

AN EVALUATION OF CARIBBEAN DESTINATIONS WEBSITES

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has proved to be a widespread medium and an integral part of the habits of millions of users throughout the world. An effective online communication strategy is considered nowadays a key element to achieve a competitive advantage in the travel & tourism market, to satisfy actual and potential tourists' information needs in a highly competitive way and to acquire new clients. All the Caribbean countries have implemented some kind of official tourism portal to promote their own destinations. An analysis of these tourism websites has been performed by collecting end-user evaluations and mapping contents and services offered online. The results show the level of quality for the destinations official tourism websites.

Key Words: Caribbean, Internet, quality, websites, evaluation, marketing

Introduction

In less than 30 years, the Internet has become the most significant development in communications since the invention of the printing press and has deeply revolutionized the way in which we communicate. Moreover, it has been the fastest growing communications medium ever and most of this diffusion is due to the development of the World Wide Web; its rate of diffusion has been much faster than radio in the 1920s, television in the 1950s and mobile phones in the 1980s (Odlyzko, 2000). For these characteristics the Web has been defined, since the beginning of its mass diffusion, as the Holy Grail of Marketing (Foxworthy 1997). Its actual potential as a marketing tool is greatly enhanced when fully integrated with other functionalities of the Internet,

such as e-mail or public discussion boards, supporting real-time one-to-one and one-to-many communications. The Internet provides features that are especially relevant to the marketing of travel & tourism. Travel is an experiential practice; travellers are not simply buying packages, accommodation, seats, or food and beverages, they are fulfilling fantasies (Archdale 1995). The Internet, with its wealth of information, pictures and multimedia has the capability to provide the appropriate stimuli to favour the purchase of a travel product or service. As the tourism business, like many others, continues its globalization process, the competitive pressure on individual destinations and attractions increases. According to statistics of the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2015), international tourist arrivals for 2014 exceeded 1138 million. The growing competition, the increasing range of travel markets, products and destinations, as well as the ever more difficult chore of finding new market segments and communicating with them, makes the Internet a valuable tool for marketing travel and tourism (Pollock 1995). This is particularly true for destination marketing, an activity in which the success is mainly due to the ease with which a good supply of information about places, facilities and events is transferred to the visitor (Sheldon 1993).

The Internet has reshaped many facets of travel, including information search and planning (Mills & Law, 2004; Xiang et al., 2008) as well as the purchase of travel-related products (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Werthner & Klein, 1999). Indeed, studies conducted by the Pew Foundation Internet Project (2009) indicate that travel reservations are one of the most popular online activities for American travellers, and that the percentage of US adults who booked or purchased travel products increased by about 250% between 2000 and 2009. In addition, a 2009 report by USTA (2009) indicates that 96.8% of online American travellers use the Internet for travel planning (or online travellers), and 80.3% of online American travellers purchase travel products for pleasure trip purposes. Another characteristic of the tourism industry which makes it dubious is its intangible nature and this can be minimized by providing information via commercial brochures, tourism website etc. Tourists like other customers seek information before travelling and today in the era of internet around 80% of the prospective tourist starts their research on internet, particularly the tourism websites of the place of travel. An effective and well maintained website is the need of the hour. Therefore the Caribbean governments have realized the urgency and need of maintaining their destinations tourism website and hence are spending a huge amount and resources for designing a good website. After globalization and the technological revolution of 1990's particularly the arrival of internet, the scope of tourism has expanded, which further has brought many new opportunities as well as challenges for the tourism and hospitality industry. Internet and tourism goes hand in hand. Today, most people consult online before they plan their travel. Internet is beneficial for both customers as well as suppliers as it is cost effective, geographical boundary less, generates high revenue but still very little research is done on evaluating the parameters for effective tourism websites in the Caribbean. So it is very important to study the

parameters which makes a website effective and helps to promote destinations by attracting tourists.

