

INTERACTIVE E-TOURISM

Beatrice SION, Cezar MIHĂLCESCU¹

Abstract:

The most compatible sector with the mass media system – tourism – is a new global interactive information system, one of communication due to the hypertext, e-mails, partnerships and a new real-time reservation system.

Tourism is introduced to clients on the Internet because the tourism product can be subsumed to the category of products and services that require a great amount of information and involve multiple risks. Customers get informed and can compare offers and destinations, they obtain data on the climate and various events in the area of interest.

The development of “virtual marketing” makes the transition from the ordinary consumer of tourism products to an experienced actor-consumer who can capitalize on the information and optimize the relationship between quality/prices/services.

To reach the desired performance, companies need to invest in order to earn consumer trust, to entice consumers to create their own, personalized tourism products on the Internet and to purchase them using the same distribution channel.

Key words: e-tourism, information system, virtual marketing

1. Introduction

The Internet has won its place in the “personalized” world media. Never has a new piece of media been so impactful, initializing such a change and “infomedia” novelty. The development of the Internet in the field of tourism goes hand in hand with the potential customers’ need for information, as well as that of tourism actors, and with their need for communication.

The most adequate sector for the media system, tourism, is a new global interactive information system, a new communication system due to hypertext connections, to e-mails, partnerships and a new system of reservation in real time.

Tourism information is introduced on the Internet as the tourism product can be included in the category of products and services that require a lot of information and involve multiple risks. Customers get informed and can compare offers and destinations, or obtain data on the climate or various events.²

The presentation of the tourism product on the Internet is timely as it is an intangible product. The Internet facilitates certain actions that support the purchase of the tourism product:

- It creates new consumption motivations;
- It is accessible 24/7;

¹ Author 1 is a lecturer at the Romanian-American University of Bucharest, e-mail address: sion.beatrice@profesor.rau.ro; Author 2 is a Professor at the Romanian-American University of Bucharest, e-mail address: cezar.octavian.mihalcescu@profesor.rau.ro

²D. Buhalis, *Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20 years on and 10 years after the Internet*-The state of eTourism research, Volume 29, Issue 4, August 2008, Pages 609–623

- It allows access to tailor-made offers according to consumer profile and at the moment chosen by the company or from home;
- It provides the opportunity to find out more information on the products and, from the perspective of tour operators, to control the information that they have on the clients;
- It allows the establishment of an optimum quality/price ratio by comparing information taken from websites, as well as the development of new forms for the organization of activity and work, not to mention new opportunities for business travel inside companies.

2. E-Marketing

The development of “e-marketing”¹ makes the passage from the regular tourism consumer to an experienced actor-consumer who can capitalize on the information at his disposal, optimizing the quality/price/services ratio.

For tourism companies the Internet facilitates obtaining data regarding customer behavior and practices, rapid update of information to create products and publish them in brochures, the integration of reservation systems and the increase in online selling, and generating performance assessment models.

In order to obtain the information needed, companies need to invest in building consumer trust, to stimulate consumers to create the tourism product online and to buy it using the same distribution channel.

Interactive e-tourism illustrates the advantages of info-mediatization in relation with the tourism demand and supply, as well as the main sensitive areas which have emerged as a result of mutations in online tourism.

Cultural heritage has to be capitalized upon on Internet websites. In this regard, the organization of interactive databases and the creation of access means to these are necessary.

Numerous companies which hold cultural information and heritage do not possess the corresponding know-how in capitalizing on these properly, and have no clue as to what attitude to display in connection with the demands of those interested in this information.

In order to succeed in using the Internet effectively, the encouragement of team work for both data collection and the commercialization of performance offered by various partners is imperative.

Online activity involves the necessity to organize the means in a certain form, which can take a juridical appearance. We can speak of a new virtual “territoriality”, a kind of a seventh continent, where actors can identify themselves as a binding element of the community of interests.

Protecting the richness of tourism heritage is also a sensitive area that needs, on the one hand, the collection of data that will then be transmitted to Internet users through portals chosen by them, and, on the other hand, maintaining the quality and reliability of this information.

