



THE ROLE OF INTERNET AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN TOURISM AND TRAVEL MARKET AS A COMMERCE TOOL AND FUTURE PREDICTIONS

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РОЛЯТА НА ИНТЕРНЕТ И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИТЕ СИСТЕМИ В ТУРИСТИЧЕСКИЯ И ПЪТНИЧЕСКИЯ ПАЗАР КАТО ТЪРГОВСКИ ИНСТРУМЕНТ И БЪДЕЩИ ПРЕДВИЖДАНЯ

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ABSTRACT: *Tourism industry has reported critical changes in its structure over the last few years. Nowadays especially Internet becomes one of the major distribution channels. All the tourists who want to travel all around the world take advantages of Internet and computer reservation systems. Thus, the tourism companies recognize the importance of the information systems and Internet. By this way the progress of electronic commerce (e-commerce) market is remarkable. So, the usage proportion of Internet and e-commerce market increases all around the world day by day. The main purpose of this study is to define the Internet marketing and to express the role of travel agencies during customer travel decision process. Another aim of the paper is to discuss the role of Internet in the future of tourism industry.*

Key Words: Tourism Industry, Internet, e-Commerce, Travel Agencies.

Introduction

The impact of the information technology revolution, however, goes beyond the Internet. At a more basic level, it is the shift from analog to digital technologies that is responsible for so many new information technology (IT) capabilities [1].

The importance of information technology in the travel and tourism industry, especially the World Wide Web, has increased tremendously in the past decade. As information is the lifeblood of the travel industry, effective use of information technology is pivotal for marketing and promotion-related activities [2].

Yet, there is a lack of systematic empirical evidence regarding the marketing activities that are affected by the use of the Internet, and their consequent performance outcomes [3].

Assessing the most valuable information technology for an organization is becoming a growing challenge for business professionals, who are confronted with an expanding array of options [4]. The adoption of Internet technologies can provide distinct value propositions to the firm. These come from the offering of information online, the possibility of establishing electronic communications and exchange of information and the conducting of transactions

online (With regard to the offering of information online, Internet technologies present high reach and richness of information. Reach refers to the number of people that are reachable quickly and cheaply through these technologies and richness relates to the depth and detail of information that can be provided [5].

Current marketing and sales practice and theory are undergoing unprecedented transformations that may be highly attributed to the adoption of new technology tools and marketing concepts, such as sales force automation tools, database marketing, relationship marketing, network marketing, electronic trading systems, and, finally, the Internet [6].

Information technology advancements have revolutionized over the past two decades the functioning of business all over the world. Its impacts have been most felt in the information dependent industries, such as tourism. So, the Internet is an important communication tool and is very important for tourism industry and especially for travel agencies. Also it is possible to state that Internet can be an effective marketing tool for travel agencies.

The Internet allows consumers to communicate directly with tourism establishments, to request information and to purchase services and products without any geographical and time con-

straints [7]. On the other hand information on the Web gains great exposure, as it is instantly available to potential customers 24 hours the day, 7 days the week [8].

Consequently, it is possible to state that tourism increasingly needs to adopt innovative methods to enhance their competitiveness. This can be provided by increasing the usage of the Internet by tourism establishments with their website and as the Internet has proven to be an effective means of advertising, marketing, distributing goods, and information services.

With the use of the Internet, travel agencies can advertise and market their businesses to both internal and external markets. In addition to this, the Internet is an important channel of distribution for consumers. Increasingly, consumers can undertake their entire tourism product search and booking online and, therefore, they require flexible, specialized, accessible, interactive products and communication with tourism organizations. The aim of this study is to define the importance of Internet marketing and to express the role of travel agencies during customer travel decision process.

Literature Review

Studies focusing on the Internet have been conducted in recent years, particularly as it relates to advertising and marketing [9]. According to recent studies, the Internet is the most effective when used as an advertising and marketing tool [10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15].