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such as Expedia.com, Kayak.com, Lastminute.com, Orbitz.com, and Travelocity.com enable travellers to easily check price, search for up-to-date information, purchase last minute or online specials, and communicate directly with sellers and/or other consumers (Jang, 2004; Law & Leung, 2000). Jun et al. (2007) compared different types of travel products travellers purchased and information sources they used (e.g., online, offline and both online and offline). They concluded that accommodations, car rentals and flights are leading travel products that travellers are more likely to search information for and to purchase via the Internet.

There is a multitude of indicators to use in and reasonable literature about evaluating a website. Several domain-specific website evaluation criteria were developed in the past few years. Criteria were developed to evaluate websites dedicated to bookstores, jobs (Terzis & Economides, 2005), museums (Pallas & Economides, 2008), airlines companies (Apostolou & Economides, 2008), ministries (Ataloglou & Economides, 2009). Examining the Webby Awards 2000 data set to understand which factors distinguish highly-rated websites from those that receive poor ratings, (Sinha, Hearst, & Ivory, 2001) evaluated 3000 websites based on six criteria: content, structure & navigation, visual design, functionality, interactivity, and over all experience. They found that the content was by far the best predictor of the overall experience, while visual design was the worst predictor of the overall experience. Targeting Web page designers; Web masters; business owners; and researchers, (Viehland & Zhao, 2008) determined how well New Zealand's top 50 Web sites were following international homepage guidelines based on twelve criteria in three categories – web page design, navigation, and usability. (Mateos, Mera, Miranda Gonzalez, & Lopez, 2001;

Miranda Gonzalez & Banegil Palacios, 2004) developed a Web Assessment Index (WAI) which provided an integrated approach for evaluating websites based on four criteria: accessibility, speed, navigability, and content which were objectively evaluated and each website was given a score out of a 100. (Ooi, Ho, & Amri, 2010) used a list of 10 criteria to evaluate three education service providers' websites in Malaysia. The ten criteria used were: source, layout, accessibility, speed, navigability, content, accuracy, level of details, current information, and appearance. They adopted a binary scoring indicating the existence or non-existence of a criterion. Using six Website evaluation dimensions, (Pallas & Economides, 2008) developed museum's site evaluation framework (MUSEF). The framework used website content, presentation, usability, interactivity, e-service, and technical as its evaluation dimensions. Each dimension contained a number of specific criteria. Sonoma State University developed a set of criteria to evaluate website content (Sonoma State University, 2005). Nielson presented evaluation criteria for websites' interface design (Nielson Norman Group, 2006). Several other authors designed sets of criteria for evaluating website features, such as currency, navigation, authority, accuracy, and coverage (Fisher, Burstein, Lynch, & Lazarenko, 2008; Hackett & Parmanto, 2009; K. H. Kim, Jung, Charles, & Doo-Hee, 2007; Lituchy & Barra, 2008; O' Reilly & Flood, 2008; Schmidt, Cantalops, & dos Santos, 2008; Yang & Chan, 2008).

The quality of a Website is difficult to define and capture but designers, developers, and users feel it when it is missing. Website quality depends on three sets of factors: task-related, performance-related, and development-related factors (Brajnik, 2001). Task-related factors include navigability, presentation quality, and appeal, content and functional adequacy. Performance-related factors include response time, transaction throughput, reliability and robustness. Development-related factors include code complexity, code reliability, code flexibility, portability, page coupling, and modifiability. The Website quality evaluation method (QEM) proposed by (Olsina, Godoy, Lafuente, & Rossi, 1999) is one of the main approaches to assess websites. (Misic & Johnson, 1999) used four factors of Website effectiveness function, navigation, content, and contact information to benchmark the Website of the College of Business at Northern Illinois University against 45 other business schools. We must distinguish between manual and automated approaches for analysing and evaluating websites. Manual evaluation relies on the judgments of individual analysts on certain websites. Speed, rigorous structure, and abundance of data are assured when evaluation is done automatically with software tools (Bauer & Scharl, 2000).

