The Diversification of E- Services in Tourism Marketing – Case of Albania

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Abstract

The hospitality industry provides twenty-four hour service all year long for the interested people, just like the Internet which is always online. This immediate information that the Internet presents to the potential customers and the opportunity to have a better viewpoint of the service they are going to buy, prepare them for the experience they are going to live. Ideas on website quality may differ, but there is also a great deal of common ground so there is a need for further research by the marketing experts. Therefore, it is very important for tourism businesses and other organizations, either from private, or from public sector, to understand the customer needs that are amenable to fulfillment in an online environment and strive to meet them. Some questions that can be raised are: What makes a destination website an effective marketing tool? How can success be measured? What is a successful website? How can quality and effectiveness be evaluated? The purpose of this paper is to address these questions using a literature review methodology, as well as a content analysis of some of the Albanian touristic websites. Seeing the growing role of websites as a customer contact point and virtual company office, tourism businesses are realizing the strategic importance of a website as a marketing tool for addressing consumers in electronic business environment.

Keywords: Tourism, Marketing, Website, ICT.

1. Introduction.

Since the consumer access to the Internet was first available through Web browsers serving home PC-s, the speed of development has been remarkable. If it is still too soon to be certain to what extent the Internet will dominate tourism marketing, it is at least clear that its impact will be a major influence on nearly every aspect of services marketing.

A tourism web-site designed appropriately can facilitate a traveler helping to ensure they are making the right choice and have an enjoyable experience. This is the main goal of tourism costumers.

The internet network operates as a global marketplace accessible to the general public twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It is a marketplace based entirely on information provision and exchange transactions in which detailed information, for example on prices and availability, is changing every few seconds. The convergence and connectivity now available through ICT appears to signal one of the historic 'discontinuities' in the way business is conducted that provide massive growth opportunities for the proactive and overwhelm those too slow to adapt. Because of the fact that tourism is an information industry and customer decisions are highly price-sensitive, it has become one of the natural lead industries on the Internet (Middleton and Clarke, 2001).

This paper intends to present the importance of tourism websites as marketing instruments which can communicate that what kind of products/services tourism enterprises offer and which are the benefits of these products. However, the information communicated must be accurate.

As Web-based marketing strategies have become more widely adopted and pressure on tourism businesses to account for investments in their Web sites has increased, interest in the evaluation of Web sites has grown.

Also, in this paper will be given some information and figures about the development of e- marketing of tourism enterprises in Albania.

2. Literature Review

All market research reports show that there has been rapid growth in both the number of Internet users who visit travel and tourism websites and the levels of travel-related spending online. While these numbers are being monitored by various organizations, the precise needs and preferences of Internet users world-wide are rarely taken into account (UNWTO, 2005).

To become more understandable the need for integrating new web technologies in the tourism services, firstly we should understand the profile of the modern consumer-traveler. Some of them are as follows (Ortiz et.al, 2001) :

1. Wants quality services.

2. Prefers more specific offers

3. Requests more information on both the product itself and generally about the destination and other additional services

4. It has been more critical and more aware

5. Performs more but shorter trips (mainly due to working obligations)

6. Decides slowly and usually last minute, which reduces the time between bookings etc. use online booking and therefore requires a quick response by the business to his wishes.

7. Constantly is moving, thus increasing the level of importance of using mobile technology to meet the needs of any time in any place.

There are different factors that influence the quality of a website. Ideas on website quality may differ, but there is also a great deal of common ground. Usability and trustworthiness, for instance, are recurring concepts and it is helpful to see which aspects are considered to make a website user-friendly and to inspire the user's confidence.

2.1 The AIDA Concept

The appearance and information structure in an attractive tourism site should correspond with the so –called AIDA concept often used in marketing:

• Attention

On the homepage the user expects an overview (navigation structure, site maps), attractive A photo, special offers, logos, etc., which emphasize the uniqueness of the region (unique selling points), and ways of communicating with the organization (colophon, contact button).

• Interest

Attractive descriptions of the region or city and practical tips are expected (weather, travel information, etc.). The more extensive the impression the potential guest gets of this destination, the better. It whets the user's appetite and increases the interest to visit the destination. The site should contain descriptions of nature and historical and cultural attractions. Photos and, possibly, sounds should be featured, as well as information on accommodation and travel within the region, with maps and route planners.

• Desire

The desire to travel to the region is stimulated through an attractive description of the things to do and see. Information on accommodations is also included in this section.

• Action

Stands for interaction and booking possibilities. Ideally, the desire to travel results in a reservation. Communication and the contact possibilities should be optimal. Possibilities to search by availability, online reservation possibilities, secure payment, etc., should be provided (UNWTO, 2005).

2.2 The Internet Search Engines

Hundreds of millions is actually the number of websites, whereas thousands of new pages are being added daily. For a casual user, without using a suitable auxiliary, software tool, to search for information on the Internet about a topic that interests them, the prospects of success of the effort is quite minimal: the user for hours wandering aimlessly in the Internet, and many related sites remain unexplored. On the other hand, his search would be easier by using a software tool, that will be effected the search throughout the Internet and would find all the search results, requiring by the user only to enter the subject that interests him with the greatest possible accuracy. Such tools are the Search Engines. In the tourism industry, such as the accommodation one, studies have shown that if the site of the hotel business is not located within the results of the first three pages of a search engine, they will likely not be in all these results. Additionally, users tend to look only sites whose links appear in these first pages of search results (Callahan, 2002). This is extremely important for a hotel company, considering that the entire advertising campaign to promote the business on the internet can be based solely on impressions of the website in search engine results.

