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The role of social media in shaping airline's image

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Abstract

Social media is important nowadays. With the development of technology today, most people want their needs to be fulfilled in an instant. Speed is the key in most cases. In this era all media gets digitized, the Internet also becomes the mode of carriage for all other media, meaning a lot of information is available on the internet. In today's competitive business environment, under pressure from the digital revolution, the corporate brand with its identity, image, and reputation becomes the center of gravity for valuable and durable relationships between the firm and all interested parties. The researcher has chosen qualitative data for designing this research. Focus of this research it is aimed to understand the social media that has been used by Cathay Pacific Airways to shape its corporate image in the eyes of public. The analysis shows that the active promotion activities through social media has a big influence in the formation of the expected company image. The use of social media as one of the strategies that Cathay Pacific uses as a means of communication can increase customer engagement.

Keywords: *Corporate Communication; Corporate Image; Social Media; Perception; Airlines.*

INTRODUCTION

The desire of individuals to engage and participate has its roots in technological developments more than five decades ago. The origins of this social media revolution can be found in the development of Internet structures, beginning with 1960s military project called ARPANET (The Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) (Lipschultz, 2017).

As the researcher sees that social media now are evolving, and become important in our daily life, as people are using social media very consistently in carrying out their daily activities. Due to the rapid growth of digital communications, corporate communication has expanded to incorporate marketing tactics, from the one-way customer outreach in the forms of advertising and publicity to the known two-way conversational approach favored by public relations professional (Issa, 2011).

Social media as the world trending phenomena is a social environment for bringing the world to a global village. This has given rise to many opportunities for many people and many businesses and companies (Castells, 2014). This understanding about social media is also enriched by Burns (2017), social media are Internet-based platforms that allow users to create profiles for sharing user-generated or curated digital content in the form of

text, photos, graphics, or videos within a networked community of users who can respond to the content.



Figure 1
Social Media User Around the World
Source: Hootsuites.com

In today's competitive business environment, under pressure from the digital revolution, the corporate brand with its identity, image, and reputation becomes the center of gravity for valuable and durable relationships between the firm and all interested parties. Vernuccio (2014) stated that Corporate branding is known as a guiding concept in the corporate communication discipline. Social media has the potential to redefine the culture and it offers new opportunities for sharing events and news. Some of popular social media that people have always used in their daily life to get more information are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and many more.

Today's customers are looking to develop more personal connections through social media and for a better digital customer experience. Very few brands are engaging deeply with their customers across channels, instead of relying on random one-off posts to broadcast their messages.

In the past, the traditional methods, and practices of corporate communication, such as mission statements, news stories, and press releases have helped the public shape an organization's image. Nonetheless, with a public that is forever present online, traditional media practices will not suffice to contribute to the shaping of an organization's image and establish long lasting relationships with a company's stakeholders (Courtright & Smudde, 2009).

The term social media was coined to describe these and other new platforms of digital communication that continually appear in this interactive electronic environment, underlining their participative and collaborative social characteristics (Vernuccio, 2014). Today, Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and online blogs, offer new advertising and promotion platforms. In principle, these sites enable airlines (and companies in general) to promote their product and brand, get the online community involved and motivated to travel, specifically target key market segments and develop brand loyalty to the carrier. It is also a way for carriers to promote word-of-mouth advertising, which is the single largest influencer when it comes to making travel decisions, and, ultimately, boost revenue levels (CAPA, 2009).

Over the past ten years, airlines have been conditioned to think the opportunity and value of social lies in the media channels themselves:

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. These are marketing channels used to build communities, target prospects and access notoriously hard-to-reach audiences with deals and promotions.

For an airline it is especially important to maintain their image and reputation in any situation that will arise in the future, to avoid a crisis or reputation loss in public. When these situations happen, people will easily have a negative judgement towards an airline. According to Ash (2020), travel disruptions are not convenient for passengers and airlines, it is a small cost by using social media that can help to deal with customers to protect the airline's image and retain their customers during this situation. In the researcher's opinion, social media can be a communication media to handle customer's complaints and suggestions, while avoiding an escalation of crisis

A constant challenge for airlines is differentiating themselves in a marketplace where pricing is crucial, as well as making sure that customer expectations are met. This can often be problematic in a fast-paced industry, which can also be prone to delays and last-minute changes. According to Meehan et al., (2016), social media gives people the opportunity to provide feedback and share thoughts regarding their travel experiences. Customer experience is everything in the airline industry. From the routes they fly to the booking process and the on-board experience, every touchpoint with customers is an opportunity for airlines to deliver breakthrough experiences that build their reputation and help them stand out in a fiercely competitive sector.

