Importance of innovation and digitalisation in growing tourism

By Josephine Wawira

21 Jun 2018

Digital transformation has solemnly grasped the tourism industry, increasingly altering operations and customer relations in a sector that contributed 3.7% to Kenya's GDP in 2017 and forecast to rise by 5.2% in 2018. The industry is experiencing a great deal of innovative disruption, with trends such as virtual reality (VR), artificial intelligence (AI), and mobile bookings and payments taking centre stage. Expectations from tourists have been set high, and relevant stakeholders continue to adapt to the technological changes in a bid to provide pertinent solutions suitable for the new digital environment.

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In a statement released by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), it has stressed the importance of tourism and technology, providing opportunities for innovation and creating the jobs of the future. Speaking during the 63rd European Commission meeting held in the Prague-Czech Republic earlier in June this year, secretary-general Zurab Pololikashvili affirmed the organisation's aim to make innovation part of the solution to the challenge of marrying continued growth with a more sustainable and responsible tourism sector.

"Together we can set a vision that considers tourism as a policy priority, a knowledge creator and innovator, and a sector of maximum value for all", said Pololikashvili, making clear his vision to create an ecosystem of government policies, funds and strategic projects that nurture disruptive ideas and entrepreneurship.

What is the traveller looking for?

In a world of digital interaction, today's traveller has shifted focus on the sources of travel and tourism data and information, highly dependent on mobile applications and the digital space for their travel purchases. From flight to hotel bookings, the services are easily accessible online, making it convenient and user-friendly. Service providers, in a bid to drive sales, revenue and operational efficiency, are upping their efforts to give top-notch customer experience by embracing the digital transformation.

For instance, Amadeus, a travel software and technology solutions provider, notes that service providers should expect the traveller to leverage more on mobile, such as location awareness and directly rebooking on the device. He wants to remain connected in the digital, mobile, and virtual marketplace; thus, expects a seamless integration across standalone apps such as those that encourage social login.

Case studies

Therefore, the main question is whether hotels and travel agents have been able to deliver on these significant traveller demands and what benefits they have recorded.

Speed, relevance, and accuracy of the digital experience are vital when a hotel is seeking to grow conversion rates. The AccorHotels App, for instance, allows customers to experience a total immersion with virtual reality using their smartphones. Besides, it provides over 2,000 tourism destinations and 4,200 addresses to affirm the importance of the location awareness application. Other useful features include exclusive presales and room upgrades to reward customer loyalty.

On the other hand, travel agents have not been left behind in relation to innovation and digitalisation. Such is Jumia Travel, a leading OTA in Africa which uses an Extranet App both on Android and web; in its strategy to use top-notch technology to further empower its hotel partners across all markets.

The tool allows hotel managers to confirm and view their incoming reservations, change their rates and update availability at their own comfort. By integrating multiple channel managers, the company gives its customers and hotels control over their bookings, reducing the standard check-in time and consequently increasing efficiency and cost savings in an industry ecosystem that is highly characterised by a "mobile-first" adaptation.

ABOUT JOSEPHINE WAWIRA

Josephine Wawira is a consultant in communication and public relations with over six years of progressive writing and broadcast experience. She is currently a writer for Africa's online hotel booking portal, Jumia Travel, focusing in the areas of travel, tourism, and hospitality as it relates to Africa.
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