Tourism

The Websites of National Tourism Organisations – A Challenge of E-Marketing

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Abstract

Nowadays tourists from all over the world get information about the destination they plan to visit through the internet web pages. National Tourism Organizations (NTO-s)/ Agencies are the official organizations which have as main responsibility the tourism marketing in national level.

There are a lot of marketing activities, which are used by the NTO-s such as the promotional leaflets/brochures, Tourism Fairs, Advertising, Study tours with foreign journalists or tour operators in their countries etc., but one of the most important form of promoting the tourism resources is the e-marketing, particularly the official websites of NTO-s and some other online technologies.

The main goal of this paper is to analyze the quality and effects that six NTO-s websites from the Balkans region have, based mainly on the image technology and functionality elements, and the way that this quality influences the visitor's decisions. The features that are launched in an NTO-s website create an interesting and trustworthy online experience because of the official status as well. More creative and well-designed websites may effectively increase their value and thus may attract more tourists.

Introduction

The tourism industry, as one of the factors contributing to globalization, has become more competitive than ever before due to the development of information technology. The improvement of internet access globally has increased the competitiveness of tourism markets, resulting in the promotion of different destinations with distinct identities, in order to position themselves competitively (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

The Internet enables online travelers to receive the real-time updated and unlimited travel information before travelling abroad, and ultimately influence their decision about which of destination to visit (Kao, Louvieris, Powell-Perry, & Buhalis, 2005).

When creating a website for the global tourism market and media, it is important to take into consideration that inequalities still exist in cyberspace on both the user and developer sides. Some countries are already a step ahead in web development while others still do not have a tourism promotional site (WTO, 2002). Since the emergence of the Internet, travel planning (e.g. travel information search and booking) has always been one of the main reasons that people use the Internet (Buhalis & Jun, 2011).

NTOs are the most powerful travel promoters for destinations because the scopes of their marketing efforts are at the national level (Mill & Morrison, 1998; So & Morrison, 2004). The activities developed by National Tourism Organizations can be divided into two types: tourist information and tourist promotion. Tourist information is deemed a traditional and passive way to distribute information of destinations to potential tourists.

Tourist promotion plays a much more active and aggressive role in attracting potential tourists by using consumer-oriented concepts and marketing strategies (Kosters, 1994; So, & Morrison, 2004).

Tourism products cannot be tested or controlled before actual visit, thus the decision-making and consumption are divided by time and space so that information available in advance plays an important role in overcoming the distances between these two.

This paper aims to explore how the tourism websites can become more attractive using the image and graphical quality and options as well the modules and functionalities that are mentioned in 6 official tourism websites from 6 countries of the Balkans region, respectively (Albania, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia and Greece). Also it aims to show how the website content of NTO-s is used for marketing purposes in order to attract the costumers from all around the world.

Research questions of this paper derive from its aim:
1. What is a successful website?
2. Which are the key elements that make an official tourism website attractive?
3. How can the destination websites be effective marketing tools?
4. How can quality be evaluated?

Literature review

2.1 Rapid Growth in the Use of the Internet

In 2013, over 2.7 billion people are using the Internet, which corresponds to 39% of the world's population. Europe is the region with the highest Internet penetration rate in the world (75%), followed by the United States (61%). Mobile-broadband subscriptions have climbed from 268 million in 2007 to 2.1 billion in 2013. This reflects an average annual growth rate of 40%, making mobile broadband the most dynamic ICT market (ITU, 2013).

2.1.1 The Internet as a Major and Trusted Source of Travel Information

Generally, in all major markets worldwide, web search is now more important than personal recommendation (GMI, 2005). Other research confirms the domination of the internet as a source of information. For example, in Europe, the internet is the most important information source, although the travel trade is still very important in terms of travel sales (IPK, 2006).

According to Flash Barometer "Attitudes of Europeans towards tourism" (2013), from the surveys that are made in the countries of European Union about the sources of information they considered to be most important when making decisions about their travel plans, it was concluded that:
- About 46% say Internet websites, whereas 5% using internet through social media sites (5%).
- The Internet remain the most common way to arrange holidays, with 53% using it for this reason in 2012 (Flash Eurobarometer, 2013).

- The overall structure of the industry has been transformed since Internet has been the essential communication tool for the industry.

Shanker (2008) has found several new developments:

1. Direct selling to the customer has increased

2. Increase in new intermediaries, such as Internet portals that are specialized in selling tourism products.

3. Customers have access to the distribution channels traditionally used by tour operators through Internet.

4. Companies can regularly alter products and services based on the needs and expectations of clients through regular interaction through Internet.

2.2 The role of National Tourism Organizations.

The main activities of an NTO in general, are the tourism promotion of the destination mainly in national level, to create and communicate images and messages from a destination to prospective visitors, mainly through tourism fairs, advertising, public relations and printing materials (brochures, leaflets etc.), study tours with journalists/foreign tour operators, etc. In some cases they deal with the development of tourism product in different areas of their destination.