Cathay Pacific is one of the biggest airlines in Hong Kong. The main office and main hub are located at Hong Kong International Airport. The airline's operations and subsidiaries have scheduled passenger and cargo services to more than 190 destinations in more than 60 countries worldwide including codeshares and joint ventures. Cathay Pacific operates a fleet of wide-body aircraft, consisting of Airbus A330, Airbus A350 and Boeing 777. Cathay cargo operates three models of the Boeing 747. Wholly owned subsidiary airline Cathay Dragon operates to 44 destinations in the Asia-Pacific region from its Hong Kong base. In 2010, Cathay Pacific and Cathay Pacific Cargo, together with Cathay Dragon, carried nearly 27 million passengers and over 1.8 million tons of cargo and mail.



Figure 2
Cathay Pacific Airways Logo

Source: The Hub. Cathay Pacific Homepage

Cathay Pacific is chosen to be the focus of the research. What makes Cathay Pacific Airways special in social media is their strategy of utilizing social listening to understand their customers better. Ashraf (2015) mentioned that social listening is one of the key areas that companies can excel in if they make the effort. Cathay Pacific is making the effort. We can

see on their Twitter account that there is a significant number of retweets, but Cathay Pacific raises the bar (and shows companies how to do it) by indulging in some social listening and finding out what people are saying about them. Then they retweet the good stuff. It shows that they like their customers and that they are using social media effectively.

Social media can be an especially useful communication medium between an airline and the mass public or its passengers. Both in everyday life and during times of crisis. There are many benefits for an airline company to maintain their social media as their corporate image, which makes it easy to handle the problem in a timely manner. According to Skytrax's award for The World's best airline for the year of 2019, Cathay Pacific is ranked at number four. Sitting at number one is Qatar Airways, with Singapore Airline at number two, and ANA (All Nippon Airways) at number 3, respectively.

This research is conducted to discover whether Cathay Pacific Airway's social media strategy on each of its social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube) helps its corporate image in the eyes of the public and does it influences the public to choose it over other airlines. In a larger perspective, this study is aiming to find out the importance of social media in shaping a corporate image of a company

A research about "Cabin Crew and Social Media: Negotiating Employees' Emotional Labor and Corporate Image of Citilink Indonesia", by Winolo & Sukandar (2019). This research explains cabin crew as the frontline who plays an important role to deliver high quality standards of service to passengers to enable companies to differentiate their products and services and fulfil passenger expectations. This qualitative research described the phenomenon between cabin crew and social media in Citilink, one of Indonesia's low-cost carriers.

"The Role of Social Media in Corporate Reputation Management - The Results of the Polish Enterprises", by Szwajca (2017). This article aims to identify the extent and directions of the use of social media in the activities of companies operating on the polish market in the field of reputation management. The results of the research showed that polish companies recognize the potential of social media and try to apply them in their marketing efforts. To achieve the research goal, the following research methods were used: critical analysis of literature and analysis of secondary sources in the form of a report from the research conducted by various national and foreign research centres.

"Preserving Corporate Reputation in the Social Media Era", by Issa (2011). This research examines the importance of financial institutions' (banks) use of social networking sites to cater to their customers and stakeholders' inquiries to protect their corporate reputation. Three top U.S. banks' publicly accessible Twitter feeds were used to analyse how the banks use twitter to build customer relationships and provide quality service for a more positive outlook of their reputation.

Another interesting research by Vernuccio (2014), *Communicating Corporate Brands Through Social Media: An Exploratory Study*. This research is identified and interpret the main emerging strategic approaches in communicating a corporate brand through social media. In this research highlighted that despite encouraging signs of effective use of social media and

discussed about the online corporate communication initiatives of more than a third of all companies are characterized as cautious. The researcher is interested to get more knowledge from this research by understanding about the corporate branding strategy.

Challenges for brand value from social media in the airline industry written by Samotolkova (2019). There has been a transformation to the way companies and customers communicate with each other in social media: use of modern communication technologies become immense. Many airlines can evaluate challenges brought by customers and estimate its opportunities and integrity in terms of proper social media marketing activities and communication that provide opportunities for building and reinforcing its brand identity.