The ability to send out information has created opportunities for a number of private portals. The multitude of offers is indispensable for the guarantee that the customers will choose products based only on their own searches.

¹ http://www.irjabs.com/files_site/paperlist/r_613_130116133438.pdf

The guarantee of diversity for distance customers creates new real time purchase rules. The consumer is faced with the rapidity of the transaction, which creates new forms of consumption which are made on impulse, are more personalized and opportunistic.

In this context, the consumer learns to use online channels, can get informed the moment his consumption needs appear, can communicate in real time and can make guaranteed transactions.

The technical possibility to create virtual areas leads to the emergence of new competitors. Shippers, communication networks, tour operators, travel agencies, tourism offices, portals and search engines consolidate their places in the tourism production, gathering and transmitting relevant information to customers that can address a multiplicity of offers for their tourism consumption.

The online connection determines the emergence of new entities, as this system needs an offer that is daily accessible, 24/7, which imposes real time commercial update, a redefinition of prices according to seasonality, to the day or to the time of day when they are available.

This situation requires an adaptation of the work organization taking into account the interactivity of the information, communication and reservation, which need to be in agreement with the new exigencies. To these aspects, we may add the need for ethnical adaptation of the information sent worldwide.

Change demands ongoing learning; job fluidity has never been more important. Jobs have to come up with unlimited possibilities as far as the information content, its communication and transactions.

Professional operators must be able to exploit the resources offered by networks, allowing their placement in privileged positions in relation with their clientele which is always pressed for time and sometimes short of knowledge to choose a reservation in this field.

Not only tourism operators, but also potential consumers need to become sensitive to the idea of information and becoming informed, the value of information in terms of its utility, as well as to gathering it, assessing it and analyzing it as efficiently as possible.

For a better user experience on the website and to obtain a good position in the classification of search tools, it is essential that tourism actors know the behavior of the users. To this purpose, they have to be aware of the most searched-for key words, the level of complexity of the key words, the degree of concentration of searches, the most popular brands searched for on the web and the e-tourism trends.

The reasons why tour operators are more and more interested in consumer demand regarding search tools are the emergence of consumer trust by offering answers to his/her problems, transforming the customers in return ones, reducing the contract cost.

The analyses made in connection with the research corpus on search instruments have led to the conclusions that:

- More than half of the key words used are single key words;
- Accommodation and transport are the first search environments, having the greatest frequency, coupled with a geographical indication (for instance, hotel + Paris);
- The key words most frequently resorted to are: travel, hotel, tourism and holiday.

Interactivity, based on all Internet websites, has a great impact on all sectors of activity and in time outlines a new relationship between the constantly available tourism demand and supply.

The tourism sector, in particular, relates to the media system as to a constant information system, used in order to communicate and make transactions, but also one of dialogue. The internet and multimedia instantly highlight all the photograph offers in the whole world.

The Internet allows the display of a customized offer as a standardized one, the electronic brochure revolutionizing selling and consumption. This medium meets the expectations witnessed in the new behaviors of tourism consumers: instant request, precise and updated information for the organization of last-minute holidays in a personalized manner. A new consumer looking for an accessible quality/price ratio without moving from a location has emerged.

E-tourism has transformed the classical chain of activities connected with the information and sale of the tourism products. Online, one can access in a few minutes an unlimited offer to compare prices, services, to get information on visas or weather conditions without going into an agency.

E-tourism presents a strategic advantage seen concretely in important changes in the tourism environment in the emergence of new actors, the “virtual travel agencies”, and in the new jobs and job descriptions as a result of the de-intermediary-zation and dematerialization of the traditional tourism system.

There is an economic advantage illustrated by the elimination of intermediaries and the reduction of transaction costs. E-tourism opens up a direct distribution chain to the end user. Hence, virtual or traditional travel agencies, tour operators, global distribution systems and hotel reservation centers need to find themselves a position in this booming sector.

