

IMPORTANCE OF DMO WEBSITES IN TOURIST DESTINATION SELECTION

Scientific paper

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Abstract

Destination management organizations (DMOs) play a vital role in promoting tourism in the country, region or town to tourists, tour operators and intermediaries, which is especially beneficial in a highly competitive tourism market. According to the information provided, DMOs create a destination image and affect the destination market positioning. In the time of computerization, the emergence of the internet has significantly changed the process of communication, and so it becomes the main communication channel through which DMOs inform tourists and partners.

Consumer behaviour studies show that consumers gather information from various sources, both internal and external and that websites are a valuable source of information for tourists when planning their trips. At various stages of planning a trip tourists are looking for different types of information. Therefore, the object of this research is to examine the importance of certain information posted on the DMO websites as well as other website attributes in the process of gathering information in order to select a destination for travel or vacation. Furthermore, the importance of different website attributes is examined.

The field research results show that respondents consider information on destination offering, destination description, booking possibilities and other marketing information to be the most important. Conversely, website functionality is not of great importance in the early phase of trip planning process.

Keywords Consumer behaviour in tourism, Destination management organization (DMO), Website, Croatia

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of tourism for the economies of a great number of countries is indisputable. At the global level, the growth rates of tourism are increasing, thus contributing to the economic development of many countries. In the face of global competition, it is important for the providers of the tourism product and for tourism destinations to understand how consumers behave when choosing a destination for vacation and travel. In many countries, the promotion of the destination and creating its image is in charge of destination management organization (DMO).

Results of the previous studies indicate that the information provided to tourists when planning a trip is a crucial factor for choosing a destination. Special attention should be given to the fact that "decisions made by tourists prior to departure are likely to limit the choice of alternative purchases later in the vacation (Hyde, 2008)." Since it is common today for tourists to search for information about destinations on the Internet, it can be concluded that it is particularly important to provide information whose content suits the needs of tourists at different stages of planning a trip.

Internet marketing in tourism is becoming important because it is not only an effective tool but also has many advantages such as accessibility, convenience, interactive communication, and no limited service in time (Kim et al., 2009). According to Dunne Flanagan and Buckley (2011) "The Internet represents the ultimate decision-making tool for the cash rich, time poor, modern traveller." Web marketing is a critical and efficient tool for DMOs to market their destination and reduce the costs for marketing (Kim et al., 2009). Therefore, considerable attention should be paid to the design and content of the DMOs website. Thus, the main objective of this research is to establish the importance of various types of information, posted on the DMO websites, in the information collection phase of selecting a travel and vacation destination. To accomplish the objective of the study, desk and field research has been conducted and the results presented in this paper.

The paper is organized in three parts. The following section is a review of the literature dealing with destination marketing and the role of DMOs as well as consumer behaviour research regarding the importance of the information on DMOs websites for destination selection. The subsequent section lays out the methodology of the research and the results it has produced. The last section discusses the main conclusions and implications.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Destination marketing

The modern tourism market is characterised by numerous new trends and rapid change, especially on the side of tourism demand. Changes refer to changes in travel motivation as well as changes in satisfying tourist needs. To satisfy their needs, in addition to the products and services supplied by different tourism offering providers in a destination, tourists also make use of a variety of goods and benefits that are a component part of a destination's tourism product. A destination's tourism product is made up of the following elements (Berc Radišić, 2009, p. 55): natural attractions, special anthropogenic features, interesting current events, tourist receiving facilities and tourism culture. Obviously, tourist destinations capable of attracting more potential tourists are destinations whose tourism products have made them distinctive on the tourism market. They possess a tourism product that is differentiated and distinctive from that of the competition and is able to provide tourists with a unique experience during their stay in the destination. Hence, to perform well on the tourism market, it is vital for a destination to take a proactive approach to destination marketing and to keep abreast of new trends in marketing. Modern marketing trends primarily refer to (WTO 2007, p. 55):

- consumers who are seeking advice from other consumers through the Internet (e.g. blogs);
- new common interest groups and social networking sites which are a main resource for orientation of knowledge (e.g. TripAdvisor);
- the Internet which will drive future developments in tourism product distribution;

- changes in Information Communication Technology (ICT) which will include advances in areas of mobile phones and digital TV and development of new electronic payment systems;
- marketing messages based on experiences and feelings which will have greater importance in travel decisions;
- unique selling propositions (USPs) which will become more important and will need to be expanded into unique experiential selling propositions (UESPs).