Corporate communication are the ways organizations communicate with various groups of people. Corporate communication is a way to build communication within organizations. In corporate communication it connects the application of communication theory that makes corporate communication relations and the overall corporate strategy of the company (Argenti, 2017).

For corporate communication practitioners themselves, one further opportunity in using social media is that it allows the company to present a more human image of itself.

Communication refers to the process by which information is transmitted and understood between two or more people (McShane & Von Glinow, 2007). Coates also stated that there are various definitions of communication, the word itself is derived from the Latin verb *communicare*, which means "to share" or "to make common". That derivation provides one half of the English meaning of communication.

Communication is a social process how people interact with each other. Corporate image refers to corporation perception revealed in the associations kept in customer mind. Corporate image has an important role for a company in the public eye. Most companies use social media as a tool to promote and communicate to the outside world. Social media has been an especially important method in communication nowadays, with the availability of fast paced technology, the expectation by most people is to have information instantly.

According to Cornelissen (2011) mentioned that corporate image may help stakeholders find or recognize an organization. When consistently communicated, a corporate image creates awareness, triggers recognition and may also instil confidence in stakeholder groups because these groups will have a clearer picture of the organization.

The world of social media marketing is one part of the "promotion" P of the marketing mix – communicating, argumenting, promoting and advertising products and services for customers and potential customers. Companies must use promotion to communicate to customers the value they are providing clearly and persuasively.

When it comes to distributing brand messages, marketers can use three core types of media paid, owned, and earned. Paid media is usually used in advertising, defined as the paid placement of promotional messages in channels capable of reaching mass audience. Owned media are platforms the

brand controls, e.g. corporate websites. Earned media are those messages that are distributed at no direct cost to the company and by methods beyond the control of the company, such as word-of-mouth (WOM) communication (Solomon & Tuten, 2013).

What people think about the organization is the key focus for the public relations audit. This perception is based on both visibility and reputation (Smith, 2017). Meanwhile, Kotler & Armstrong (2010) stated that perception is a process that people known can choose, organize, and interpret the information's, to form a meaningful picture of the environment.

Content analysis is a technique for examining the content or information and symbols contained in written documents or other communication media (such as photographs, movies, song lyric, advertisements) (Neuman, 2013; Yunus et al., 2019).

This research discusses new media, based on West & Turner (2019) new media encompasses computer-related technology. This communication technology includes the Internet, including emailing, blogging, and texting the influence of social networking sites (Facebook and LinkedIn) on communication; cell phone usage; and high-definition (HD) television.

Social media are Internet-based platforms that allow users to create profiles for sharing user-generated or curated digital content in the form of text, photos, graphics, or videos within a networked community of users who can respond to the content (Burns, 2017). Chaffey (2009) defines Web 2.0 as a collection of web services that facilitate interaction of web users with sites to create user-generated content and encourage behaviors such as community or social network participation, mashups, content rating, use of widgets and tagging.

With social media, stakeholders can now share experiences, opinions, and ideas about organizations, and organize for action, at scale. In other words, they can use social media to network with others and disseminate corporate news, whether good or bad. There are four kinds of social media that nowadays people always use that will be discussed in this research, which are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.

METHOD

The researcher has chosen qualitative data for designing this research. According to (Neuman, 2013), qualitative data come in a vast array of forms: photos, maps, open-ended interviews, observations, documents, and so forth, and the data can be simplified into two major categories: field research (including ethnography, participant, observation, depth interviewing) and historical-comparative research.

The approach of the research is a qualitative method. Qualitative research offers a powerful means to better understand communication relationships and the social world. Based on (Daymon & Holloway, 2010), qualitative research methods are a powerful means of gaining an in-depth, holistic understanding of the relationship between international culture and communication from the perspective of those inside a society or ethnic group.

Qualitative research is a method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. Qualitative Researchers study "things" (people and their thoughts) in their natural settings, attempting to

make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. This research is based on post positivism, which is to observe the object with scientific nature.

Focus of this research it is aimed to understand the social media that has been used by Cathay Pacific Airways to shape its corporate image in the eyes of public. To narrow the research is to find out whether a company social media has an impact on public to be the new customer or retaining its loyalty.

