THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE CONSERVATION MARKETING FOR RELATIONSHIP MARKETING BETWEEN CONSERVATION ORGANISATIONS AND BUSINESSES

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ABSTRACT

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, marketing for online conservation was increasingly used by conservationists to appeal for funds from businesses and to improve public awareness on the need to reduce the loss of biodiversity. Yet, uncertainty remains in the academic literature about the effectiveness of online conservation marketing. Given that the potential impact of online conservation marketing in the corporate sector is evident (i.e., with a clear reduction in management and maintenance costs, and an increase fund collection), knowledge of online conservation marketing is important for building and maintaining a conservation group -to-business relationship. This study serves as an exploratory inquiry and aims to understand whether Environmental Education Centers (EECs) in Malaysia use electronic platforms for conservation marketing purposes. Based on an extensive literature search on conservation marketing and a search for EEC background information, from 2015 to 2020 many EECs in Malaysia have either used, or are using (i.e., WWF Malaysia) or will soon be using (i.e., Taman Hidupan Liar Gua Musang) online conservation marketing as one of their marketing strategies. The findings hold true even for the EECs with poor Internet connections (i.e., National Elephant Conservation Centre Kuala Gandah). This exploratory study underscores the need for more research in this area, especially with regard to the effectiveness of online conservation marketing among EECs since many of the EECs are situated in locations with poor Internet connectivity. Without an understanding of electronic marketing strategy used by the EECs, the conservationists' role will likely be limited to that of conservation research, improving the standards of animal welfare and describing the loss of biodiversity.

KEYWORDS: Education Environmental Centers, Electronic Platform, Conservation Marketing, Sustainable Tourism

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Reaching a target audience to talk about conservation issues and influencing their behaviour is not easy in current world where people are continually bombarded with information, and distractions are so readily available. Although not typically considered to be a part of the conservation science toolkit, marketing techniques designed for use in the commercial sector to identify and influence human preferences and behaviour by placing the target audience at the core of the marketing process, should definitely be added to the conservationist's arsenal. The objective of this exploratory study is to understand whether Environmental Education Centers (EECs) in Malaysia use electronic platforms for conservation marketing purposes, and if they do, to what extent are the electronic platforms used for conservation marketing purposes?

METHODOLOGY

This study explores new insights into a well-known research area (Strauss & Corbin, 1998); hence a qualitative methodology was chosen for this research. This qualitative research is one-of-a-kind as it makes use of both primary and secondary data. The secondary data, was received via extensive literature search and analysis of EEC online platforms on a computer. Meanwhile, the primary data, was collected via semi-structured interviews with those who work or volunteer at EECs in Malaysia. Some, 23 interviews were performed before the ideal data saturation was achieved. The rational of choosing staff or volunteers at EECs was because they spend most of the time at the EECs, making them the ideal respondents.

FINDINGS

Based on the primary data (interviews) and secondary data (extensive literature search and analysis of EEC online platforms), even before first outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia (2015 to 2020), many EECs in Malaysia had either used or were using at least one type of electronic platform for conservation marketing purposes (i.e., WWF Malaysia). These findings also clearly show that many of the EECs that do not use any electronic platforms for conservation marketing purposes, have every intention to start using online conservation marketing as one of their marketing strategies (i.e., Taman Hidupan Liar Gua Musang). The findings hold true even for the EECs with poor Internet connections (i.e., National Elephant Conservation Centre Kuala Gandah).

The reasons why the EECs should be using electronic platforms for conservation marketing purposes include the greater exposure for conservation programmes, lower costs, and that online marketing is more effective than the traditional marketing approaches. Based on this study, the types of electronic platforms that are most commonly used by EECs to promote their conservation initiatives is their own corporate website. However, when EEC representatives were interviewed (at EECs which did not make use of any electronic platform, but have every intention to do so), majority of these EECs plan to use social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram as their primary electronic platform.

One of the reasons given by EECs for choosing social media platforms is because advertising on social media is the most cost-effective. Meaning that the EECs may use more of the funds raised for conservation efforts, rather than for more expensive advertisements. Another reason for choosing to use social media platforms is because most of the current volunteers and staff at EECs are millennials who are familiar with the use of social media platforms. They even make use of their own personal accounts for conservation marketing-related activities. Hence, doing the same task on the EEC's own social media platform is not a difficult ask for the staff, or volunteers at the EEC.

CONCLUSION AND COTRIBUTIONS

This original research study explores the use of electronic platforms by EECs. In particular, this study explores the current levels of utilisation by EECs of electronic, social media platforms. This study also explores the intention of EECs (which do not own or use any electronic platforms at the time of research) to make use of electronic platforms in the near future, the study also considers the types of electronic platforms and the reasons for the EEC's intention to use that particular platform. Based on the primary data (interviews) and secondary data (extensive literature search and analysis of EECs use of online platforms), from 2015 to 2020 many EECs in Malaysia have used, are using (as in the case of WWF Malaysia) or will soon be using (as in the case of Taman Hidupan Liar Gua Musang) online platforms for conservation marketing purposes.

Interestingly, the research findings hold true even for EECs with poor Internet connectivity (as in the case of the National Elephant Conservation Centre Kuala Gandah).

Additionally, this study also makes a practical contribution as to how conservationists may encourage businesses and individuals to participate in conservation initiatives. The findings of this study may strengthen the relationship between EECs and businesses and encourage the EECs to act proactively by advertising conservation initiatives directly to businesses and the general public, rather than to act reactively waiting for the volunteers to help them obtain funding from organisations and individuals.

This exploratory study underscores the need for more research in this area, specifically with regard to the effectiveness of online conservation marketing among EECs. Without an understanding of the electronic marketing strategy used by the EECs, conservationists' will likely be limited to conservation research, improving the standards of animal welfare and describing the loss of critical biodiversity.

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