Destination management organizations (DMOs) play a central role in promoting tourism in the country, region or town. Thus, Elbe, Hallén and Axelsson (2009) underline: "A main function of destination management organisations (DMOs) is that of being responsible for marketing their destinations." In many countries the general organization of DMOs consists of a national tourist office and tourist offices on the regional and local level. Because of the role and importance they have in marketing a destination's tourism product, DMOs should be aware of new trends and guide the development of their tourism product to take account of trends which may directly or indirectly affect consumer choices and behaviour (WTO 2007, p. 53).

To a great extent in many western countries, DMOs use the advantages provided by the Internet to enhance their consumer orientation. These advantages enable them (WTO 1999, p. 66):

- to reach a large number of consumers worldwide with information and product offer at relatively low cost
- to provide information of greater depth and quality than has been possible through traditional medium of print
- to enable consumers to book quick and easily and
- to enable large scale savings on the production and distribution of print.

In this way, DMOs can reach potential tourists more efficiently and adjust more easily to their specific individual demands.

2.2. Importance of the information on DMOs websites for destination selection

Consumer behaviour is a vital area of research for operators intending to design or sell a tourism product, regardless of whether they are the providers of tourism products or DMOs. "Tourism consumer behaviour can be defined as the ensemble of its acts, attitudes and decisions regarding choosing, buying and consuming tourism products and services, and also its post-consuming reactions (Fratu, 2011)." Understanding consumer behaviour on the tourism market is crucial because "it offers a clearer view of what consumers are looking for and the manager can reflect them in the development process (Fratu, 2011)." It is important for destination marketers to learn how and where potential visitors search for information about a destination, how important various sources of information are to them, and based on what factors do they select a destination for vacation and travel.

Understanding consumer behaviour on the tourism market and the consumer decision process in selecting a destination is not easy because "decision-making is a complex and multi-stage process (Ozdipciner et al., 2012)." The complexity of consumer behaviour in tourism is a reflection of high involvement in the purchase decision, high consumer commitment, strong influence by other people, long-term decision, considerable emotional significance, provider of the tourism product, high level of information search and high level of insecurity linked to intangibility (Swarbrooke, 2007, p. 72).

According to Moutinho (2000, p. 73), a vacation tourist behaviour model consists of three parts: (1) pre-decision and decision process; (2) post-purchase evaluation; and (3) future decision-making. Pre-decision and decision processes are particularly important because the other two stages are dependent of them. In this first stage, the consumer is exposed to numerous influences and makes a buying decision. Hyde (2008) indicates that "pre-vacation decision-making may be conceptualized as comprising three phases – a search for travel and destination information, the making of a plan for the vacation, and the booking of selected elements of the vacation, such as the means of transport and places of accommodation".

Tourist information search is one of the most extensively researched issues in consumer behaviour in tourism (Hyde, 2008), reinforcing the importance of understanding consumer behaviour in tourism. Moutinho (2000, p. 46) indicates that "information seeking is the expressed need to consult various sources prior to making a purchasing decision." Fodness and Murray (1999) researching tourist information search behaviour and strategies highlight that "tourist information search strategies are believed to be the result of a dynamic process in which travellers use various types and amounts of information sources to respond to internal and external contingencies in vacation planning." They further indicate that there are "at least three distinct strategies for information search: spatial, temporal, and operational (Fodness and Murray, 1999)." "The spatial dimension of information search strategy reflects the locus of search activity: internal (accessing the contents of memory) or external (acquiring information from the environment). The temporal dimension represents the timing of search activity. Search can be either on-going, building up a knowledge base for unspecified future purchase decisions, or pre- purchase, in response to a current purchase problem. The third dimension is operational, reflecting the conduct of search and focusing on the particular sources used and their relative effectiveness for problem solving and decision making (Fodness and Murray, 1999)."