In his article, "Strategy and the Internet" Michael Porter has emphasized that Internet technology becomes strategically significant only when its practical application creates new value. By allowing companies to conduct business online and use digital technologies to streamline operations, the Internet is helping them develop new value propositions [16].

Avlonitis and Karayanni [17] using a sample of 130 industrial businesses, they found a substantial positive effect of the use of the Internet on sales management activities, market-oriented product management activities, and sales performance and efficiency. The results of this study also stress the central role of the sales force in the successful implementation of the Internet marketing strategies within organizations.

Baloglu and Mangaloglu [18] emphasized the importance of travel intermediaries' images for international travel destinations, and examined structured (scale items) and unstructured (open-

ended) images of selected Mediterranean destinations (Turkey, Egypt, Greece and Italy) as perceived by US-based travel intermediaries. The results found significant differences in images of tour operators/travel agents promoting these destinations and those not promoting. The findings indicated that tour operators and travel agents promoting these destinations have differentiated images of the four destinations. The structured and unstructured images helped identify common and unique characteristics as well as strengths and weaknesses of the four tourist destination countries. The results provided important implications and directions for the governments and tourism authorities of Turkey, Egypt, Greece and Italy for developing a marketing strategy targeting distribution channel members.

Frias, Rodriguez and Castaneda's study [19] results show that destination image is worse when tourists use the Internet than when they use exclusively the travel agency, thus confirming the expected effects of information overload. Even more importantly, this effect is moderated by the tourist's message involvement. In this way, in situations of high message involvement, the effects of Internet-induced information overload make themselves evident. On the other hand, in situations of low message involvement, there are no differences in image when the Internet is used. This may be due to the fact that tourists with low message involvement have built the initial image through the peripheral route using heuristic rules or elements related to the design of the website consulted rather than by using the information contained in it.

Drawing on data from 1200 California travel agencies, this case study applies the theories of path dependence, network externalities, and impacted information to the adoption of computer reservation systems (CRS). Results suggest that the adoption pattern is not explained by path dependence. While network externalities may be present in the case of larger travel agencies, it is the lack of information on the relative merits of CRS that best explains the pattern of adoption across all travel agencies [20].

According to the 2003 Annual PhoCusWright Travel Consumer Trends Survey (PhoCusWright, 2003), nearly 30 million people, representing 14% of the US population, had purchased online travel products/services. Even when travelers did not make their reservations online, they did visit online travel websites to find specific travel information. The use of online travel ser-

VICES is now the most popular way consumers purchase their travel tickets and other related conveniences, resulting in traditional travel agencies being ranked last in customer usage. NetRatings (2002) reported that approximately 39% and 43% of all web surfers accessed online travel websites in February and March, 2002, respectively. In addition, according to the Etourism Newsletter (2002), 53% of leisure travelers and 55% of business travelers in the US have used the Internet to obtain pricing and other information [21].

According to Law and Chen [22] information for travelers to search or surf will be more comprehensive. At last, with the advances in security techniques, users will gain their confidence on Web safety and are more willing to provide their credit card information on the Web.

Özturan and Roney's [23] study presents the results of an exploratory study of the current stage of Internet use among travel agencies in Turkey. It shows that even though there is an increase in the use of the Internet, Turkish travel agencies use it simply as an additional mode of communication. The current emphasis is still on traditional marketing communication channels such as printed media, and telephone. Their web sites do not possess the interactive features required for Internet marketing. Despite the fact that there is an increase in the use of the Internet, travel agencies generally cannot use it effectively. It seems that the Internet is used more often for e-mail. Even though more than half of the travel agencies have a web site, their sites do not possess the interactive features for successful Internet marketing. In other words, these agencies are not seeking out customers through their web sites, but they want to provide information for current or potential customers about their company and the tours they offer. Word-of-mouth is also perceived as an important source of information. Although contact between the participants in the Internet is not face-to-face, social interaction is still possible by creating virtual communities. However, travel agencies do not use their web sites for this purpose.