The Internet influences the structural and national organization of a tourism operator as well. The development of the Internet raises numerous obstacles of a cultural, technical and economic nature, and that is why making alliances among Internet using companies is useful in order to successfully face the changes occurring in e-tourism consumer behavior. Closing such deals is imperative between private and public partners in order to draw the attention of users interested in the development of online tourism.

The promotional mix on the Internet must include references concerning search tools in order to avoid the difficulties involved in catching consumer searches, in launching affiliation campaigns or price reduction campaigns.

3. Opportunities and Risks for Tourism Operators as a Result of Using the Internet

Internet development influences all economic sectors, therefore tourism as well, as information and communication technology spreads rapidly. Tourism already constitutes the first sector of electronic commerce and is one of the most prominent and present sectors on the web, tourism websites being increasingly more numerous.

As a result of increased leisure time, tourism consumer behavior has changed in the sense of the fragmentation of holidays and their spontaneity. The tourism consumer behavior has evolved in the sense that holidays tend to be more expensive, more numerous and, most of the times, contracted last minute. That is why tourists expect tailor-made and high quality services. Promptly informative tourism is the sector best adapted to the online environment.

We are today speaking of e-tourism as if it were a person looking for information on the Internet before making a booking, either resorting to a website or to a traditional means. The Internet is a distribution channel that has been adapted to the target offer very well.

In the modern context, the Internet represents a new means among the traditional selling and information media destined to tourism consumers and to all actors in this field of activity. It progressively gains its place in the distribution achieved by networks of tourism agencies because it allows them direct access to distribution networks at reduced costs and with the possibility to communicate with reservation centers included.

Online selling without human intervention still remains an exception, but this situation will be developed more in the near future. Today, the greatest number of leader bodies specialized in online sales are the ones with a long-term experience in this activity. In France, those with a 2-year experience have reached the fourth version of the website.

The networks of tourism agencies distributing tourism products approach the Internet matter cautiously. They have websites that cannot present a very complex catalogue offer, but which allow them to make sales. Direct contact with agency professionals is assured to a smaller extent.

Tourism operators need to approach the Internet as a new technology materializing in specific equipment and in teams which are able to use them. Tour operators should not see the Internet simply as a connection with the available database. Inaugurating a website on the Internet market represents a significant concept investment that has to be constantly upgraded. Moreover, Internet reservations require the use of specific procedures and, consequently, internal reorganization.

Significant modifications appear as far as the ensemble of jobs in tourism is concerned, with relevant consequences on partner relationships, but also on the tourism demand. The Internet is a new distribution channel of global dimensions, but accompanied by new actors.

The needs of individual tourism consumers under the circumstances of online purchase of a tourism product differ from those of companies, and hence they will be treated differently in what follows.

In the case of individual consumers, the sale of tourism products on the Internet is quite reduced due to the high price of the necessary information systems and of their usage. The creation of a clientele for the tourism products sold in this way depends on the possibility of the prospective customer to access exact information and on that of the providers to sell a gamut of customized products made for each client. The use of the Internet tools in purchasing a tourism product is supported by the potential client's trust in both the product and the distribution chain and payment security. Prospective customers entrust their credit card numbers to tourism service providers in the country and abroad only if they have a network of agencies or offices where they can subsequently address while in difficulty.

The easiest purchase online is transport services, but in this case as well the providers are faced with difficulties linked with the release of all the catalogues in the system, as well as with the trouble connected with the wish of a part of the clients to be taken into account in the process of choosing a tourism product. These difficulties appear due to the fact that, in the interval between the order processing and the actual consumption, cancellations, changes, requests for complementary services may ensue, which leads to lower consumer trust in actually considering requests.¹

¹ M. Mkono, J Tribe, *Beyond Reviewing Uncovering the Multiple Roles of Tourism Social Media Users*, Journal of Travel Research, 2016

Through Internet usage providers have the opportunity of presenting their offer through presentation catalogues launched on the network. The simplest transactions in the system are those that refer to the sale of plane or train tickets to the clientele that is knowledgeable as far as the mechanism of using the Internet is concerned, and who trusts all the means of sale and price cashing for the respective service or product.