According to Neuman (2013), explained that paradigm as a general framework for theory and research that includes basic assumptions, key issues, models of quality research, and methods for seeking answers. This research is based on phenomenology paradigm, phenomenology is a concept derived from the field of philosophy. Phenomenological tradition is marked by communication that he contends is an “experience of otherness”. It means that a person tries to attain authenticity by eliminating biases in a conversational phenomenologist believe that an individual’s system of beliefs should not influence the dialogue taking place (Craig & Muller, 2007).

When discussing about the media that as our important daily needs, the researcher found that the theory that is suitable to explain this research in more detail are with uses and gratification theory. According to West & Turner (2019), uses and gratification theory provides a framework for understanding when and how individual media consumers become active and the consequences of that increased or decreased involvement.

In this study, data collection techniques that will be used consist of primary data and secondary data. In qualitative research, we may develop theory during data collection process to make a comparison between the data that we had collected. Neuman (2013) stated that grounded theory adds flexibility and allows the data and theory to interact. In grounded theory, we build from a specific observation to broader concepts that organize observational data and then continue to build principles or themes that connect the concepts.

The data will be collected by conducting formal doing interviews with key informants, and observation which will then be analyzed. Triangulation as checking data from various sources in various ways and at various times. Instruments that will be used to test the validity of the research are: (1). Reviewing a minimum of 10 journals that has a similar topic to this research, (2). Book reviews to support and supplement theories being used, (3). Transcript checks will also be done for the interview process to ensure that no obvious mistakes are made. According to Sugiyono (2018), the activities analyzed in qualitative were carried out interactively and continued continuously until they were finished, so that the data was already saturated. Activities in data analysis are reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification.

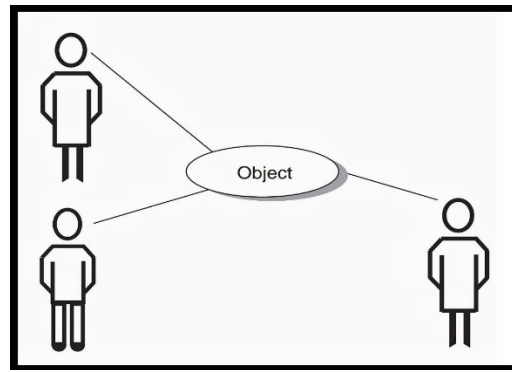


Figure 3
Triangulation: observing from different viewpoints
Source: (Neuman, 2013)

To demonstrate how this research can demonstrate the goodness or quality of the research, are referred to validity and reliability. In all research, validity is about the soundness and rigour of the study (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account (Creswell, 2013).

DISCUSSION

Cathay Pacific Airways was founded on 24 September 1946 by Australian Sydney H. de Kantzow and American Roy C. Farrell. The airline made the world's first non-stop transpolar flight flying over the North Pole in July 1998 originating from New York's JFK Airport, which was also the maiden flight to arrive at the new Hong Kong International Airport. The airline celebrated its 70th anniversary in 2016, and as of March 2018, its major shareholder is Air China. Cathay Pacific continues to invest heavily in its home city and had another 92 new aircraft due to delivery up to 2020. Cathay Pacific is a founding member of the Oneworld global alliance, whose combined network serves more than 800 destinations worldwide.



Figure 4
Cathay Pacific aircraft
Source: Personal

The company is a member of the Swire group and is a public company listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. Dragonair is a wholly owned subsidiary of Cathay Pacific, and the airline also has a 60% stake in AHK Air Hong Kong Ltd, an all-cargo carrier operating regional express freight services.

Cathay Pacific Airways is known to be Hong Kong's leading airline. The company has been voted airline of the year in the Skytrax for 4 times, in the

year 2003, 2005, 2009, and 2014. It also won best transpacific airlines in 2015, and many more awards and honors. It gives them the opportunity to acquire more customers and generate more revenue. People would have more confidence in an airline that is recognized by the award-winning bodies, because it would make people have more confidence in flying with the airline. In addition, with Cathay Pacific Airways' online booking, they give more convenience to their customers, giving them the chance to attract more customers. The airline is making full use of technological advancement for easy transaction and operations for the convenience of customers and employees. With its recognition, the airline attracts more opportunities for expansion.