Prior to making a decision about which vacation destination to choose, tourists gather information from a variety of sources. Accordingly, tourism information search includes internal search as well as the multiple external information sources used (Ho et al., 2012). Internal search refers to "the retrieval of information about alternatives, stored in memory (Moutinho 2000, p. 46)." But, "in the case of vacation travel, the search is often external, involving active processes and a variety of information sources (Moutinho 2000, p. 46)." External information source search is especially important to people who have no previous experience of a specific destination, so "external sources of information will be the ones providing the information the tourist needs to plan the holiday period (Castañeda et al., 2007)." Most often, external information sources

include consultation with friends and relatives, past experience of the destination, destination-specific literature, professional consultants and, since recently, the Internet, to an ever greater extent (Hyde, 2008).

In recent years, the Internet has had a major impact on consumer information search behaviour (Peterson and Merino, 2003) and has become one of the most important sources of tourism information (Frías et al., 2012). The Internet is believed to enhance information processing and consumer decision-making by providing the right information (Choi et al., 2007). It provides tourists with access to relevant information on destinations around the world, enables direct communications with tourism suppliers to request information, enables easy and fast booking and empowers consumers to develop and purchase their own itineraries at any time and any place (Andrić and Ružić, 2010; Castañeda et al., 2007; Buhalis, 1998). Furthermore, the advantages of online tourism information search include relatively low cost, customised information, ease of product comparison, interactivity, virtual community formation, and 24-h accessibility (Ho et al., 2012; Wang, Head and Arthur, 2002).

Information search is considered crucial to tourists' destination choices (Jacobsen and Munar, 2012). At various stages of planning a trip tourists are looking for different types of information. Choi et al. (2007) conducted a study which was focused "on understanding the patterns of the traveller's information preferences and search behaviour across the complete course of the travel experience". They found that destination websites are visited across the first, early and middle stages in the pre-trip planning course (Choi et al., 2007). So Kah et al. (2010) highlight that "the ultimate goal of the websites offered by destination marketing organisations (DMOs) or travel businesses is to inspire potential travellers to purchase a travel-related product." However, tourists' preferences for information content differ depending on the destination levels. Choi et al. (2007) argue, "the lower the level, the more concrete and specific the information should be" and "at the national level, however, it is apparent that the focus should be directed at image projection (Choi et al. 2007)." It is important to present as much information as might be required by the potential tourists on an event Web site (Filo et al., 2009). Hence, attention should be paid to the functionality and content of websites, as these represent critical success factors and help to attract a greater number of tourists (Kokash, 2012). DMO websites should be functional, simple, and aesthetically pleasing (Luna-Nevarez and Hyman, 2012). However, "consumers are often overloaded with information provided by multiple sources and feel overwhelmed before finding the intended information. Irrelevant or untargeted information will be filtered through consumers' cognitive system with little impact (Choi et al., 2007)." This makes it all the more crucial to establish the importance of certain types of information to consumers searching the Internet and DMO websites during the vacation planning stage. Based on this, the objective of the research is defined as follows: To establish the importance of certain information posted on DMO websites to consumers in the information collection phase of selecting a travel and vacation destination.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Field research was conducted to accomplish the objective of the study and to establish the importance of information posted on DMO websites to consumers in the information collection stage of selecting a vacation or travel destination.

The research instrument used was the instrument applied to analyse the importance of information posted on the websites of travel agencies in Jordan (Kokash, 2012). Respondents were asked to rate the importance of information and website attributes arranged in six groups: Home page, Basic information, Complementary information, Communication and interactivity, Navigation, Functionality and Marketing. The questionnaire contained 87 variables referring to information posted and to other website attributes. Since the role of DMO in Croatia play tourist board, respondents were asked to rate on a scale the importance of information posted on the websites of tourist boards when searching the Internet and collecting information to select a vacation or travel destination. On the rating scale, 1 signified that the information was not important to the respondent, while 5 signified the information was extremely important.