The following situations emerge for the tourism service providers:

- Great tour operators along with airline or railway companies manage their products very well and have at their disposal networks of agencies with which clients come in direct contact. These products are relatively simple and well-known to the customers, hence the online selling can be used for all their offers;
- Great agency networks, whose catalogues cover a wide combination of services, only present a limited number of products available for purchase through this system.

In the case of companies, Internet usage is based on a specific demand coming from those who travel for business. Most companies have understood that technology is a significant factor in the normalization of purchase practices when it comes to business travels. These companies have adequate equipment and technology which they use on a regular basis, but are still confronted with difficulties concerning online payment security.

The Internet offers a plethora of services based on the new technology:

- The personalization of tourism services through the choice of a means of transport, travel duration, paying negotiable prices, the use of proper accommodation units;
- Optimized prices as a result of a negotiation with the service providers, especially with airline companies where fares are decreasing in relation with the array of services and the number of travels.

Direct order via Internet is not among the elements of company commercial politics, as an infrastructure that would include centers that are able to take up the order, offering various opportunities, is needed.

Online selling has determined the appearance of a new type of needs connected with information security and the security of the systems used by agency networks. The need for security has been particularized through the recent outburst of great viral attacks.

The operators falling victims to the “I love you” virus have consumed a lot of time to gain back their normal and safe operations and could not issue tickets for a week. The integration of agency information systems within those of companies is necessary in order to achieve information security.

The strategic options of various tourism operators are the following:

- a) Airline companies have decided to keep the great reservation systems associated with telecommunication networks and to restrict connections with tourism agencies that represented the essence of distribution networks. They have created portals for collective reservations: HOTWIRE, launched by 6 American companies, OPODO, by 9 European companies: Air France, Air Lingus, Alitalia, Australian Airlines, British Airways, Finnair, KLM, Luftansa, Iberia, which offers the best fares for more than 480 airline companies and 54.000 hotels.

Not all airline companies have adopted the same policy as far as the Internet is concerned. For some that hold a better position on the market, the Internet appears as a means that allows the sale of tickets with reduced distribution costs. Other companies use

the Internet to launch advertising campaigns through which they announce important price cuts.

Great airline companies have developed reservation systems associated with their telecommunication networks forming strategic alliances. These have diversified technological services, which have materialized in the sale, to travel agencies, of operational solutions for leisure travels destined to individual clientele and to business tourism, offering big companies the solutions necessary for them to integrate their own information systems.

Thus, Sabra is present in more than 70% in Travelocity, the most important travel portal in the USA; Galileo has created a trip-com type of portal; Amadeus has built a partnership with the American and European online agencies Priceline, eDreams, eBookers.

To the aim of developing the European market, Amadeus, a leader on the French market, has recently adopted a new attitude regarding arrivals in Europe through the Travelocity and Expedia American online travel agencies, supporting the creation of online travel agencies.

Strategic alliances are preoccupied with the diversification of the service range, having in view the assurance of free services that would allow the setup of folders with the online users. Sabre has created a free “virtualiser” website that allows the customer a PNR (passenger name record) visualization on the Internet. While the customer is connected, the website proposes to her/him a range of tourism services and a profile is being created for her/him. In the second stage, the website proposes direct purchase of plane tickets. Amadeus has a similar service – “check-my-trip.com”.

b) Tourism agencies face difficulties in introducing the catalogues online because of the tariffs, hence they only offer online products that are simple both in content and in their manner of having a tariff established, and which can be checked immediately. The most privileged companies in terms of Internet distribution are the integrated agencies which possess a range of products. They have no need for an opening strategy of market penetration with the help of the Internet any longer, as they have the best trust factor, namely their brand and product. The electronic courier is the one that ensures the offer distribution, reservation confirmation and the transformation of clients into return customers.