According to Tsai, Huang and Lin [24] the electronic commerce model has made a significant impact on Taiwan's travel industry, as there are multiple distribution channels on the Internet. Also it is indicated that new technology customers have begun to buy directly from suppliers' websites, resulting in price-sensitive customers who love to shop around and who have

now become natural constituents of on-line travel agencies.

Wu and Chang [25] examined wholesaler construction of trust mechanism in B2B commerce in the travel industry. Results show a great difference between party trust and control trust, showing that retailers are primarily concerned with image and reputation, and less with concrete measures to enhance control trust.

E-Commerce

Electronic commerce conducted on the Internet is changing the nature of products themselves. Products can now be customized based on detailed information collected from interacting with customers about their profiles, their needs, patterns of buying, etc. [26].

Due to the open and global nature of the Internet, electronic commerce is fostering the creation of a shared global information space. The radical increase in connectivity enabled by the Internet is giving rise to new communication and coordination mechanisms both across organizations and customers, and also within groups of customers themselves [27].

The pace of research in electronic commerce continues to increase, while staying on track with its original goal. That goal is to create a global market place where people with surpluses and needs can conduct exchanges with others who have complementary needs and surpluses. Negotiation preceding this Exchange consists of an exchange of bids, and this exchange of information must be secure, reliable, engaging, informative, and efficient, in order to allow the global marketplace to increase the welfare of all participants [28].

Internet technologies may be oriented to different, but compatible, uses. These uses have the potential for generating revenues through, for example, e-commerce applications and have the ability to reduce costs, including both fixed and variable costs. For example, using Internet technologies in conjunction with Office automation software and enterprise resource planning (ERP) may help reduce fixed and overhead costs, while Internet electronic data interchange (EDI) and business to consumer (B2C) applications may reduce the variable cost of the manufacturing and distribution processes of the product. Thus, Internet technologies may be orientated to conduct business activities within a firm's boundaries and with external business agents (e.g., customers) [29].

Internet as a Marketing Tool

Internet marketing is the process of building and maintaining customer relationships through online activities to facilitate the exchange of ideas, products, and services that satisfy the goals of both parties [30].

The Internet is widely recognized as an extremely valuable marketing tool. It is generally held that the Internet offers substantial advantages over traditional means of communication: reduced costs of information exchange; increased speed of information transfer and retrieval; increased customer involvement in and control of transactions; and greater flexibility of using the marketing mix. Its main business uses include communications (both internal and external), market research, customer services, market penetration, product development, cost savings through process reengineering, direct marketing, advertising and product delivering [31].

Internet has grown so rapidly in the past decade that it became an effective marketing tool. Consider the example of Google, a search engine developed as a project by two graduate students, which became the number-one search service in just four years. Why? Because it is capable of incredible things: Using 10,000 networked computers, it searches 3 billion Web pages in an average of 500 milliseconds. To do the same search manually, by thumbing through 3 billion pages at the rate of 1 minute per page, would take 5,707 years. This ability has made Google an essential tool for many businesses. As a result, Google has built a powerful advertising business [32].

The Internet provides opportunities for an organization to enhance its' business in a cost-effective and practical manner. That is, the Internet can be used to conduct marketing research, reach new markets, better serve customers, distribute products faster, solve customer problems, and communicate more efficiently with business partners. The Internet is also a useful tool for gathering intelligence on consumers, competitors, and potential markets, as well as communicating information about companies and/or products [33].

The accessibility of the Internet is having an impact on the way organizations provide product-related promotional information to customers. Beside the usual advantages of being an anytime and anywhere medium, the Internet also allows for increased interactivity and customization of promotional information [34].

In any business, particularly through the Internet, a customer normally develops in his/her mind some sort of ambiguity, given the choice of similar alternative products. The ambiguity is mainly due to two reasons [35].

Firstly, how to make a final product choice to purchase, and, secondly, on what basis the other products will be rejected. In order to answer the above questions, the customer may like to classify the products in different preference levels, preferably through some numerical strength of preference. Achievement of this classification will serve as a decision aid to the customer in the sense that, while purchasing a product, he/she will come to know the information on what preference level the product is chosen and what are the other available products in the network which are either superior or inferior to the chosen product. This will remove the ambiguity in the customer's mind as far as the product choice is concerned [36].

