Alexa and friends revolutionize destination marketing

Digital voice assistants like Alexa and Siri are heralding the end of learned destination marketing, because they radically change consumers' search behavior. The more unique a destination brand is, the better its chances for success.

> **When artificial intelligence makes all offers completely interchangeable, the winners will be those who manage to dodge this factual interchangeability.**
>
> *- Christoph Engl-*

Someday we'll think back to the days when destination managers devoted all their energy to designing a logo: With its colors and shapes, it was supposed to characterize the destination and make it unmistakable. What a flag was to a state, the logo was to tourist towns and regions.

Behind a logo, they figured, a community of providers could gather, find its identity, and poach customers from the competition. To go with this tribal totem, they created other tools for attracting the attention of potential guests, such as TV spots, flyers, gadgets, ad films, brochures, and magazine ads, as well as their respective adaptations for the World Wide Web. At the time, nobody had any idea what brands and marketing were in for as soon as people started using their smart phone to receive messages and react to them immediately.

The new search standard: "Voiceability"

Since digital assistants like "Alexa" have become additional residents in many homes, have started listening and providing answers to the most banal – and soon also to the most unusual – questions, one thing has become a certainty: Brands will need "voiceability" in the future.

The elaborately designed logos are of no more use with this than the brochures they adorn. A destination today must make sure that it can be found on the web thanks to well-chosen content – or else it doesn't stand a chance in this coming age of voice controlled search engines.

Reputable studies anticipate: By 2020, 30 % of all surfing will be done without a screen, 50% of searches will be done with voice assistants, and customers will expect ever more relevant answers.

The future belongs to complete sentences

Google's search results list is currently an important topic in companies – for now. Because search behavior is changing: People do not task Siri und Cortana to search for something with individual words (as they do with google), but speak complete sentences that lead to detailed results. The future, then, is all about the found content and its quality.

Speaking and listening are getting ready to outdo typing and reading: Being listed among the first ten search results – a long-standing goal of many brands – no longer helps: Because a voice assistant only reads out the main result or perhaps suggests two more. But that's the end of it.

The difference will be whether a person asks for the brand or for the industry it belongs to: Striving for the clear No.1 position will be the order of the day – both as a search term and as a result. Any brand that is verbally asked for by name has won. "How much is a Miele washer?" is the winning sentence. "How much is a washer?" is the losing sentence.

The new travel motivation is called "Instagrammability"

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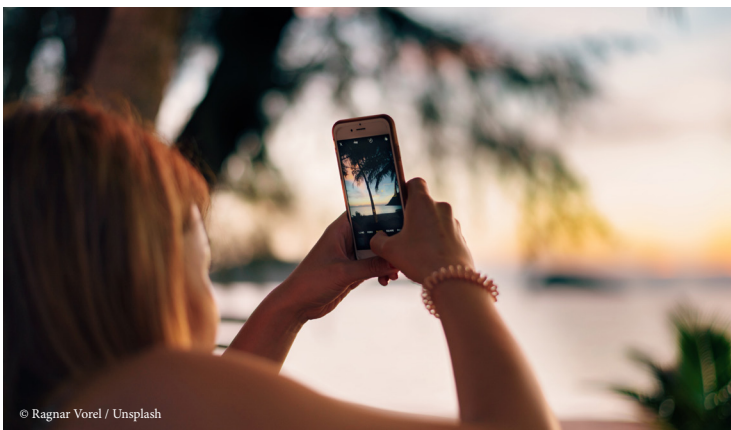
When British millennials were asked what criteria they use to choose a vacation destination, this answer was the most frequent at over 40%: "How well you can show the vacation place on Instagram." The new term "Instagrammability" was born. It was mentioned well ahead of "sights" (5th place), "local cuisine" (4th place), "self-realization possibilities" (3rd place), and "availability and price of alcoholic beverages" (2nd place).

Since this insight became known, at the latest, it has dawned on tourism marketing experts: Their usual advertising methods will be obsolete sooner than they thought. Their web sites, even if they are chock full of ad films and magnificent scenery shots, could pass by the needs of the growing generations X and Y.

