

Digital Marketing Initiatives and Its Effect on Follower Base: A Study of Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC)

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Abstract

The rapid rise in the number of Internet Users in India in the past decade has been a result of the Government push for internet reforms. With this penetration of internet to even the remotest areas of the country, the reach of products has also increased through internet based advertising. The penetration of internet fuelled by the advancements in Information Technology has brought a paradigm shift in the way marketing is done. Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Limited (IRCTC) is a Public Sector Enterprise under the Ministry of Railways, Govt. of India, set up in 1999 with an aim to modernize catering, ticketing and tourism business of the Indian Railways. The organization is arguably the only Public Sector Tourism & Travel organization having Pan-India presence.

Objective: To understand the effect of digital marketing initiatives of IRCTC and the change in the follower base of pre and post Covid-19.

Methods: The nature of the current study is descriptive. Secondary data were employed for the study's purposes. The IRCTC's web portal and different annual reports were used to collect data.

Findings: Despite being a public sector enterprise under the Ministry of Railways, Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Limited has been using digital marketing tools for a variety of purposes, including raising public awareness and promoting its travel packages and e-catering business. It has been noted that the internet platform was extremely important in improving the services provided by IRCTC.

Novelty: The researcher attempted to identify the usage pattern and change in follower base of the digital marketing initiatives of IRCTC. The study depicts that the follower base of IRCTC has witnessed major increase across all the digital marketing platforms. There is a technological shift witnessed among the follower base post Covid 19.

Keywords: IRCTC; Digital Marketing; Social Media; Travel & Tourism; Internet Ticketing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally marketing used to be the domain of a particular department in the organization. Over the years, as competition for capturing market share grew, organizations devised newer ways to reach out to their customers and marketing became an all pervasive component of organizations' activities. With increasing penetration of the internet, some of the products are turning digital such as entertainment through Over the Top (OTT) Channels, radio has taken the form of Podcasts, newspapers have gone digital, travel agencies have gone online. With the emerging scenario, where products are turning digital, marketing of these products also requires a digital push. Another important feature of internet based marketing is the level of interaction between all participants in the market which has increased manifold. Interactivity, as the main feature of the Internet, has enabled a new dimension of connection between all the participants in the market. The digital nature of the Internet technology provides a comprehensive and detailed insight into the characteristics of consumers and their behavior in the electronic environment. (Batinic, 2015). In today's age, where the consumers/customers want instant responses to their queries, this form of marketing is quite useful. The major advantage of digital marketing is that marketers can sell their products or services 24 hours and 365 days, lower cost, efficiency gain, to motivate the customer for more purchase and improve customer services. The scale of Internet Usage can be understood from the fact that in January 2021 there were 4.66 billion active internet users in the world. These comprise of 59.5% of the total global population. Out of these 4.66 billion users, 92.6% i.e. 4.32 billion use the internet through mobile devices. The number of internet users in the world are slated to grow at a rapid pace in the coming years. With 18.71 billion users in 2010, the number of users is expected to grow by 201% to 56.32 billion users in 2025 (J. Degenhard). Traditional marketing involves resorting to marketing campaigns based on historical evidences and then conducting market research to collect data and analyzing this data to study the effectiveness of the marketing campaigns. Digital marketing on the other hand, involves planning the target audience well in advance and conduct targeted marketing campaigns for the selected market only. The response is available on real time basis through several tools.

IRCTC is probably the only travel and tourism related Public Sector Enterprise in India having a very strong Digital Media presence. On social media, IRCTC offers various tourism products to its vast customer base. Such as:

- Air Ticketing
- Tour Packages
- Maharajas' Express Luxury Train
- Golden Chariot Luxury Train
- Buddhist Circuit Tourist Train
- E-Catering

IRCTC's official social media channels/handles on various networks are shown in the table below:

	Twitter	Facebook	Instagram	Telegram	Koo	YouTube
Tourism and Air Ticketing	@IRCTCOfficial	@IRCTCOfficial	@irctc.official	IRCTC Official	@irctcofficial	@IRCTCOfficial
Maharajas Express	@Maharajas_Exp	@MaharajasExpressIRCTC	@maharajas_express	--	--	@TheMaharajasexpress
Golden Chariot	@GoldenChariotIR	@goldenchariotofficial	@goldenchariotofficial	--	--	@Goldenchariotofficial
Buddhist Circuit Tourist Train	@buddhistrain	@buddhisttouristtrain	@buddhistcircuittrain	--	--	@irctcbuddhistcircuittouris9474
E-Catering	@eCateringIRCTC	@cateringIRCTC	@ecateringirctc	--	--	--

Source: Authors own illustration

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Digital Marketing is emerging as a preferred marketing tool for organizations across the world. A number of researchers have studied the various aspects of Digital Marketing, which have been studied to have a better understanding of the subject.