Moreover, it is useful to be improved the HTML code page, and to be mentioned for example, more keywords in the headers. Also, most search engines still have difficulties in indexing dynamic pages and multimedia elements. For this reason, should be avoided from a website of business information such as:

- Text in graphics
- Pages that require registration (registration), cookies or passwords
- XML
- Java applets
- Adobe Acrobat (PDF) files- Google has no problem with the indexing of these
- Dynamic content (URLs with "?" in them)- Google, AltaVista, FAST and Inktomi have no problem with these indexing
- Multimedia files (Flash, Shockwave, streaming video etc)

Apart from the improvement in form and structure of the sites described above and aimed at attracting more users-clients, improving the position of a business website in the results list returned by a search engine for a particular issue, can be done with a number of other ways and methods. One of them is trying to increase the number of links found on other pages, but showing the website of the company.

In this way can be achieved a better position in the page of search engine listings, as the engine sees it as "valid" source for a particular issue and a number of related (or not) with the theme pages showing it.

2.3 How a website can be successful?

Usually there are three main parameters that make a website attractive or not.

The quality and type of content (richness)

The ease of access to content (reach)

The interaction and user satisfaction (affiliation)

The company must display the name of the product and the site and organize the content that is attractive and meets the purposes of its existence. Particularly in terms of content, it is important to design a site that meets the requirements of internet users. A web-site that intend to create interest and pass an advertisement may have just a good introductory (possibly made in flash) presentation and basic interaction. But it cannot bring a continuous searching. Instead, if the site meets a need that characterizes users and stakeholders of the product, if for those people actually gives useful information and services, then the company shows that it really cares about the public and consumers, and that does not sacrifice their time simply to advertise some services or products.

2.4. The online booking systems of accommodation units.

It is a software that allows small or large hotels to make online booking through internet 24 hours/day, 7 days a week. In addition, enables to handle the reservations wherever the owners want such as: At home, office, reception or from all these points simultaneously.

2.4.1 How does the hotel booking functions?

The customer declares the days of arrival - departure, the number of people who will stay overnight and if they want half board or full board or bed and breakfast, in case of them. With those elements in relation to the arrangements made for the various costs through the server, is calculated the cost of accommodation both with the meals that are mentioned. If the customer agrees to the charge and wants to go further, he/she complete a booking form with the respective data and sends it to the server. The server notifies by e-mail that there is a demand for reservation in the site and the operator check the availability of the rooms. If the operator accepts the booking complements in advance, he supplement the amount of the prepayment by the client who is notified by mail that the book was accepted and advise on how the advance payment should be made and the deadlines that are required for those payments.

In addition to this there are some options that can be configures according to the owners requirements, such as:

1. Room prices per item and per period
2. The operation period (high, medium, low, etc)
3. How many rooms are available per room type.
4. The highest booking period
5. The maximum number of days per booking
6. Charge or not for infants and children and their age
7. Separated charge or embed breakfast on room rates

2.5. Tourism websites in Albania.

In Albania during the last five years the Internet use has spread dramatically, recording a higher increase in the number of home users, but particularly those for business purposes in the wider sector of the tourism services. Although the number of Internet users is growing continuously, and its cost, thanks to the high competition is decreasing, the quality of the websites of tourism enterprises is generally not at the right level in terms of options involved, especially the online bookings, online payments etc.

According to a survey conducted by GOPA Consultants, GIZ and ATA on the needs of IT utilization in the tourism sector in Albania", some of the results are:

1. From the 92 tourism enterprises which took part in the survey, 67% of them had Internet presence.

- Presentation of company and offers' was the most common function in homepage. In general, companies have a good use of computer and Internet for main (simple) applications.

- Internet presence and use of the web to perform a wide range of activities is not so high.

- 31% of the companies declared they would like to build a new homepage or to have assistance to improve the functions of their existing ones;

- Regarding travel agencies, flight reservation, travel package and hotel reservation are the most common functions performed by software solutions. 80% of the companies said they use an integrated solution to perform related functions (Traeger, 2010).

4. Conclusions

The e-marketing in the tourism sector, as a key marketing tool, could be considered as a main driving force for a successful bussines activity, but also for the image of the country in general. Sometimes tourism websites, make the tourist to decide if he/she will visit or not a destination.

The frequency and convenience of the Internet by any user led large tourism enterprises to promote a large percentage of the image via the Internet.

The tourism enterprises in Albania should invest more in promoting their online activity, because due to every day life dynamics, fatigue and the lack of free time, people are more directed to the exploration of information through the Internet..

Nowadays except for PC-s or notebooks there are a lot of other electronic devices such as, the mobile phones, Kindle books which could access the internet network. This fact makes us think that the Internet is getting everywhere.

The websites of tourism enterprises must be updated and enriched continuously and not to remain with the past information as it actually reduces the seriousness of the tourism enterprise.

In Albania should be established a secure platform between the tourism enterprises and the banks, in order to include payments online through the websites. This is an obstacle especially to a category of international tourists.

Tourism enterprises in Albania should make a benchmarking with the respective enterprises of the countries of the region, in order to improve their online marketing.

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