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ВЪЗПРИЕМАНЕТО НА ИНТЕРНЕТ МАРКЕТИНГА ОТ АЛБАНСКИТЕ ТУРИСТИЧЕСКИ АГЕНЦИИ

THE ADOPTION OF INTERNET MARKETING BY ALBANIAN TRAVEL AGENCIES

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Abstract: Technology had a great impact on different industries. Tourism is not exempted from that. Several firms have offered their tourism services on-line and claim that they offer better their services comparing with the traditional travel agencies. But what is important is the perception of their customers. In this research different determinantes of tourists' satisfaction in on-line tourism was investigated. Internet has changed the way travel business is conducted especially the patterns of traditional distribution of tourism products and services. The progress of technologies brings a number of issues for travel agencies to deal with. Internet present a powerful tool for travel agencies against to traditional agencies. These technologies can also contribute to minimizing transaction costs, lowering uncertainty, sharing market information and aiding in distribution channel efficiency. Providing computer systems that integrate travel businesses with supplier, distributor and retailers is the crucial first step toward developing successful e-commerce business model. The number of tourists who use internet to make booking or reservation online is growing up. Albanian travel agencies must understand these changes to adopt their business according to these changes.

Key word. Travel agencies, travel industry, electronic services, internet marketing.

1. Introduction

The benefits from the exploitation of new technologies in the promotion and marketing of tourist services arise from the kind of communication that the internet offers for organizations, enterprises, citizens and consumers. The internet is a channel allowing fast, easy and direct communication. An important advantage is the availability of tourist information continuously, on a 24-hour basis. The internet is also naturally used in tourism which, as a social experience, involves direct and indirect human interaction. Furthermore, according to all international studies, the number of travelers that access the internet to seek information for their travel and to select a destination is steadily

increasing. The quality of the presence of a destination in the internet (easiness to find and access content, structure, design etc.) is nowadays of crucial importance and constitutes a selection criterion. This also applies for Albania and was clearly shown in the results of the internet user's field research, where 52 % of the respondents said that they have used the internet to find information about tourist services. In the beginning, travel agency websites were simply used as an 'online brochure', in other words, providing static information for the online consumers to view. Today some travel agency websites are starting to find other uses of their websites, such as providing interactive functions and personalizing and customizing its contents

based on the characteristics of their target markets. Travel agencies have come to realize that their websites serve as extended office to their customers and represent the quality of their products and services as well as their reputation.

Studies on tourism website performance in the world have evolved over the years and it is very easy to find in the literature. The purpose of this paper is to introduce an approach and analyze of travel agencies websites in Albania. The approach involves applying, the extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA) developed by Burgess and Cooper. The eMICA model was used to evaluate the extent of travel agencies website development. The findings of the study contribute to a better understanding of the functionality used in travel agencies web sites and confirm in general the usefulness of the eMICA model for evaluating websites by travel agencies, with suggestions for improving the eMICA model in future research. In addition, this research provides recommendations for travel agencies and professionals on how to build well-constructed and effective websites in order to have a very powerful tools for marketing.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sampling Procedure

For the purpose of this study, was used the directory of the travel agencies published in the website of Tourism National Agency in Albania, (<http://www.akt.gov.al>). The directory contains the top 113 travel agencies in Albania, with different level of operational capabilities. Some travel agencies can only operate within Albania while others are registered for both domestic and international travel. Out of the 113 travel agencies, we select a total sample of 49 agencies which had developed their website.

2.2 Data Collection

Search engines, Google and (<http://www.akt.gov.al>) were used to find the corresponding websites. As the site performance may be influenced by the type

of browser, computer speed, internet speed, and time of a day, these external factors were controlled when conducting the content analyses of the sites.

3. Literature Review

Studies on the role and impact of the Internet have been conducted in recent years, particularly in the area of advertising and marketing. The Internet has proven to be an effective means of marketing, advertising, distributing goods, and information services. The Web is both the biggest challenge and the biggest opportunity for travel agencies in a long time. Furthermore, the travel and tourism industry is a very fragmented and an information-rich business, which makes it especially receptive for the benefits that the Internet offers. One of the characteristics of tourism products is that it is intangible, in other words, they can't be sampled before the purchase decision is made. The information-based nature of the tourism products means that the Internet, which offers global reach and multimedia capability, is an ideal communication vehicle for promoting and distributing tourism products and services.

How the Internet changed traditional tourism industry in developed countries has been studied by Burgess. However, there are only a few researches into the classification and evaluation of tourism websites in Albania, although in the case of general website assessment, some publications of results do exist but they do not specifically address tourism websites.

Many researchers have used content analysis to evaluate the websites of related industries. The model was developed on the basis of a conceptual framework which consisted of five major website dimensions, including information and promotion, reservations information, surrounding area information, and management of websites.