Current trends in the market environment, such as shrinkage of markets, increase of competition, technology turbulence, and diffusion of the information technology through the organizations, preempt structural changes in the organizations and their marketing channels. These trends call for increased collaboration among organizations that leads to increased outsourcing activities, transformations in the value chains of the organizations and of their distribution channels, and the formation of new network organizational structures. In fact, these trends are calling for enhanced communication capabilities and increased interorganizational exchanges. In view of these marketing phenomena, the examination of both business-to-business marketing transactions, and the potential of the IT (i.e., the Internet) to facilitate these transactions, becomes a primary concern [37].

The Internet can be used as a distribution channel in the following ways [38]:

- Physical products, also sold in conventional stores, which can be advertised, described and/or ordered on-line (e.g., computer hardware, wine); and
- Products, which can additionally be delivered over the electronic commerce medium, such as information, music or software.

Possible Uses of Internet and World Wide Web

Everyday the World Wide Web (W3, WWW or Web) is used by millions of people connected

to thousands of computers all over the world [39]. The introduction of the newest Internet component, the WWW, had transformed the Internet into a popular marketing medium due to its unique capability to blend text, pictures, sounds and video clips into multimedia documents [40]. The Internet represents today an important role in business environment.

The WWW appears to be an ideal medium for businesses attempting to promote themselves and their wares. Setting up a site on the WWW, and thus gaining instant access to millions of people all over the globe, can be achieved at a small fraction of the cost using more conventional methods [41].

It is already possible to visit 'virtual malls' full of 'virtual shops', browse through catalogues and examine various products in vast detail, all courtesy of the Web. This has all been made possible by the multi-media capabilities that the Web provides [42].

Even so, many firms are still struggling with the basic issue of how to use the Internet and digital technologies for their best advantage. Despite the visible and noteworthy successes such as eBay and Google, other Internet companies continue to struggle including "here-to-stay" giants such as Time Warner [43].

Companies, especially those involved in research and development can use the Internet as an additional resource for collecting information. It is possible to post a query on a bulletin board or join a discussion group and receive advice on how to solve the problem. Alternatively, there are millions of Web pages, some of which contain access to searchable databases of information relating to particular subjects [44].

The use of low-cost electronic mail (e-mail) is the Internet service used most extensively by businesses [45]. Also, consumers can undertake their entire product search and booking online and, therefore, they require flexible, specialized, accessible, interactive products and communication with establishments.

Internet Applications in Tourism Industry and Travel Agencies

The Internet as a communication and market space is growing at an unprecedented rate. As of August 1999, some 215 million people have access to the Internet, a leap from the 133 million estimated to be online one year earlier and a five-fold increase from 40 million in 1995!. Of the 215 million, 57% are English language users,

while 26% access the Internet using European languages (excluding English). It is widely believed that Berners-Lee's development of the "World Wide Web" in 1989 was key to opening up the Internet as a global and easily accessible information space, accompanied by a new vocabulary: HyperText Transfer Protocol (HTTP); Uniform Resource Locator (URL); HyperText Markup Language (HTML); web site and web page. By April 1998, there were an estimated 320 million web pages. Some specialists suggest that the number of web sites is doubling in under six months, a slow down from doubling every three months back in 1994 [46].

With the development of the Internet increasing dramatically in recent years, the tourism industry has begun to use Internet as part of their marketing effort [47].

Many of those new online organizations include traditional travel agents, tour operators, national tourist offices, airlines, hotels, car hire firms [48].

Besides the development of the Internet has increased dramatically in recent years, the tourism industry has begun to use Internet as part of their marketing effort [49]. Thus, enhanced Internet search capabilities make it possible for firms to find critical information much more rapidly and have greatly increased the possibility that one firm can be located by another firm or by customers wishing to conduct business with it [50].