The Internet offers interesting advantages to distributing tourism agencies, as its usage allows better presentation quality for the products, the update of promotional offers, a better processing of orders through electronic mail. The range of available products can be larger for professional users than for the great public, as travel agents interpret and use the information received adequately.¹

The Internet is still used by a significant proportion of the clientele as an informative environment and not a purchase one. This means that a lot of clients go to agencies in order to concretize the purchase of the product that they have chosen online, which is why it is essential that the agency should have the same information.

The diversification of the tourism offer is crucial in order to increase online sales, along with the high quality presentation of the products online on professional websites, while the equipment used to contact agencies should be high quality as well in order to render a better multimedia usage.

¹<http://www2.unwto.org/publication/handbook-e-marketing-tourism-destinations-fully-revised-and-extended-version-30>

c) Hotel industry uses the Internet, proposing to users of information websites online reservations as well, with the help of electronic messages. A rigorous management of the Internet commercial correspondence is absolutely necessary, as a lot of potential clients do not accept the absence of an immediate message through electronic courier.

The Internet brings a relevant opening to the market segment of the small hotel industry, of the rural hotel industry, as selling their products is done at costs lower than those of classical promotion (publicity, adhering to a hotel chain). For the economic hotel industry, the Internet offers the possibility of client reservation on all continents for which phone call reservation would be more expensive than the price of a hotel room.

The analyses made on hotel chains regarding the Internet have led to the conclusion that it will replace other systems as it offers significant advantages.

Research done by tourism operators has shown that Internet usage by prospective customers is a slow process and that trust in this system and in online payment security still remains an issue that needs to be addressed with a lot of responsibility.

The structure of companies using e-tourism can be:

- Companies that are experienced in the use of the system and for which the Internet is a means to get connected to a series of distribution channels; those which function as online agencies must improve their system in order to be able to offer counseling services concerning reservations and payments as well;
- Companies that consider the Internet as a means to build for themselves a modern image as a result of owning a website.

As far as the individual clientele of Internet users who resort to the online environment as a source of information and tourism product purchase, e-tourism success depends on:

- The simplicity of the desired product;
- Trust in brand reputation, payment security and that of ticket delivery;
- Product selling price.

The Internet allows one to gather information and the best conditions for sale.

The revenue that tourism companies achieve from online sales is usually reduced, but there are companies with substantial figures as well. This latter category includes those tourism companies that design their products in either a vertically or horizontally integrated offer, and companies that offer simple inexpensive products (economic accommodation units, promotional products, last-minute service sales).

Transporters are those tourism operators with a clear strategy as far as the Internet is concerned, as clients buy a service at an advantage. By using the electronic ticket, airline companies allow the complete online sale without the intervention of a salesperson or a reservation agent.

Tour operators consider the Internet a means to expand their global development strategy. German tour operators, who are leaders in Europe, find the online acquisition of tourism products as much more convenient in comparison with a traditional purchase.

An important segment in Internet usage is that of the hotel industry, of rent-a-car service providers and retail agencies. For them, the Internet offers an interesting alternative in comparison with the classical manner of dealing with matters which makes use of paper and phone reservations.

Online agencies are faced with a great number of difficulties. Firstly, we should consider the nature of the products that they sell. Sales of airplane tickets, which

represented the cornerstone of their activity, have been taken over by airline companies, which control this market segment very well.

Another difficulty refers to consumer behavior in case (s)he is inexperienced or apprehensive of this system.

Therefore, the optimistic scenario regarding the development of the activity of online agencies is not yet fully applicable, which nevertheless does not mean that online selling will not develop. This development will become clear as prospective customers will trust this system more and investments will be made in the adequate technology.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we may state that the Internet, which is nowadays successfully used especially in online selling, will increasingly expand in the near future in tourism as well, where its main role is that of being an informative environment for tourists, but also serves as a means to make reservations. Special attention is granted to the development of information flows through appropriate resort to information equipment and the ongoing perfecting of websites. These necessities are the consequence of change occurring in clientele structure, customers being more and more demanding as far as their comfort, navigation and information quality criteria.

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