The respondents in the study were full-time and part-time students at the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management in Opatija and the Polytechnics in Rijeka. Students were judged as being an appropriate group of respondents for such a exploratory study considering that previous studies have shown Internet users in tourism as being persons of higher education and those who visit travel websites and general websites more often, and have more positive attitudes towards use of the Internet (Andrić and Ružić, 2010; Hyde, 2008; Morrison et al., 2001). Moreover, this group of respondents is expected to include more Internet users than other age groups and scores high in Internet literacy (Kah et al., 2010). A convenience sample comprising 336 respondents was used. The average age of the respondents was 22, and 60% of the respondents were females.

The data collected were analysed using the statistical software SPSS 19. After incomplete questionnaires were removed, 333 valid questionnaires remained for further analysis. The methods used were descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis.

To reduce the large number of manifest variables to a smaller number of latent variables, explorative factor analysis was conducted using principal component analysis. Prior to the analysis, the verification of the appropriateness of the scale for conducting factor analysis was carried out with the help of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin coefficient (0.880) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2_{(3655)} = 13737,58$; $p < 0.001$) showed that the correlation matrix is appropriate for carrying out the factor analysis (Tabachnik and Fidell, 2007, p. 614).

After the verification of appropriateness of the scale for conducting factor analysis, the principal components analysis with varimax rotation of the factor axis was carried out. The varimax rotation method is used since the goal was data reduction to a smaller

number of variables and clear separation of the factors (Hair et al., 2006, pp. 126-127) by maximizing variance of loadings on each factor (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007, p. 639). The criteria for the number of factors extracted and variables retained were based on eigenvalues, percentage of variance explained, and significance of factor loadings. Factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, a solution with at least 60% of total variance explained, and factor loadings above 0.4 were considered as satisfactory. Items with saturation higher than 0.40 on more than one factor were eliminated as recommended by Churchill (1979). To test the reliability of the scales, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated. The results presented in Table 1 were obtained following exploratory factor analysis.

Out of the total number of variables, 15 factors were extracted that explain 61.73% of variance. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used to test the internal consistency of factors. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the last two factors (Search option and Website actualisation) are lower than 0.6, which is considered valid for exploratory research (Hair et al., 2006, p. 137). A low alpha coefficient may result from the fact that these factors consist of only two variables. Further, inter-item correlation was performed. Correlation coefficient between items were 0.404 (for Search option), and 0.346 (for Website actualization) which is considered as satisfactory according to Hair et al. (2006, p. 137) who suggest that inter-item correlations should exceed .30. Therefore, the authors decided to retain these factors to avoid losing useful information for managers and DMO website designers.

Table 1: **Factor and reliability analysis for importance of information and attributes of DMO websites (N=333)**

| Factor /Items | Factor loading | % of Variance Explained | Cronbach's alpha |
|---|----------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Links | | 7.125 | .898 |
| Links to other sites which provide complete details about the destination | .753 | | |
| Links to other relational sites | .745 | | |
| Link to the home page in each page of the website | .668 | | |
| Content links in pages of the website | .639 | | |
| Site map | .574 | | |
| Domain name related with the destination | .541 | | |
| Internet Search Option | .477 | | |
| Database Search Option | .446 | | |
| Ease of use and to get access | .435 | | |
| Online booking | | 7.010 | .859 |
| E-mail reservation | .748 | | |
| Online order and buy | .739 | | |
| Online booking | .716 | | |
| Electronic payment | .639 | | |
| Special offers | .556 | | |
| Prices information | .535 | | |
| Discount coupons and incentive programs | .467 | | |