Kaur Gurmeet (2017) has studied the various modes of Digital Marketing, Characteristics of successful Digital Marketing Campaign with special reference to the Tourism Industry. The author has concluded that six points – quality website, Search Engine Optimisation, Email Marketing, Presence of Social Media, Content and Mobile Friendly pay a very crucial role in a business's digital success. **Gunmarekha B. S. & T A Binoy (2018)** in their paper have made an attempt to analyse how digital marketing is transforming tourism towards smart tourism ecosystems. The study focusses on how a comprehensive digital marketing strategy could allow tourism businesses to overcome the challenges and develop opportunities offered by technology. The paper suggests a Digital Transformation Model at 3 levels – Pre-Trip, During the Trip and Post-Trip which combine to create Tourism experience. The paper concludes that due to high penetration of digital media in the common man's life, there is a need for digital marketing companies to be part of the customer experience right from online search stage to feedback stage. **Purohit Kavita (2018)** in her paper has conducted extensive research on secondary data to understand the emerging trends of digital marketing with specific reference to tourism and travel industry including development of convenient booking engines, creating customized experiences etc. The author has studied characteristics of a successful digital marketing campaign. The author has concluded that digital information technologies will have increasing profound impact on tourism industry with user generated media such as bloggers, podcasts, live streams, reviews etc playing a pivotal role in overall experience creation and management. **Bala Madhu, Verma Deepak (2018)** have studied the current and future trends in marketing. The paper is based on existing literature and internet sources. The authors have mentioned that India is going through a radical change in the digital sphere and the customers of today are searching more on the internet to find the best deals. The exploratory research makes an attempt to answer various questions such as what are the successful techniques of digital marketing, comparison between traditional and digital marketing and whether companies prefer traditional marketing to digital marketing. The authors have concluded that digital marketing is slowly taking over traditional marketing because it can be better targeted, it is cost effective and it is available 24 x 7. **Sharma Uma, Thakur K S. (2020)** have studied the various tools of digital marketing with special reference to India. The authors have also studied the impact of Digital Marketing on Consumer Behaviour and have mentioned that today's consumers have become researchers. The authors have conducted a study based on Primary Data from 100 respondents and have established a connection between monthly income and goods bought by the consumers. The study also concludes that the consumers were happy with the products/services bought on the internet. **Mavis Chamboka, Tichawa Tembi M, (2021)** have made an attempt to systematically review the existing literature published in tourism related journals on digital marketing tools in tourism from 2015 to 2020. They have also discussed future trends in digital marketing in tourism. The paper has studied the various tools of digital marketing like SEO, SEM, Email Marketing etc and their impact on tourism related business. **Davies Gareth, Manuel Nimal, Mistry Dilip, Roth Andrew, (2021)** The paper presents pathways for ASEAN countries to recover from post pandemic decline in travel. Five strategies have been suggested in the paper – Marketing with an aim to enhance customer experience, Enable agile operating model for marketing & technology to work together, Move pragmatically towards a modern martech stack, Ensure responsible first party data management and Balance spend allocation across channels. The paper suggests three stack elements – Audience Management, Campaign Execution and Data & Analytics Performance to achieve this goal. **Greztel Ulrike (2022)** has conceptualised six smart functions for successful Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) for optimum long term competitiveness through digital medium. The paper presents a practical guidance for DMOs to implement destination governance. The six functions suggested by the author

are Mobilising, Match Making, Managing, Sensing, Shape Shifting and Stewardship. The author concludes that smart tourism development requires smart governance which can be adopted easily by DMOs because they already operate in the Public – Private Sphere and have know how of stakeholder management.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It is a systemic process for collecting and analyzing information to increase the understanding of the concerned phenomenon. The aim of the research is to find out the hidden and undiscovered truth. So, the objectives of this research paper are:

- To study the effect of digital marketing on IRCTC.
- To study the effect of covid-19 on follower base of IRCTC.

3.1 Research Design: The present study is descriptive in nature. For the study purpose secondary data was used. Data is collected through various annual reports and web portal of the IRCTC.

