand what to do on Social Media sites (in order to benefit from it)?

Why do you think the majority of small accommodation providers are not using Social Media?

Do you perceive Social Media as a marketing medium that could soon replace traditional marketing channels (print, Tv, etc.) or will they always complement each other?

In your opinion, could the use of Social Media be equally effective for domestic and international promotion? Please elaborate.

What Social Media channels are used?

Since when are you using Social Media as a marketing channel?

What type and specific channel(s) of Social Media are you using?

Which of those channels do you engage in the most?

Which of those channels do you engage in the least?

Are you planning to engage in any other channels in the near future?

How is Social Media used?

Who is in charge of managing the Social Media activities in your business?

Does this person have previous experience and knowledge about Social Media?

Do you coordinate your Social Media activities with your other marketing activities or do manage them separately from each other?

How active are you in your Social Media channels (frequency of use, engagement, interaction, etc.)?

Do you encourage your guests to leave feedback?

How do you deal with negative comments or critique?

Do you reply to positive and/or negative reviews or comments?

Do you use information and feedback received from your customers through Social Media? (If yes, please elaborate)

Do you check Social Media sites of your competitors for ideas, feedback, comments, etc.? If yes, was the information found useful to you?

Do you monitor the success of your Social Media performance? (if yes, how?)

How would you judge your own knowledge about the strategic use of Social Media as a marketing tool?

In your opinion, could you improve your Social Media performance?

Participant Information Sheet

Project Title

Social Media - potential, perception and usage as a marketing tool: The case of small and medium sized accommodation providers in Auckland

An Invitation

I would like to invite you to participate in a study concerning the potential and current value of Social Media as a direct marketing tool for New Zealand's small and medium accommodation provider.

My name is Christine Jonscher, and I am conducting this research as part of my academic Master's degree.

You have been identified as someone who could provide a valuable perspective on the use of Social Media for marketing purposes. The research will involve interviews with eight Social Media practitioners in the hospitality industry. Your participation is completely voluntary and no personal or commercially sensitive information will be asked. Furthermore, you may withdraw from the research at any time prior to the completion of data collection if you choose to do so.

I would be very grateful for your consideration of this invitation.

What is the purpose of this research?

Social Media are increasingly becoming an integrated part of peoples' day-to-day lives as a source of information and communication. But what exactly are Social Media? Social Media can be defined as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content.

The rapid rise of Social Media networks has led to the growing power of customers, in terms of identifying, customizing and purchasing of (service) products. These changes present great opportunities, particularly for service providers but at the same time they also create various challenges and risks.

Therefore, the overall objective is to gain a greater understanding of the potential compared to the perceived real value of Social Media as a direct marketing tool for small and medium sized accommodation providers. It will further be assessed what barriers exist in using Social Media as a marketing tool in this field and how these could potentially be overcome.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Your company has been identified as an Auckland-based accommodation provider with less than 20 employees that is independently owned and operated. As a business that is using Social Media as one of their marketing tools, you are someone who can provide a valuable perspective and contribution to this research.

What will happen in this research?

I will be contacting you in the next few days to follow up on this invitation, which will also give me the opportunity to answer any questions you may have regarding this research. We will then arrange an interview at a location and time most convenient for you. Before we start with the interview I will ask you to sign a consent form to ensure you agree to take part in this research. In the interview you will be asked to describe your perceptions of, and experience with, the use of Social Media as a marketing tool. I would like to audiotape the interview so that I have an accurate record, but this would only be done with your consent. During the interview, you have the right to withdraw from interview at any time. I will then partially transcribe the interview and delete the data from the recorder.

What are the discomforts and risks and how will these be alleviated?

I do not anticipate any discomfort or risk arising from your participation in this study. However, you may feel uncomfortable telling me about problems or challenges you have faced. Please be assured that I (the researcher) will do everything possible to alleviate any potential discomforts and risks, such as:

- You will be given the opportunity to view the partial transcription of the interview to avoid any potential misinterpretations of your information and guarantee its accuracy.
- You will have the possibility to access, modify or withdraw information given at any stage.

How will my privacy be protected?

1. All information, your name and that of your business will remain confidential (unless agreed by you) and will be used for the purpose of the academic research only
2. All potential identifiers of individual participants and organisations will be removed from the reporting data.
3. No data will be provided to a third party
4. All data will be kept in a secure location, with access given only to the researcher and the participants upon request

What are the benefits?

The outcome of this research will be a greater understanding of the potential and perceived real value of Social Media as a direct marketing tool for small and medium sized accommodation providers. Findings and practical recommendations will be provided to you and may be beneficial for your marketing activities by increasing the profitable use of Social Media. This research will also provide an important contribution to the limited body of academic knowledge regarding Social Media marketing for small and medium sized service provider (in NZ's tourism and hospitality industry).

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There is no cost to participate in the research apart from approximately 45-60 minutes of your time.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please take a few days to consider this invitation. If, during that time, you decide that you would like further information or clarification about any aspect of the research, please contact me, Christine Jonscher, or my supervisor, Dr. Hamish Bremner (contact

details are listed at the end of the document). Your participation would be very much appreciated. Please remember that your participation is voluntary and you will be free to withdraw from the research at any time through the data collection process. I would be grateful for your consideration of this invitation and to hear back from you.

How do I agree to participate in this research?
You will need to read and sign the consent form to indicate your informed consent.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?
Should you wish to receive a summary of the findings of this research, you will be able to make the request on the consent form or of course directly with me, Christine Jonscher.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?
Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr. Hamish Bremner, hamish.bremner@aut.ac.nz, +64 9 921 9999 extension 5898

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEC, Madeline Banda, madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz , 921 9999 ext 8044.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Researcher Contact Details:

Christine Jonscher
Faculty of Applied Humanities
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Project Supervisor Contact Details:

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Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 7 September 2011, AUTEC Reference number 11/191

Consent Form

AUT
UNIVERSITY
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

Project title:

Social Media - potential, perception and usage as a marketing tool: The case of small and medium sized accommodation providers in Auckland

Project Supervisor: **Dr Hamish Bremner**

Researcher: **Christine Jonscher**

○   I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated

○   I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

○   I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and partially transcribed.

○   I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.

○   If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.

○   I agree to take part in this research.

○   I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research (please tick one): Yes○ No○

Participant's signature: ....

Participant's name: ....…………………

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

……………………………………………………………………………………..

……………………………………………………………………………………..

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 7 September 2011, AUTEC Reference number 11/191