| Factor /Items | Factor loading | % of Variance Explained | Cronbach's alpha |
|--|----------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Events and offering | | 5.701 | .863 |
| Attractions | .812 | | |
| Events | .796 | | |
| Specific destination activities | .608 | | |
| Hospitality and hotel information | .558 | | |
| Restaurants and gastronomy information | .541 | | |
| Outdoor activities | .508 | | |
| Traditions and culture | .496 | | |
| Offers variety | .430 | | |
| How to arrive | .427 | | |
| Multimedia | | 5.639 | .873 |
| Background in colours | .811 | | |
| Background's images | .806 | | |
| Multimedia | .700 | | |
| Interactive maps | .691 | | |
| Flash animation | .660 | | |
| Variety of information | .571 | | |
| Web statistics | | 4.753 | .819 |
| Hits number | .751 | | |
| Website usage statistics | .660 | | |
| Website design information | .656 | | |
| Number of visitors | .580 | | |
| Registration and inscription on the site | .418 | | |
| Useful information | | 4.306 | .741 |
| Commercial time | .732 | | |
| Exchange and currency converter | .657 | | |
| Clothes | .581 | | |
| Telecommunication | .467 | | |
| Climate and geography | .464 | | |
| Utilities | .408 | | |
| Contact | | 3.872 | .820 |
| E-mail list | .675 | | |
| Telephone numbers, P.O. box, location | .652 | | |
| E-mail link | .619 | | |
| Fax number | .512 | | |
| Customer service | .415 | | |
| Pictures and description | | 3.787 | .783 |
| Destination photos on homepage | .630 | | |
| Destination's photography | .582 | | |
| Destination's promotion | .563 | | |
| General information about the offer | .489 | | |
| Destination description on homepage | .435 | | |
| Languages | | 3.351 | .710 |
| Languages | .722 | | |
| Languages selection on homepage | .619 | | |
| Dynamics | | 3.330 | .681 |
| Flash introduction | .720 | | |
| Dynamic photo-text | .636 | | |
| Electronic destination's catalogue | .537 | | |
| A virtual visit | .449 | | |

| Factor /Items | Factor loading | % of Variance Explained | Cronbach's alpha |
|---|----------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Service providers information | | 2.921 | .729 |
| Hotels' guide information | .694 | | |
| Airlines' and service providers' information | .543 | | |
| Complete and detailed information about the offer | .511 | | |
| Comments | | 2.853 | .714 |
| Visitors' annotations, comments , observations | .644 | | |
| Online brochure request application | .584 | | |
| Logo and slogan | | 2.559 | .733 |
| Logo | .737 | | |
| Slogan | .700 | | |
| Search option | | 2.462 | .577 |
| Search option by word | .478 | | |
| Directory search option | .408 | | |
| Website actualization | | 2.059 | .512 |
| Actualization date | .666 | | |
| Local time | .414 | | |

Source: research results

Once the exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis were conducted and the factors created, the importance of individual factors to potential tourists was analysed. Using descriptive statistics, the average mean values of the individual factors were calculated. Table 2 presents the average values obtained as well as the highest and lowest scores.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for extracted factors

| | Minimum | Maximum | Importance | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------------------|---------|---------|------------|----------------|
| Pictures and description | 2 | 5 | 4.60 | .500 |
| Languages | 1 | 5 | 4.43 | .775 |
| Events and offering | 2 | 5 | 4.39 | .555 |
| Online booking | 2 | 5 | 4.30 | .664 |
| Web actualization | 1 | 5 | 3.88 | .777 |
| Search option | 1 | 5 | 3.77 | .801 |
| Contact | 1 | 5 | 3.73 | .832 |
| Comments | 1 | 5 | 3.73 | .938 |
| Multimedia | 1 | 5 | 3.70 | .803 |
| Dynamics | 1 | 5 | 3.68 | .716 |
| Links | 1 | 5 | 3.67 | .732 |
| Practical information | 1 | 5 | 3.66 | .687 |
| Logo and slogan | 1 | 5 | 3.58 | 1.011 |
| Web statistics | 1 | 5 | 3.03 | .838 |
| Service providers' information | 1 | 3 | 2.04 | .354 |

Source: research results

The results presented in the above table show that respondents consider the most useful information on DMO websites to be destination pictures and description ($M=4.60$, $SD=.50$) and information concerning events in the destination ($M=4.39$, $SD=.555$).

Also important is the option of choosing a website's language ($M=4.43$, $SD=.775$), together with the option of online booking ($M=4.30$, $SD=.664$). In rating the importance of individual attributes for the factors Pictures and description, Events and offering and Online booking, the lowest average score was 2, further underlining the importance of specific factors. Unlike these factors, Service providers' information received a maximum score of 3, suggesting that this type of information is irrelevant to respondents.