4. RESULT & DISCUSSION:

Table 1.1: Inception of Social Media Channels of IRCTC

Services	Twitter	Facebook	Instagram	Telegram	Koo	YouTube
Tourism and Air Ticketing	May 2010	May 2011	Nov. 2017	Jan. 2021	Feb. 2021	Feb 2019
Maharajas' Express	June 2013	Jan. 2012	June 2015	--	--	March 2014
Golden Chariot	Nov. 2019	Nov. 2019	Nov. 2019	--	--	Nov. 2019
Buddhist Circuit Tourist Train	March 2018	June 2011	April 2018	--	--	Feb. 2019
E-Catering	Feb. 2017	Feb. 2017	Sept. 2017	--	--	--

Source: Annual Report of IRCTC

It has been observed from the table 1.1 that IRCTC has started working on Digital Platforms in 2010 when it set up the official account on Twitter with tourism and air ticketing. Eventually, it introduced itself on other social media platforms with other services offered by IRCTC.

IRCTC has also opened its account on the Koo App, which is an Indian app launched in March 2020 with tourism and air ticketing.

Table 1.2 IRCTC's various Social Media follower's base

	IRCTC Tourism	Maharajas' Express	Golden Chariot	Buddhist Circuit Tourist Train	e-Catering
Facebook	2,86,228	91,329	11,058	3,22,942	1,71,369
Twitter	6,11,000	8,610	919	3,263	29,738
Instagram	4,64,000	7,355	2,188	2,975	7,121
YouTube	3,04,862	5,300	445	686	--
Koo	93,300	--	--	--	--
LinkedIn	6,088	--	--	--	--
Telegram	5,895	--	--	--	--

Source: Annual Report of IRCTC

It is evident from table1.2 that IRCTC tourism has been used by all the social media channels whereas, Maharaja Express, Golden Chariot, Buddhist circuit tourist train and e-catering is not used by Koo, LinkedIn and Telegram users. There is a considerable number in the follower's base of these websites regarding the various services provided by IRCTC.

Table 1.3 IRCTC's Follower Base on Facebook

Facebook	Sept-20	Sept -21	Sept -22
IRCTC Tourism	266341	270816	286228
Maharajas' Express	92589	90948	91329
Golden Chariot	11248	11214	11058
Buddhist Circuit Tourist Train	33870	33424	32942
E-Catering	179083	174208	171369

Source: Annual Reports of IRCTC

Table 1.3 depicts the IRCTC follower's base on Facebook. It has been observed that IRCTC Tourism has majority followers and there is a constant increase in these followers followed by e-catering, Maharaja express, Buddhist circuit tourist train and Golden chariot. On the basis of above data it can be concluded that the initiative of promoting IRCTC products on Facebook has turned into a profitable decision.

Table 1.4: IRCTC's Follower Base on Twitter

Twitter	Sept-20	Sept -21	Sept -22
IRCTC Tourism	226813	511000	611000
Maharajas' Express	7303	8188	8610
Golden Chariot	161	797	919
Buddhist Circuit Tourist Train	3408	3340	3263
E-Catering	18970	28020	29738

Source: Annual Reports of IRCTC

Table 1.4 depicts the IRCTC follower's base on Twitter. It has been observed that IRCTC Tourism has majority followers and there is a constant increase in the follower's followed by e-catering, Maharaja express, and Golden chariot. But in case of Buddhist circuit tourist there has been slight decrease in the follower base. In nutshell, it can be concluded that twitter is proved a lucrative platform for IRCTC.

Table 1.5: IRCTC's Follower's Base on Instagram

Instagram	Sept-20	Sept -21	Sept -22
IRCTC Tourism	197000	451000	464000
Maharajas' Express	3683	5342	7355
Golden Chariot	444	1243	2188
Buddhist Circuit Tourist Train	1014	1982	2975
E-Catering	2397	5600	7121

Source: Annual Report of IRCTC

Table 1.5 depicts the IRCTC follower's base on Instagram. It has been observed that IRCTC Tourism has majority followers and there is a constant increase in these followers followed by Maharaja express, e-catering, and Golden chariot. But in case of Buddhist circuit tourist train there has been slight decrease in the follower base. It can be concluded that Instagram also has proved a money-spinning platform for IRCTC.