The decision of the tourist is influenced by two factors internal experiences i.e. their own past experience and the external information which we get on internet, websites or online blogs, brochures etc. (Peterson, Balasubramanian & Bronenberg, 1997). With the ever increasing use of the internet it has become very important for the countries to maintain a well-designed and competent website (Kaplanidon & Vogt, 2004). A well designed and maintained website will reach to a larger number of people which will be more beneficial for the businesses (English Tourism

Council, 2002; Rita, 2000). Website can be used as a marketing tool; it increases the brand identity and also helps in market research (Armstrong & Kotler, 2009). The prime role of a website is to provide complete information of the product and company to its consumer (Hallerman, 2009). Now with the help of tourism websites, people can easily have access to all the information at a destination like accommodation, transportation, tours, beach activities etc. They can get in touch with the suppliers and service providers directly which brings down the intermediary cost. Hence it becomes cost effective and time saving (Antonioli, Magda & Baggio, 2002). Direct contact making, quick research and response, low distribution cost, and opportunity to buy the best deal by comparing the prices are some of the important factors, why people prefer to use the internet over traditional purchasing (Eisenberg & Eisenberg, 2005). The success of website is dependent on its functionality and usability (Lu & Yeung, 1988). The characteristics of website which makes it an effective website are clear, adequate and updated information, user friendly and easy to understand, quick response to queries and feedbacks (Hamil & Gregory, 1997). Factors crucial for the success of tourism websites are the provision of maps, visa information, do's and don'ts of the place, information about currency, distances, culture, weather etc. and also the availability of sufficient photographs and videos (Zhou & DeSantis, 2005). The tourism websites should not be static, boring or dull instead they should be innovative and attractive (Lazariuis et al., 2002; Albert et al., 2004). Different researchers have felt the need and importance of evaluating the websites. Website evaluation can be described as a process of understanding the user requirements and ensuring the website provides relevant and updated information which is helpful for the users (US Dept of Health and Human Services, 2002). The websites must not be overloaded with the information because excessive information can create a lot of confusion and can drop the quality of decision taken by the people (Biswas, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

By summarizing the ideas and the studies of a number of practitioners and researchers it is possible to compile a list of elements that are essential to the development of a successful web site (Morrison et al., 2004; Nielsen, 1994; Nielsen & Molich, 1990; Rachman & Buchanan, 1999a, 1999b). The list of the criteria based on these authors' works for the evaluation of websites is given in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Elements of a successful website

No.	Evaluative statement
1	Strategies and objectives must be clearly stated and clearly understandable by the visitors.
2	The target audience must be identified and the site must meet the needs expressed by it.
3	Features that make possible an interaction between the user and the organization must be present and designed in a fully usable way.
4	A rational structure supported by navigation aids must avoid any risk of confusion and allow users to browse all of the sections with great ease.
5	Other features adding functionality or aesthetic appeal must be designed in a coherent way and must be functional to the site contents.
6	Informational content must be presented in a readable and correct way (colors, size, fonts, grammar, style etc.). The site must exhibit credibility, relevance and accuracy of the information presented
7	Content of high value must be provided to the users to encourage them to explore further and to return regularly to the site.
8	Regular and frequent maintenance to add, revise or remove content and to correct errors and malfunctions must be accomplished.
9	Promotion of the site must take place using an integrated approach that incorporates traditional media and online resources.
10	The financial, human and physical resources required for the Internet marketing effort must be given the correct consideration and planned and controlled in a reasonable way.