Cathay Pacific's new global brand concept harnesses its strong heritage and service to create a bold direction for the future. According to Heard (2019/05/21) written in discovery.cathaypacific.com, Cathay Pacific has evolved from a small regional carrier to one of the world's great airlines, growing an extensive global network and redefining the long-haul travel experience, and the airline created modern, connected fleet, airport lounges that have set standards in comfort, and continues to pioneer new routes linked to its vibrant home of Hong Kong. It is also mentioned about the explanation from Cathay Pacific's Chief Executive Officer Rupert Hogg. Through it all, there has been an enduring thread that defines us; a belief that great service will always be valued, that our style of service is what makes us different and better.

Move Beyond is an opportunity to look back with pride at the past. 'By looking back at history, we wanted something that brought some of the swagger and confidence of the brand that might have slipped over the past decade or so,' explains Cathay Pacific's Head of Brand Ruairaidh Smeaton. 'We wanted a brand purpose that would put us back on the front foot – we are a great airline, but how do we get even better than that? With Move Beyond, our aim is to be one of the world's greatest service brands.' For an airline with a long-standing reputation for excellence regarding its service, it is an acknowledgement that the online retail world and the service industry have heightened consumer expectations. The aviation world has changed, too, with increased competition across all market sectors, which makes it harder still for an airline to tell the world what it stands for.

According to Du (2017) Cathay Pacific makes an emotional connection to the customers and potential customers. Their brand strength is consistently good service and sophistication congruent with the world's greatest city, ties in with Hong Kong image faultlessly. Association is the jingle you hear at the end of the trip when the planes landed, and the flight attendant's voiceover is telling you how much they have enjoyed having us on board.

In a discussion about Cathay Pacific Airways' brand concept, the researcher conducted interviews with external factors in this study, namely people who have never flown on Cathay Pacific Airways. All of them agreed that Cathay Pacific's image through its social media campaign will attract them to travel with Cathay Pacific in the future. They also agreed that Cathay Pacific's brand image must be projected through its social media as social

media has become a medium of communication and this technology can be used to increase brand awareness.

Nowadays, the average person understands and uses social media actively every day. From the interview, the researcher found out that all the interviewee is an active social media user. All those 18 people answered the same, they are active users of social media, and most of them have known all social media platform.

Based on the interview, it is noticeably clear that Facebook is now not just a social media that a lot of people are active in but has become a communication tool between users. For an airline that uses Facebook as a social media platform, Cathay Pacific must realize that when people visit their Facebook page, they have many different objectives. They may be looking for promotional tickets, travel information, news updates, even ticketing issues. These objectives must all be catered for while transmitting their brand image on the page, may it be from the designs, posts, and their replies to questions and comments.

As Instagram is geared towards sharing pictures, rather than post messages, the pictures themselves become the spotlight. For Cathay Pacific, posting pictures on Instagram must be a way to showcase their brand and gain the public's attention. The key message that is being posted in the form of a photo must be able to be received by the public and the description written underneath it must support its delivery.

As a single tweet in a Twitter post is limited to 280 characters, the message being delivered must be concise and clear. Most of the respondents agree that twitter is great at delivering messages and updates, rather than sharing media and pictures. As the delivery and the message becomes the spotlight, this is the battleground for Cathay Pacific Airways to compete in. Timely updates must be delivered in an easy to understand language. It also must bear in mind that not all its readers can understand airline or travel terms, so the language must be crafted for the general public.

YouTube is a platform of social media where its user can post videos. It is a way of sharing the user's message through a video for the public to see. Some of the respondents think that there is a lack of videos posted on the official YouTube account. Others think that the videos are not attractive enough, or it is not treated as a priority in terms of social media choices. I think this is a missed opportunity for Cathay Pacific Airways. As YouTube is gaining more viewers these days, this must be capitalized in a way that transmits Cathay Pacific Airways' brand and image.

According to Durianto (2004) functions of brand loyalty, among others as follows: (1). Loyalty to a brand will reduce marketing costs, (2). Brand loyalty will increase trade and strengthen marketing intermediary confidence, (3). Brand loyalty will indirectly attract new consumers to buy these brand products, (4). Brand loyalty will give time to respond to threats competition like the emergence of new products. With loyalty the brand will give time to develop the product superior.