In relation to the above, Doolin and Cooper has described that commercial website development typically begins simply and evolves over time with the addition more functionality and complexity

as firms gain experience with internet technologies. The extended model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA) was developed by Burgess & Cooper. It was based on this concept. They used the eMICA model to evaluate the level of website development was realized for the first time, in New Zealand's Regional Tourism Organizations and highlighted the utility of using interactivity to measure the relative maturity of tourism websites. Since then, the eMICA model has been used frequently. Larson & Ankomah employed it to evaluate the degree of sophistication of the websites of 20 US states/territories' tourism organizations. We have also used the eMICA model to study the electronic commerce application level of Albanian travel agencies.

Things have changed dramatically over the past several years in terms of website design and development methodology. Back in old days (a couple of years ago in internet years) it was quite acceptable, and the norm for an organization to pack all of its brochures, ads, direct-mail pieces, new releases and other marketing materials in box, drop it off at the web developer's office and after a short conversation ask when they might expect the web site to be "done". The web developer would then take the marketing materials and digitize some, scan some and do some HTML programming to develop the site. By going through this process, organizations ended up with a web site that looked just like their brochure, so hence the term "brochureware". Brochureware is no longer acceptable on the web if we want to be successful. Sites that are successful today are ones that are designed around: Objectives of the organization; Needs, wants and expectations of their target market; Products and services that are being offered¹. Some of the most commonly primary objectives include: (1) Advertising product and services; (2) Selling product and services; (3) Providing customer

services and support; (4) Providing product or corporate information; (5) Creating and establishing brand identity and brand awareness or company identity and awareness.

This study uses the eMICA model developed by Burgess and Cooper. The eMICA model consists of three stages, incorporating three levels of business process which are: Web-based promotion, information and services, and transaction level. The stages of development provide a roadmap that indicates where a business or industry sector is in its development of internet marketing applications. E-MICA model incorporates a number of additional layers of complexity, ranging from very simple to highly sophisticated, within the identified main stages of the model. The eMICA model is shown in Table 1.

¹ 101 Ways to Promote Your Website, p 2-8, Susan Sweeney, CA, CSP, HoF

Table 1. The extended model of internet commerce adoption eMICA

eMICA	Examples of functionality
Stage 1—Promotion	
Layer 1 basic information Layer 2 rich information	Company name, physical address and contact details, area of business Annual report, email contact, information on company activities
Stage 2—Information and services	
Layer 1 low interactivity	Basic product catalogue, hyperlinks to further information, online enquiry form Higher-level product catalogues, customer support (e.g., FAQs, sitemaps), industry-specific value added features Chat room, discussion forum, multimedia, newsletters or updates by email
Layer 2 medium interactivity	
Layer 3 high interactivity	
Stage 3— Transactions	
Layer 1 transactions	Secure online transactions, order status and tracking, interaction with organization servers.

Promotion is the initial stage of web development, with static information which serves mainly to promote the business offerings. A second level is also presented where a richer variety of information is available on the web. In other words, this is an additional channel of marketing strategies, offering the company's information online. The second stage described what the eMICA model is when the company website *moves to a dynamic information system* with a web front end. Within this stage, are identified in three levels. Low level of interactivity is characterized by on-line catalogues, links to detailed information and on-line registration form. Medium level of interactivity is characterized with more complete product catalogues, on-line help for users and personalization as well as wider links to industry sites. High level of interactivity is completed by the sites that include chat rooms, discussion forums and multimedia applications.

The third stage identified in the eMICA model is where the web site has a functional maturity *which permits on-line transactions*. This requires a higher level of security than the previous stages as well as user identification. At this stage users will be able to purchase products and services across the web, maintain an individual

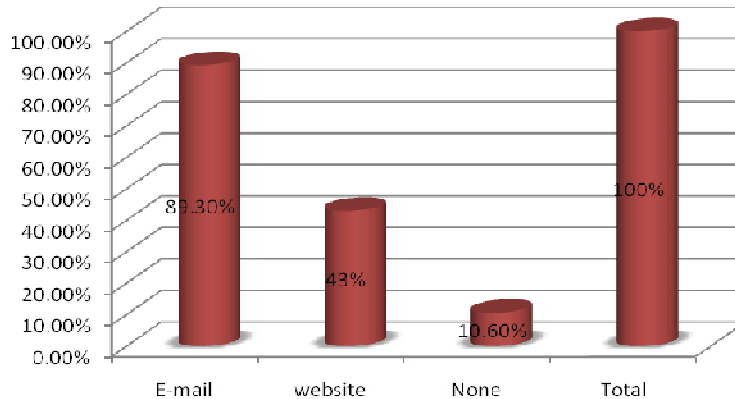
profile and obtain personal profiles matching offerings to the individual needs. This is the broadest and most complex ecommerce application since it enables the company to process multiple tasks such as online sales, online orders, online delivery (especially for digital products) and online payment.

4. The adoption of internet marketing by albanian travel agencies

Travel agencies use a variety of published and computer-based sources for information on departure and arrival times, fares, quality of hotel accommodations, and group discounts others specialize in travel targeted to particular demographic groups, such as senior citizens. Travel agencies who primarily work for tour operators and other travel arrangers may help develop, arrange, and sell the company's own package tours and travel services. They may promote these services, using telemarketing, direct mail, and the Internet. They make presentations to social and special-interest groups, arrange advertising displays, and suggest company-sponsored trips to business managers. The National Agency of Tourism in Albania, has started its activity since the year 2005 and serve as main online directory for travel agencies, hotels, restaurants, Night club, Guesthouse,

etc. There are 113 travel agencies in Albania. 43% of them have their own website, 89% have e-mail address and only

10% of them have none of them. Source: National tourism agency. (www.akt.gov.al).