Based on these characteristics a quality index has been developed that has two major components. The first is the user evaluation of the website content and the second is evaluation of the website's

functionality. Combining these two use-based scales it is possible to derive a general quality index defined as (Baggio, 2003):

QUALITY INDEX = CONTENT EVALUATION X FUNCTIONALITY EVALUATION

The number of evaluators (i.e., the sample size) is an important element to derive a significant result from these assessments. Classical statistical procedures have well-grounded methodologies for estimating the ideal size of a sample depending on the population parameters. The range is typically of the order of magnitude of about 102 – 103. However, it has been shown (Antonioli Corigliano & Baggio, 2006) that the significance of these types of assessments can be quite satisfactory even employing a limited sample of evaluators. In fact, for this present case of 103 evaluators, the confidence interval for the results presented here can be estimated to be around 5%. The evaluators were asked to check the existence of the items on the websites under analysis and to assign a score (from 0 = min to 5 = max) taking into account the usability and the completeness of the single functionalities (Antonioli Corigliano & Baggio, 2004; Baggio, 2003).

In this study twenty websites of the Caribbean islands have been assessed using a methodology derived from these considerations. A representative sample of end-users 103 students completed a questionnaire evaluating the websites based on the above characteristics. These students were given a lecture by the researcher about website evaluation then spent a class session looking at the Caribbean websites. The next class session was then used to do the website evaluations and completing the evaluation form. Microsoft Excel version 10 was used for the statistical analysis of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this survey show that, even considering the relatively young age of these implementations, these websites are designed outstandingly but some of them can be improved. While the potential of the Internet has been much discussed a few of the websites do not meet their potential. Users' evaluations and mapping of contents and services offered attain a generally medium quality index, mainly in the area of the customer relationship functionalities. Given the relationship between online buyers and website quality, some of the countries do not take full advantage of the e-commerce capabilities of the Internet, thus risking loss of significant tourism business for their destinations. In performing the analysis a quality index has been defined by combining user evaluations and level of contents and services provided.

The Internet has had a substantial impact on the purchase of travel products, and in particular destinations, airline and hotel reservations; however, a wide array of travel products are now sold

online, including car rental reservations, tickets to attractions and events, cruise reservations and tickets to sporting events. The results of this study as can be seen in Table 2. Using the Quality Index Value, shows that the Caribbean destinations websites with the best quality include Jamaica (M=18.5), the British Virgin Islands (M=18.26) and the Cayman Islands (M=18.10). Grenada was the only destination in the second tier (M=17.11) and 5 destinations in the third tier with mean scores between 16 and 17. The bottom tier consist of three islands, Bonaire (M=12.37), Curacao (M=12.85) and Puerto Rico (M=12.78). The island of Cuba score (M=8.47) was significantly less than all the other islands.

Table 2. Caribbean Destinations Websites Quality Index

Destination	Fuctionality (Mean)	Content (Mean)	Quality Index Value
Antigua	4.01	4.16	16.68
Anguilla	4.22	3.92	16.53
Aruba	4.08	4.16	16.97
Barbados	3.95	3.98	15.72
Bonaire	3.52	3.51	12.37
British Virgin Islands	4.27	4.28	18.26
Cayman Islands	4.18	4.33	18.10
Cuba	2.89	2.93	8.47
Curacao	3.64	3.53	12.85
Dominica	4.01	3.97	15.91
Grenada	4.10	4.17	17.11
Guadeloupe	3.59	3.84	13.8
Jamaica	4.31	4.29	18.50
Martnique	3.85	3.99	15.37
Montserrat	3.8	3.85	14.63
Puerto Rico	3.51	3.64	12.78
St.Kitts & Nevis	3.88	3.99	15.49
St.Lucia	4.14	3.94	16.31
St.Vincent	4.07	4.06	16.52
St.Maarten	3.74	3.57	13.36

Several practical implications can be drawn for the Caribbean destinations and online travel and tourism businesses. First, it is posited that businesses promoting tourism products online need to consider the 'cluster' of buying behaviours when developing travel related products. Since online travellers would be likely to purchase similar types of travel products in terms of the complexity degree and the function of the product, business marketers need to identify the 'cluster' of purchasing behaviours of the traveller, and then provide a customized set of online travel

products. In addition, destination marketers need to provide different types of tools to support the different purchasing groups as they differ substantially in terms of Internet knowledge, innovativeness, satisfaction, usage and the information sources they use.