Table 1.6: IRCTC's Follower's Base on YouTube

YouTube	Sept-20	Sept -21	Sept -22
IRCTC Tourism	1040	3360	304862
Maharajas' Express	3750	3980	5300
Golden Chariot	12	70	445
Buddhist Circuit Tourist Train	86	106	686

Source: Annual Report of IRCTC

Table 1.6 depicts the IRCTC follower's base on YouTube. It has been observed that IRCTC Tourism has majority followers and there is a constant increase in these followers followed by Maharaja Express, Buddhist circuit tourist train and Golden chariot. It can be observed from the table that Golden Chariot has a sudden increase in the follower base. It can be concluded that YouTube has also proved an attractive platform for IRCTC as per the number of followers are concerned.

4.1 Change in the follower base of various digital marketing channels of IRCTC

During the study it came to light that Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Limited, though being Public Sector Enterprise under the Ministry of Railways, Govt. of India has been utilizing Digital Marketing Tools for various purposes including public awareness and product promotions for its tourism packages and e-catering business. The organization has a separate department dedicated to carrying out digital marketing activities. It has been observed that during the pandemic, the growth on digital marketing platforms grew manifold.

The organization has been doing Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Social Media Marketing (SMM) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM), Emailers, Push Notifications etc. for its various products and services. There is steady growth in the follower base of IRCTC's various Digital Media Channels. During this period, IRCTC has also added Koo accounts.

In order to constantly engage with its followers, IRCTC took several initiatives such as creating nature's music videos – rain sounds, wind sounds etc. Another initiative of IRCTC which gained popularity was a *COVID Safe Travel– The New Normal* e-book which was circulated to all registered users and also put up on various website of IRCTC. When the restrictions were slowly lifted, engagements were created through Question & Answer Posts like “What’s on your travel list?” etc.

Table 1.7: Follower Base of IRCTC Official Account on different Channels

Platforms	Sept-19	Sept-20	Sept -21	Sept -22
Facebook	244900	266341	270816	286228
Twitter	168121	226813	511000	611000
Instagram	81900	197000	451000	464000
YouTube	392	1040	3360	304862

Source: Annual Report of IRCTC

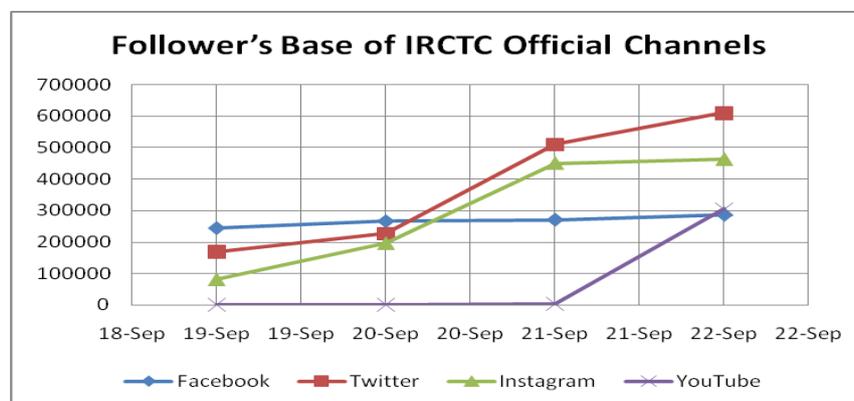


Fig: 1.1 Follower Base of IRCTC Official Channels

Table 1.7 and figure 1.1 depict the follower base of IRCTC official Account on different social media platforms. Pre and post Covid-19 pandemic the followers on different social media channels have shown incremental growth indicating the digital marketing push by IRCTC during this period. The values in the table depict the digital marketing expansion of the organization. The constant growth in follower base is indicative of the concerted efforts of the organization in promoting its products through the digital medium. Another aspect which is highlighted is the User Engagement by the organization. The continually increasing user/follower base indicates that the users look forward to meaningful information from the organization's social media pages/channels and the users/followers rely on the information provided by the organization on its social media channels.

5. CONCLUSION

The world of marketing, which was making a continuous shift from the physical to the digital world, made rapid strides towards innovative digital marketing strategies during the last two years of the pandemic, during which physical interactions were restricted across the globe. On the basis of the study it can be concluded that Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Limited, though being Public Sector Enterprise under the Ministry of Railways, Govt. of India has been utilizing Digital Marketing Tools for various purposes including public awareness and product promotions for its tourism packages and e-catering business. It has been observed that the online platform played a vital role in the upliftment of the services offered by IRCTC. During the pandemic, there is steady growth in the follower base of IRCTC's various Digital Media Channels. The pandemic can be termed as a catalyst towards growth of digital marketing. Thus, it can be concluded that the Digital Marketing Platforms used by the organization is heading in the right direction and contributing to the overall growth of the organization.

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