This new motivation also declares war on the monotonous standard rooms of large hotel chains, as well as the same old guided tours of cities and sights. "Destinations can no longer settle for being uniform vacation destinations for mass tourism. Rather, it is the uniqueness of the place, the special town with an authentic atmosphere, the exceptional scenery, the unusual local culture, that now draw the attention of tourists," writes German cultural scientist Andreas Reckwitz in his book "Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten" (The Society of Singularities).

Away from the average and toward the unique

Being special is the trump card, uniqueness is rewarded, the general and standardized is charmless," Reckwitz explains the observable change in society. The average person with his average life is suspected of conformity. The new measures of all things are authentic subjects with original interest and an extraordinary biography, the unmistakable goods and events, communities and cities. Late modern societies celebrate the singular and turn away from the collective, says the author, who was nominated for the literature prize of the Leipzig Book Fair.

What does that mean for destinations? What are the challenges? What are the risks and pitfalls? And: What is the role of destination branding in these changes?

Travel motive and benefit belong together

When we use spoken language to search ("voice search") and not written (googling), we soon combine motives with facts. "Hi Alexa, where can I take my family (motive) for a week's vacation at the beach (motive) in a hotel (fact) with direct access to the ocean (fact)? Maximum price for four people 1,500 Euro (fact)?"

Such a complex question would have been reduced to a loose string of words in the Google search box: "beach vacation family hotel ocean access direct". The more complex the questions become, the simpler it will be to answer them via digital voice assistants.

For these assistants to deliver usable results, the quality and combinability of the available data and information are crucial. In particular, the data sets must contain not just hard facts, but also information that can be associated with motives.

Voice assistants need combinable data

Thanks to their combination speed, digital voice assistants will even beat personal recommendations, machine will beat human being. But one thing at which the machine is not as proficient: making value judgements. The question "Hi Google, is it better for our family to go to the beach for three days next weekend than to spend three days in a city?" will be a tough one to answer even for self-learning systems like Cortana, Siri, and Alexa.

Companies who have deposited their information on as many data bases as possible at the necessary depth could be among the winners. Because when it comes to linking information or querying combination possibilities, digital voice assistants need sufficient fodder. They grab it where they can get a large enough amount of it – and spit it out as a result. That is the one dimension.

The other dimension is this: When a brand has gained a No. 1 position because consumers trust it, it will be fed right into the digital assistant: "Alexa, find me a rental car for next weekend on Mallorca – from Sixt!" A brand that is addressed and spoken out loud in a search has hit the jackpot.

Brands become dialog partners

A brand that has escaped the generics of its industry (rental car) and can lean on a brand core is at the head of the pack. It is an advantage to have a pronounceable brand name, without any tricky foreign terms. (Easycar or Budget – how do you pronounce that?)

Brands have to turn from safety providers and trust silos into dialog partners: Interaction is no longer limited to "like" and "share" – in the future it will also be about "recommended" and "selected". 60% of USA travelers would consider a spontaneous trip based on an impulse, 57% appreciate personalized information based on their collected travel habits, and one in three would consider using digital assistants for their travel planning. If even half of these answers are true, it means new challenges are emerging for destination marketing.

More obvious than ever: Brand is content, not surface

The reduction of a brand to communication and graphic elements (like the logo) will be punished mercilessly in the future. Destinations whose differentiation ideas merely splash about at the surface may, at best, win graphics or design competitions – but no new customers. Because the new search systems recognize without any emotion who has relevant content to offer – and who gets lost in the meaningless.

The more customers deal with voice assistants and consider their suggestions to be helpful, the more valuable the classification of information becomes. Digital assistants use algorithms to search for clear instructions how to solve a problem. Artificial intelligence connects individual data segments in order to develop conclusions or prognoses from that combination.