An analysis of the mean values of the individual variables that reflect the importance of specific types of information has established the following information as being the most important to respondents: images of the destination ($M=4.72$, $SD=.616$), attractions ($M=4.61$, $SD=.735$), description of the destination ($M=4.57$, $SD=.649$), how to reach the destination ($M=4.56$, $SD=.774$), general information concerning the tourism offering ($M=4.55$, $SD=.728$) and events ($M=4.52$, $SD=.784$). The least important information pertains to website design ($M=2.57$, $SD=1.114$) and Web statistics ($M=2.68$, $SD=1.101$).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research conducted points to the importance of certain types of information posted on the DMO website in the process of selecting a destination for vacation or travel. Research has established that the most important information to users in the initial stage of planning a trip is information that uses textual and visual images of a destination in order to describe the experiences that can be enjoyed in the destination. Mackay and Couldwell (2004) have underscored the importance of pictures in creating and communicating a destination's image, as have Luna-Nevarez and Hyman (2012) indicating the importance of more graphics and less text on DMO websites for capturing visitors' attention and creating a good first impression.

In addition to textual and visual images of a destination, information about attractions, events, specific activities in the destination, and hotels and restaurants are also important to potential tourists, together with practical instructions on how to reach the destination. The Kokash study (2012) achieved similar results establishing that "the most important categories according to the tourists' evaluation were basic information and marketing."

The research also underlines the importance of online booking and electronic payment options on a DMO website, which is in keeping with the recommendation of Luna-Nevarez and Hyman (2012) that "a DMO website should satisfy the information preferences of likely viewers while assisting with the basic commercial transactions required by destination visitors, such as hotel booking, event booking, or travel package purchasing."

Although earlier studies have highlighted the importance of experiences of previous visitors (Luna-Nevarez and Hyman, 2012), this type of information was given a mediocre score in this research. DMO website attributes belonging to the categories of navigation and functionality were also not rated as being exceptionally important in the phase of information collection. However, it should be pointed out that website functionality was not the primary focus of this research but rather emphasis was placed on the importance of information. Practical information and service providers' information were also rated as being less important. This can be explained by the fact that general information is important to tourists in the initial stage of information search when selecting a destination, while practical information gains in importance in the subsequent travel stages.

Recommendations can be made to destination management based on the results of the research conducted. The purpose of a DMO is to create a destination's image and position and promote it on the global tourism market. To achieve this, DMOs can use the advantages provided by modern technologies in market communication and can use visually appealing websites to catch the attention of potential tourists in the initial stage of planning a trip. To make the experiences a destination offers more tangible, DMO should use images and multimedia. DMO websites should be multilingual, provide basic information about the tourism offering and enable online booking and electronic payment. Because detailed information concerning service providers, intermediaries and the offering, together with website information, is not of very high importance to users, it is not necessary for it to be in the forefront.

The results of the study conducted should be taken with reservations considering the study's limitations. These limitations relate to the sample and research instrument. The study was not carried out on a representative sample. Instead, a convenience sample of students was used due to the study's exploratory nature. It is possible that a different group of respondents would rate in a different way the importance of information and website attributes in selecting a vacation or travel destination. Hence, the study should be repeated on a heterogeneous sample of respondents. The second limitation refers to the research instrument. The research instrument used was originally used to analyse the quality of the websites of travel agencies. It is possible that different results could have been obtained with a different research instrument.

These limitations represent a challenge for future research. Further studies should be carried out on a representative sample or a sample of tourists in a specific destination. In addition, the websites of various destinations could be displayed to the respondents making it easier for them to rate how important the information posted actually is to them. Furthermore, by using the research instrument applied in this study it is possible to rate the quality of DMO websites, which is this instrument's primary purpose. Based on both researches, it is possible to make an importance-performance analysis and identify the gap that emerges in practice between the importance of individual website attributes from the user perspective and the actual performance as assessed by experts. In this way, opportunities for improving the quality of DMO websites could be identified, lending the research even greater applicative value.

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