This study provides a new angle to the understanding of communication effectiveness on Caribbean destination websites. Processing fluency indicates that customers only can process a rational amount of messages on the destination websites. Therefore, marketers are advised to use strategies which limit the amount of messages communicated by the website features. The priority rankings of the four primary website characteristics are 1) information quality, 2) ease of use, 3) interactivity, and 4) visual attractiveness. High-quality information content serves as the most important fluency signal. Top priority for marketers is the importance of comprehensive, useful, timely, and easy-to-comprehend travel information to attract potential customers. Customers who visit a destination website have questions they are seeking to answer and will be disappointed if the website looks great, but does not answer their questions clearly and accurately. Marketers are advised to always keep in mind that the primary objective of customers is high-quality tourism information, and not fancy website design features. .

Ease of use functions facilitate customers' ability to process information content with less effort, such as simple layout, minimal clicks to locate desired information, and clearly separated categories for different groups of tourists, etc. Interactivity functions sometime provide more effective communication than text content on its own because these features help customers understand information faster and more accurately. Although visual attractiveness has been found to spur customers' interest to browse the tourism website, visual attractiveness on its own has a limited impact on processing fluency. In past studies of destination websites, the impact of visual attractiveness on website destination has probably been exaggerated. Appealing website design is like icing on the cake, but cannot replace the cake itself, namely high-quality specific and accurate travel information.

Based on our findings we recommend that Caribbean destinations should act collaboratively with different hotels, travel agents, transport providers, ancillary service providers such as police, hospitals, fire emergency etc. to provide information about them on their website so, as to make website more tourist friendly. Different people from different countries understand different languages, some of the destinations websites were presented in one language, and translation facility can help to reduce this gap. So a tourism website should provide provision of multi-language translation. All the important and necessary information should be available and accessed easily so they should be clearly available on the home page. A person sitting thousands of miles away do not have an idea of exact distance, time to travel from one place to another, weather condition, do's and don'ts, permits required. All the necessary information should be

provided on the website so that travellers would not face any inconvenience and would further build their trust.

Conclusion

Caribbean countries are among the most popular tourist destinations in the world and the promotion of their resources is a crucial activity, mainly performed by the various national tourism organizations. The Internet and the Web have proved, in the last few years, to be a widespread communication and business environment and have rapidly become an important part of the habits of millions of users. An effective online communication strategy is considered nowadays a key element to achieve a competitive advantage on the market, to satisfy actual and potential tourists' information needs in a highly competitive way and to acquire new clients. All the Caribbean countries have implemented some kind of official Internet tourism portal to promote their own destination. An analysis of these official tourism websites has been performed collecting end-user evaluations and mapping contents and services offered online. Some tourists only have a slight idea of where they want to go on a vacation when planning starts. Such tourists or their travel partners are likely to look for information for making a final travel decision. As the web becomes an increasingly popular information source, tourism destination websites can play a critical role in destination choice. The Caribbean Islands Destinations websites need to remain reliable and up-to-date; most of them are technically satisfactory.

The main limitation of studies such as the present one on the evaluations of a website is the lack of common and generally accepted assessment principles. Many different research works propose different although similar approaches (see for example, many of the papers in Frew 2004). A more uniform methodology could prove extremely valuable in comparing the evaluations performed by different groups in different conditions, thus increasing the usefulness of the approach and of the indications that can be derived from such works. The website of a tourism destination can give a competitive advantage especially in the main tourism spender countries, where the Internet technologies have nowadays reached a real mass diffusion. The implications of a methodology to assess the quality of a website as perceived by the casual user are very important. Even though theories about design and implementation techniques of usable software products exist, without doubt the success of a website is guided by the appreciation of the users and their criteria are the most important determinants.

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