Essentially, the role of a NTO in the marketing of the country as a touristic destination is to attract visitors foreign/domestic, through the main forms of promotion mix, increasing the awareness of tourists, influence their decisions and implementing different marketing strategies which can improve the image of the destination.

Also, according to Chandra & Menezes (2001) some other NTO tasks might be to research the emerging markets, to develop the market intelligence, to forecast demand, to identify markets and segments having the best potential, to provide destination information to interested parties, to monitor tourist / visitor satisfaction etc. Some NTO- s, like that of Great Britain, France, Greece etc., have established their branches abroad, mainly in the potential markets aiming at making a direct marketing, influencing better in the decision-making process of the costumers. NTO-s should choose the appropriate communication messages, images, symbols etc., in order to identify and position the mark of their country towards the potential future visitors.

Usually the NTO-s status is semi-public or public agencies. In the first case there is a partnership between the private sector and the government, so the organization has more power and resources.

It is important to point out that the NTO representatives should be consulted with the private sector stakeholders for the brand strategy or the website content in order to be more realistic and attractive for the foreign markets. In fact, the private sector through the different tourism activities that it provides, is in direct contact with the costumer, understand better his/her needs and can hear the complaints; they can understand better than people who are working in the NTO what the costumers want and how the services should be provided. So, they play a crucial role in the national marketing campaigns of a destination.

Inter-organizational cooperation in destination marketing is very important. The importance results from the necessity of being able to align the NTO's destination promotion promises with the delivery of the tourism product by the numerous industry suppliers. Destination marketing cooperation was also seen as important in order to make more effective use of each organization's limited resources (Bat Seth, 2008).

2.3 The evaluation of tourism websites and e-marketing.

E-marketing and ICT tools have facilitated business transactions in the industry by connecting trading partners, distribution of product services and providing information to consumers across the globe. Nowadays, consumers are using more and more the online information in order to plan their vacations and travel. Information is the key element in the tourism industry (Shanker, 2008).

According to Werthner and Klein (1999), Internet consumers are looking for more specialized information and ask for better services. NTO-s must now be concerned and put an effort to ensure that the destinations provide a total high quality visitor experience. Furthermore, many countries through NTO-s are making studies about online satisfaction because of the fact that sometimes an NTO website which has problems in using the features that it contains, may cause frustrations and discourage the travelers from visiting the destination.

Kim and Lim (2001) stated that the more consumers consider information quality an important factor, the higher the probability that they intend to buy the product.

The impact of the website should be considered very carefully. The tourism sites usually are cost effective and make possible a very quick access to the foreign markets everywhere. But the most important aspect of a website is the homepage which is the first view of the website, so it must attract the customers to move into the website and to search more information within it. Some researchers think that the homepages provide the overall impression of the site. Both committed and uncommitted customers are influenced by the image conveyed by the creative design of the homepage, and ease of navigation the most effective homepages are not necessarily those with the most features, rather those that have a range of complementary features that provide enough information to enable a broad understand of the contents of the entire site. Of equal importance is the home page's capability of conveying a positive image of the destination (Sirisuthikul, 2006).

Most tourism website evaluation research focuses on measuring website information and process, value added, relationship, trust and design, and usability aspects (Hashim, Murphy & Law, 2007).

However, it is difficult to unite all instruments to form a single standard for website evaluation. Still, the numerical computation approach appears to be promising as it is measurable, repeatable, and can likely be used to form a long-term strategy (Morrison, Taylor, & Douglas, 2004).

Lu and Young (1998), who were pioneers in the field, proposed a framework for evaluating website performance, in which the usefulness of a website is estimated based on its functionality and usability.

According to a study of World Tourism Organization (2005) about evaluation process and the quality criteria and key success factors for destination Websites, there are two models, respectively:

• The AIDA concept;

• 2QCV3Q Meta Model

Also some of the quality criteria are that a tourism website could be evaluated based on: accessibility and readability, search engine optimization, technical performance, identity and trust, customization and interactivity etc.

The **AIDA** Concept is consisted from 4 elements, respectively:

- **Attention**. Usually, in the homepage of an NTO-s site the expectations of the user are to see interesting site maps, beautiful photos, multimedia elements, attractive logos and slogans etc.
- **Interest**. It is important to have attractive descriptions of the tourism destination or practical information such as weather forecast, route planner, interactive maps, descriptions for the culture, archeology nature etc through images or videos etc.
- **Desire.** Providing interesting content and images to in the website should be increase the desire for visiting the destination in the future
- **Action.** The tourism websites should have booking and reservation options in order to facilitate the costumers and to provide it with more value.