This paper uses the eMICA model to study the travel agency website of Albania, because the model has been tested and used on tourism industry, and several surveys have been done for the USA, Europe and Australia regional tourism organizations. In this study, we change and modify the original model created by

Burgess and Cooper (2000). In evaluating the travel agency websites, some elements are omitted, but some new ones are added. Similar to the original model, the adopted one from us has three stages, but some of the elements are changed: Table 2

Table 2. The extended model of internet commerce adoption for travel agencies in Albania

Promotion stage:	
1.	Contact detail
2.	Images, photos
3.	Information for travel agency, products and services, touristic destination
Information and services	
4.	Systematic links to further information
5.	Product catalogs (accommodation, dining, shopping)
6.	Multiple value-added features (maps, location, news, photo gallery, e-zinnes, ads)
7.	Interactive value-added features (currency convertors, interactive maps, downloadable materials, special offers, guest books)
8.	Online customer support (FAQs, site map, site-search engine)
9.	Online bookings
10.	Advanced value-added features (Order form inquiry, multi-language support, multimedia, chat rooms and discussion forums)
Transactions stage	
11.	Secure online payment
12.	Services after payment

The Albanian tourism industry has developed its online services and obtained some initial experience. Albania has a different tourism ecommerce development environment in which barriers and challenges are still present. Out of the 49

travel agencies which had developed their website 10 of them are under construction or have technical problems. Each travel agency site was assigned an appropriate stage and layer in the eMICA model based

on the level of development of the site. The results of the study are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of the travel agency websites evaluated

	Stage of eMICA	Number of sites	Percentage of total sites
I	Promotion stage		
	Layer 1	2	5 %
	Layer 2	4	10 %
II	Information and services		
	Layer 1	5	13 %
	Layer 2	16	42 %
	Layer 3	6	15 %
III	Transactions stage		
	Layer 1	6	15 %
	Total	39	100%

Only 15% of travel agencies in Albania are located in the first stage of eMICA model. They provide information about agencies (agency name, physical address and contact details, area of business, information on company activities and contact detail); information for touristic destination and their product or services; images, photos. The majority of travel agencies, about 75% are in the second stage, have interactive value-added features such as key facts, maps, location, news, photo gallery, e-zines, ads, and site search engine. They offer systematic link for further information which enable customers to obtain the necessary information for their decisions. Certainly, considerable amount of websites do not have the overall systematic links and sometimes the page are under constructions or missing information. So the technical problems (by the side of travel agency) are evident. A good word-of-mouth viral marketing strategy enables a visitors or a recipient of e-mail to share the website or e-mail content with others with just one click of a button or link. Every travel agency should look to every repeat traffic generator for viral marketing. Repeat traffic generator like coupons, newsletters, e-specials and contests all provide ideal opportunities for "Tell a friend" or "Send a copy to a friend" links and buttons. Unfortunately only two

agencies have included these options in their websites.

Only 15% of travel agencies have attributes of the Transactions stage which is third stage of the eMICA model. In other words, only few websites have developed to that stage. This may indicate that many users of website are skeptic to online payment or they don't have credit card at all.

5. Conclusions

The number of websites continues to grow up and the travel agencies are looking for the better ways in order to satisfy the consumer's needs. The ability of websites to attract customers will become increasingly critical for business survival. According to this research, the main aspects of insufficiency of travel agencies services in Albania are:

1) The results show that online travel agencies in Albania have mainly moderate level of website development. On the other hand, most European travel agencies websites adopt or covered all three stages of eMICA model.

2) The content of the websites sometimes is not well designed. Generally, the designers of the websites will take in account some critical details such as what are the customer's needs and how can attract them to our sites. The pages are so filled with massive duties and some time

are poor of information or online service which customer really expect to get.

2) Some websites are not update. This is a big problem for the websites users.

3) Some travel agencies have used heavy videos as their front-page, but sometime this is not a good choice due of the technical problems in loading the page.

4) The key factor for developing a successful website is to correctly define user needs or requirements. Some travel agencies websites are not satisfactory. Therefore, as obtaining information is still the main aim of web users so improving the quality and level of web information are major tasks for travel agencies.

5) About 10% of travel agencies websites are constantly under construction, or even inactive, as mentioned in the focus groups discussions and also confirmed

during the field research. On the contrary, the others (professionals websites) show much better results, mainly due to their personal involvement and close following up of technological developments.

6) Some travel agencies websites doesn't have the option of booking and online payment. They are only information providers. Furthermore, exist a lack of services after payment. This layer which includes following services is not presented in eMICA model, but it is important and significant from our point of view because the travel agencies must develop continuous relations in long terms with their customers.

As was assumed, the websites of travel agencies must adopt all the element of eMICA model in order to get traffic and satisfy the consumer's needs.

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