

Online strengthens SA's tourism industry

The revolution of the internet and rise of social media and websites such as Trip Advisor has resulted in e-tourism becoming a key tool in allowing businesses in the tourism industry to compete and operate on a global scale.



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This is according to Nick Seewer, CEO of the Pepperclub Hotel and Spa, who says that the growth of online tourism channels and review platforms has provided the industry with an opportunity to engage both directly and interactively with target audiences and trade partners.

Seewer said that with one-third of the world's population having access to the internet, travellers are now able to access vast amounts of information, including tourism-related news and offers from across the world. "Travellers are taking advantage of modern technology to adapt their travel behaviour, especially when researching possible travel destinations and when purchasing travel products and services."

He pointed to the recent sixth annual E-tourism Africa Summit 2013, which revealed that 98% of travellers start their research for holiday destinations online, while reviews and referrals are the number-one driver behind people's choice of destination.

Seewer said that they are finding that TripAdvisor is starting to play a crucial role for hotel business. "Travellers now rely on personal information and recommendations posted on review websites and social media platforms. Evident of this is the growing popularity of long-established travel review platforms, such as TripAdvisor, which receives approximately 60 new reviews per minute."

50% of travellers make use of online reviews, referrals

According to the 2012/13 International Tourism Berlin (ITB) World Travel Trends report, approximately 40% of comments posted on online mediums, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, which influence travellers' destination choices, while 50% of travellers made use of online reviews and referrals to plan their next vacation.

The report also highlights the growing importance of travel bloggers, as their online presence is gradually starting to influence the tourism industry, due to the way in which they cultivate trust by directly interacting with audiences. "Although there is a growing debate on the independence of bloggers' opinions, they still hold an integral role in the way in which a reader views a topic."

Due to the growing trend of e-tourism, it is vital for businesses within the tourism industry to have a strong online presence, and manage it accordingly, said Seewer.

"As many establishments around South Africa now offer complimentary Wi-Fi, access to social media platforms is effortless and enables travellers to be more interactive with a brand, even during their stay at a particular property or while on holiday.

"The ITB report also indicates that 70% of travellers actively posting photos and videos while travelling - this visual and 'real-time' activity is being communicated to a diverse audience, creating a great opportunity for the local businesses to engage and connect with potential clients."

Seewer said that it is now the industry's job to maximise this growing opportunity. "The E-Tourism Africa Summit reported that, in 2012, South Africa received more than 200 000 online bookings and that the online sales exceeded R 700 million. Given that South Africa had over 9 million visitors during 2012, the growth potential for e-tourism in the country is therefore significant," concluded Seewer.

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