The development of the Internet as a universal and interactive means of communication, and a parallel change in consumer behavior and attitude, have therefore shifted the traditional way tourism and travel products are distributed. Increasingly, consumers can undertake their entire tourism product search and booking on-line and therefore the role of e-Mediaries has been changing dramatically [51].

Tourism has become much less singular and distinguishable from other social activities. For example, a recent survey shows that about half of those with Internet access regularly browse the Internet from their workplace, for tourist information [52].

Furthermore, in the hunt for profitability and global market advantage during the last three decades, providers of tourism information and services have been shaping the evolution of many technologies, including transnational banking, enquiry and booking systems using interactive videotext and computer reservation systems (CRS) [53].

The development of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) in the 1990s as a means for the global sharing of information has made a great contribution to social science. The Internet acts as a new communication and distribution channel for e-travellers and suppliers of travel services and products. It is virtually impossible for tourism organizations to overlook the Internet in their marketing mixes due to its advantages, which include global accessibility, convenience in updating, real-time information service, interactive communications features and unique customization capabilities. The World Tourism Organization declared that the key to Internet success lies in the swift identification of customer needs and the establishment of direct contact with consumers, offering them comprehensive, personalized and up-to-date information [54].

The revolutionary developments in Information Technologies, which have been experienced through the proliferation of the Internet and the World Wide Web since 1995, illustrate that consumers increasingly rely on the Internet for travel information. They utilize commercial and non-commercial Internet sites for planning, searching, purchasing and amending their travel. Non-tourism organizations tend to seize the emergent opportunity by utilizing the new Information Technologies' tools. This is already the case with major Information Technologies' providers, (e.g. Microsoft developed Expedia, an electronic travel agency) to satisfy tourism demand [55].

In the last few decades, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have deeply affected the way business is performed and the way that organizations compete. The tourism and travel industries were particularly affected by these developments and in particular, the way organisations distributed their tourism products in the marketplace. Traditionally, the travel distribution role has been performed by outbound travel agencies, tour operators (TOs) and inbound travel agents or handling agencies. They were supported by computer reservation systems, global distribution systems or tour operators' videotext systems (leisure travel Networks) [56].

For many years, tourists have had access to computerized tourism information and reservation systems through travel agencies only. Today, however, more and more tourists get tourism information directly through the Internet in an efficient way [57]. Traditional shopping channels may no longer satisfy them anymore. A recent US survey revealed that more and more

Internet users will make their holiday travel plans via the Internet in future. Of the 7700 respondents surveyed, 90% planned to purchase travel services online like airfare, followed by hotels (52%) and car rental reservations (42%). Another study shows that US Internet users will spend US\$16.6 billion online in 2003 on leisure and business travel [58]. This new technology provides advantages for the tourism information suppliers too, in that, e.g., the offer time for tourism products can be extended towards the time of consumption. This increases the likelihood that a buyer is found and here with reduces the costs for committed but not consumed resources [59].

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Tourism suppliers can remotely control their servers to display information on services/products at an electronic speed [60]. The factors contributing to the success of a travel website are lower distribution costs, higher revenues, and a larger market share. As for the travelers themselves, the Internet allows them to communicate directly with tourism suppliers to request information, and empowers consumers to develop and purchase their own itineraries at any time and any place [61, 62]. More and more tourists are utilizing the Internet and on-line resources for their information needs [63]. Buhalis [64] argues that the rapid development of the Internet opens up unprecedented and affordable opportunities for the global representation of tourism.

On the other hand, travel agencies are highly dependent on up-to-date, accurate information. Information technology has been widely used within travel agencies for reservations, accounting and inventory management functions. Raymond and Bergeron refer to the types of systems used by travel agents as [65]:

- Global distribution systems (GDS) such as Galileo, Sabre and Amadeus which are used for reservations, information search, client management and reporting;

- Organizational information systems (OIS) which are used for accounting, reporting, record management and billing.