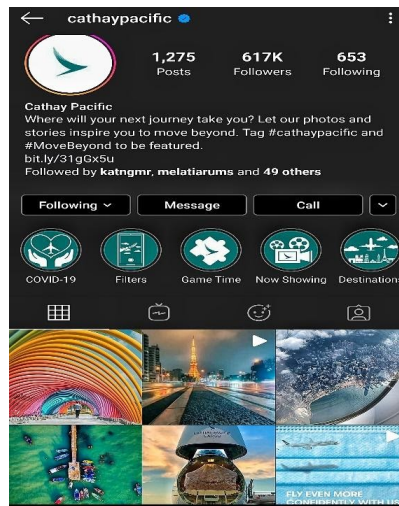


Figure 5

Cathay Pacific's Instagram Account

Source: Cathay Pacific's Instagram Account



Figure 6

Cathay Pacific's Twitter Account

Source: Twitter

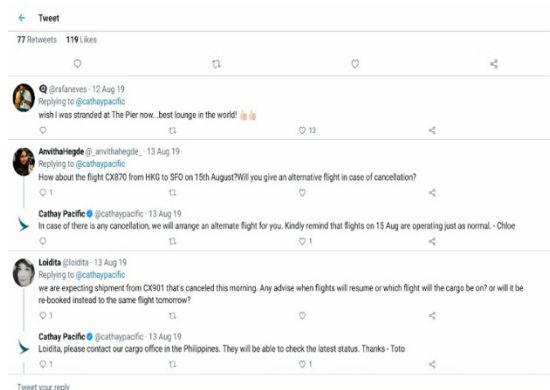


Figure 7

Cathay Pacific's Official Twitter replying comments

Source: Twitter

Corporate image is the internal picture reflected on those outside of the sphere of enterprise in question. A positive corporate image would forge sense of trust thereby ensuring satisfaction and loyalty. On the other hand, a negative corporate image would lower potential customer portfolio and reliability of the firm. All in all, a positive image is vitally crucial for corporations (Bozkurt, 2018).

Based on the literature review that has been discussed in the previous chapter, the researcher would draw an opinion that it is suggested that a positive corporate image can give a motivation to the public to stay loyal with the company, or become a new loyal customer because of the product and services of the company.

To become the world's best airline while at the same time maintaining their corporate image through social media, we can see that Cathay Pacific still has some catching up to do. As their competitors in general have more reach and followers on their social media accounts. According to Ash (2020): "Filtering social media on popular terms such as bad service, cancelled flights, or delayed, can help airlines to pinpoint what issues customers are facing and how they feel about it. With this data airlines can understand what the customers' expectations are".

Table 1
Summary of Analysis

Social Media	Issues	Solution
Facebook	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of posts and updates 2. Lack of promotional fares 3. The need to put people at the center of the attention 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Study your audience 2. Engage by replying to messages and enquiries promptly 3. Timely updates for urgent matters 4. Consider postings that is centered around people who are stakeholders of the airline 5. Design a page layout that is user friendly and transmits the corporate image
Instagram	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Instagram Stories feature is underutilized 2. Needs more postings centered around customers 	
Twitter	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Replies to customers enquiries often takes a long time 2. Not interesting 	
YouTube	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not enough content 2. Only utilized as a news sharing media 	

Source: Personal Documentation (2020)

The analysis shows that the active promotion activities through social media has a big influence in the formation of the expected company image. It can be concluded that promotional activities through Instagram at this time

are more effective in attracting an audience, so quality postings are needed in the future. It is expected that further quantitative and in-depth research on social media analysis can be carried out to improve corporate image

CONCLUSION

My analysis and opinions that can be drawn are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube as a type of social media has a huge power to improve corporate reputation. The use of social media as one of the strategies that Cathay Pacific uses as a means of communication can increase customer engagement. In other words, deeper research on social media can build a corporate image because this study has a broader understanding and scope. It is particularly important for organizations to explain and provide information to the public about company activities and news about the company's development transparently through social media in order to create a better corporate image and gain a new audience. This research concludes that the social media used by each company is especially important in shaping the positive corporate image expected by the company itself. It is hoped that in the future Cathay Pacific Airways can continue to create new and more innovative strategies to improve its corporate image in the eyes of the public. The consensus from respondents who provided comments and suggestions about social media accounts of Cathay Pacific Airways, is that further enhanced promotional activities that are more attractive is needed. These can help promote new destinations, ticketing offers, and other new developments. This will contribute towards building a good corporate image.

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