The **2QCV3Q** Meta Model (in Latin V stands for U), has been used evaluate the websites of regional tourist boards in the Alps and was conceptualized from the university of Trento. This model raise some questions such as:

- Identity- The website should be trusted by the costumers.
- Content - Content is evaluated in terms of information and suggestions for the tourists.
- Services- Criteria related to this question evaluate the functions offered by the site;
- Location- This criteria concerns the visibility of a site and, everything that contributes to its accessibility
- Management- Criteria in this category address, among other things, the maintenance of the site;
- Usability-This characteristic concerns all the aspects that enable relatively undemanding use of the site in terms of cost, time or cognitive.

Also some other researchers like O'Connor (2004) used the method of content analysis to identify the best approach to design a quality website between presentation and usability. Although no clear winner could be identified, the studies did indicate that photos on travel Websites helped potential travelers in making purchasing decisions. The study also revealed that a combination of text and picture was more effective at selling the tourism product than text content only.

Methodology

In this study are analyzed 6 websites from countries of Balkans region, respectively Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Greece. The evaluation criteria for the quality of websites is the imaged-based technology, (see Table 1) which is used in the homepages of NTO-S websites and the website requirements modules and functionalities, (see table 2). The criteria's that are selected from the two categories will be measured through a quantitative method after the analyses of the website's homepages.

The official websites are analyzed during July 2013. Also the evaluation process also is based on the AIDA concept focused mainly in the first element Attention, in the the the **2QCV3Q** Meta Model with the criteria of Services that are offered in the websites or functionalities that it has, as well as in different studies and researches such as the conclusion of O'Connor (2004) mentioned above or Chang (2006) who has make a research of Image-Technology Inventory of National Tourism Organizations in 25 countries of the world. The official NTO-s of the 6 countries selected and their websites are as follows:

Albania-National Tourism Agency- www.albaniantourism.com

Bulgaria-The National Tourist Council - www.bulgariatravel.org

Croatia-Croatian National Tourist Board - www.croatia.hr

Montenegro-National Tourism Organization of Montenegro - www.montenegro.travel

Macedonia-National Agency for Tourism Promotion and Support www.exploringmacedonia.com

Greece - Greek National Tourism Organization - www.visitgreece.gr

Results and Discussion

Table 1.

Imaged – based technology evaluation criteria's

Criteria	Albania	Bulgaria	Croatia	Montenegro	Macedonia	Greece
Photo/picture	3	3	5	14	6	6
Graphic	0	13	6	13	8	28
Video	0	1	1	0	3	1
Audio	0	2	0	0	1	0
Animation	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**3**	**18**	**12**	**27**	**18**	**34**

Table 2.

Modules and functionalities evaluation criteria

Criteria	Albania	Bulgaria	Croatia	Montenegro	Macedonia	Greece
Slideshow module	1	1	3	1	1	1
Interactive map	0	1	1	1	0	1
Event calendar	0	1	1	1	1	1

Social media integration	0	5	6	2	4	8
Multilingual options	2	9	16	4	1	2
Mobile site version	0	0	0	0	1	0
Total	**3**	**17**	**27**	**9**	**7**	**15**

None of the websites had all the criteria's that were selected to evaluate the website quality. The country with the highest number of the elements (images & functionalities) is Greece with 49 units in total, followed by Croatia with 39 units in total.

Regarding the modules and functionalities of the websites the highest number of the elements corresponds to Croatia with 27 units in total, where the high number of languages dominates, in which the content of the website could be read, whereas Greece dominates with the number of graphic (icon/banners) with 28 units.

One of the results that was found was that only Macedonia had a website mobile version, but in fact it has not other important elements such as interactive map, multilingual options etc. Finally, regardless the highest number of selected criteria units of Greece in the image-based technology category, which of course is very important to bring the attention of the website's visitors, the website of Croatia is more qualitative due to the fact that there are 16 languages that are mentioned in the "languages" menu. This fact makes possible for many people from all over the world to read in their own language the content of the website apart from the other features of the website which are interesting as well.

Conclusions

The official tourism websites of NTO-s have a great impact in the decision –making process of the visitors for visiting a country because the official status that they have create more trust to particularly to the foreign markets. The conceptualization and designation of a NTO-s website should be under a consultation process with different stakeholders from the private sector, because they usually understand better the market needs and wants and interact directly with the tourists.

Customers are very much influenced by the image conveyed, by the creative design of the website's homepage, and ease of navigation: the most effective homepages are not necessarily those with the most features, rather those that have a range of complementary features that provide enough information to enable a broad understand of the contents of the entire site.

Generally, images on travel Websites help potential travelers in making purchasing decisions. Some studies also revealed that a combination of text and picture was more effective at selling the tourism product than text content only.

Image based technology combined with the necessary modules and the functionalities in the homepage of the NTO-s website increase the its quality, which brings directly the attention of the costumers and raise their motivations for visiting a tourism destination.

The website of NTO's are a very important part of e- marketing strategies because they deliver many information, to a wide audience with a relatively low cost, comparing to the traditional methods of marketing.

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