At the present day, an increasing number of lodging customers make reservations directly

with hotels by bypassing traditional distribution channels [66].

In Buhalis's study [67], it was found that information technologies, especially the Internet, can be used as an effective business tool in the tourism industry.

Conclusion

Information systems and Internet are used in every level of life and age. It would be a gross injury to not to take into consideration the advantage of Internet and information systems while the negative effects of them are discussed today.

Internet and information systems play a great role in establishments' life, as it is the same in every subject area. Especially establishments are using information systems intensively in their commerce activities except from the whole functions.

Important changes have been seen in recent years in establishments' marketing concept with the increasing use of the Internet. Establishments reserve investments for e-commerce and Internet while they are designating their marketing budget.

The Internet's core advantage lies in its great capacity of fast, efficient, integrated, and interactive exchange of information. The multiple tools of the Internet enable the transmission and exchange of information through multiple formats, namely one-to-one communication (i.e., through e-mail), one-to-many (i.e., through the Web or e-mail), and many-to-many (i.e., through the Web, newsgroups and mailing lists) communication. Thus, the Internet facilitates the information exchanges between organizations, concerning issues such as discovery of new customer needs, trends of the local and global markets, competitive moves, joint development of products, joint selling activities, etc. [68].

Together with the prevalence of Internet more tourism establishment begin to use Internet more. So it is possible to say that tourism establishments benefit from the advantages of technology. On the other hand, an increasing number of tourism establishments begin to use Internet and information systems especially in marketing and sale activities. Hospitality establishments, transportation establishments and travel establishments benefit from the advantages that Internet serves them and try to increase their commerce activities by reaching more effectively to their target audience.

The travel and tourism industry has become a sophisticated and complex industry, providing a wide range of products for business, leisure and many other purposes, and encompassing a diverse range of firms and other organizations. In fact, it can be seen as an 'umbrella industry', comprising a series of interrelated businesses, embracing, amongst others, travel and transportation companies, accommodation and catering enterprises, destination agencies, tour operators, travel agents, and providers of recreation and leisure facilities. Apart from being highly important in a socio-cultural and an environmental context, the travel and tourism industry is of major economic importance to most countries in the world.

Travel establishments are more dynamic than other tourism establishments and the necessity to reach consumers is their basic mission. Being information source is the most important role that travel establishments take. In recent years travel establishments began to use technology and Internet more frequently and they began to make more investments on this area.

Travel establishments give information about their services and products to their potential consumers and also they perform reservation and sales mission through the Internet. By this way they use the advantages that technology presents them. Usually some travel establishments continue their activities with computers by only opening Internet agencies. So, they perform their marketing and sales activities by using Internet instead of a physical establishment.

Historical structures and mythologies may preclude particular futures, but the pattern of social innovation remains open to multiple interpretations, both good and bad; futures are always provisional, and are a product of individual and collective expectations, competition, serendipity, and the tensions and contradictions inherent in all human activity [69].

An important contributor to understanding the future Internet-based business models is an awareness that future scenarios are not realities somehow disconnected from the present. Even revolutionary change can be shown to have its roots in fissures of the past. We have already discussed many of the socio-economic factors shaping the tourism sector of today [70].

It is possible to indicate that the role, importance and effects of information systems, e-commerce and Internet in business world will increasingly continue in the future. The fast changes in business world causes people to make

different decision in different situations and so the number of people that make daily activities through Internet, increase. This situation effect directly tourism industry and travel establishments.

It is possible to state that this tendency will continue in the future and with this prediction it is possible to say that travel establishments will serve more facilities through Internet. Although there are a lot of people who think that travel agencies will remove from tourism industry with the increase of Internet use, travel agencies will extend their service network by the reason of Internet and so they will reach more consumers and will increase their commerce performance.

Travel establishments employ people who can use Internet effectively and have enough knowledge about information systems. So, travel establishments revise their personal profile and adopt it to the new tendency. Travel establishments can serve their services more and more people in Internet and they try to expand their market through these qualified personal.

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