Strong destination brands therefore have two success factors:

- Their positioning offers a high level of differentiation, which is visible in concrete offers and services.
- They solve a concrete customer problem or address a desire that can be satisfied emotionally.

More consistent than ever: Customers buy desires, not products

It pays for destinations to address people's travel motives with their offers and resist the temptation to create their own travel motives. Strong brands are those who do not copy but comprehend: What counts first and foremost is what is deep inside of people that makes them travel, and what they can realize at a destination.

If it were any different, the ground-breaking success of the travel platform Airbnb or the image communication channel Instagram could not be explained. The private-lodging broker Airbnb became a major player in the travel industry, in addition to established hotels and resorts, because of its promise of authentic travel experiences and the statement "Live there".

On Instagram, we are invited to "Collect moments, not things!" With that slogan, the portal cuts to the bone those destination providers who extol their infrastructure and large number of beds.

**Don't just go there.
Live there.**

© Teri Johnson / Airbnb

People do not buy kilometers of hiking trails and ski slopes, and they do not buy square meters of rooms and vacation apartments: People buy discovery, adventure, safety, and comfort – and want to trust the destination of their choice with that desire. The average will be left in the dust and end up in the price war for being the cheapest.

Stronger than ever: Follow your own identity

When artificial intelligence makes all offers completely interchangeable, the winners will be those who manage to dodge this factual interchangeability. The misconception of many destinations that they can copy the success patterns of others because they do the same thing, only better, will have fatal consequences. Our brain sticks to what it knows for safety, unless it recognizes the new as being clearly different. Customers only perceive the original as being different – not the similar.

One of the biggest dangers of destination brand building is to seek success in diversity of offers – not in the self-similarity of their own identity. Artificial intelligence also rewards trust in self-similar brand success patterns. The way to become a great destination brand is to reproduce these success patterns consistently and turn them into new and attractive offers – always copying only one's self and not the competition.

Third parties take over communication with digital possibilities

The truth will be: Destinations and vacation providers will have to cede their communication about benefit and relevance to third parties. Whether digital assistants, artificial intelligence, or customers actively posting their opinions and evaluations on the web: The prerogative of interpretation of content, communication and its channels shifts from provider to customer.

All that is left to the provider is to control the occasions and initiate communication reasons. Destination marketing will rise from "Bling-Bling" to a whole new dimension. Marketing for destinations is increasingly turning into occasion and product development.

And customers and guests? They will handle the information and evaluation business. They film and photograph at highest quality, share their experiences with their community, and become the "influencers" we hope for today.

The democratization of communication in marketing is in full swing. We just have to be willing to recognize it.

The Author

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The Tourism Expert and Association Strategist

Christoph Engl's vast know-how of practical brand development and brand management in international tourism is recognized throughout the industry and puts him in high demand as a brand expert. Numerous decision makers in tourism, city, or location marketing or the hotel sector, such as the states of Kärnten, Thüringen, the Münsterland e.V., the tourism region Salzburger Land, the Motel One chain or the Hotel Weisses Rössl, trust in his brand expertise gained during his years as CEO of Südtirol Marketing AG. In that position he was instrumental in introducing the umbrella brand Südtirol, which is considered an international Best Practice for the development of a cross-sector regional brand. The legal scholar looks back on an exceptional career: He first worked in several employer associations of South Tyrol, before becoming the director of the region's 5,000-member hotel and restaurant owners' association. Now he applies this experience for the benefit of his clients, such as the Handelsverband Bayern (Bavarian Trade Association) or IHK Südthüringen (South Thuringia Chamber of Industry and Commerce).

About BrandTrust

BrandTrust is the leading management consultancy for effective brands

With our profound understanding of brands and our experience gathered in over 1,000 brand strategy projects over the past 14 years, we enable our customers to see their brands with fresh eyes, and use it to unlock undiscovered business potential. We help enterprises to turn their superior performances into outstanding brands, and show them how they can achieve meaningful growth in saturated markets. The only way this can succeed is if the value of a performance is conveyed to the customer's perception at the brand touchpoints and turned into appreciation.