

The Travel Agency Website – Factor for Business Success

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Abstract

E-commerce is a constant of contemporary life. The online purchase of tourist products is a complex and delicate process, and in this respect, the website has a decisive role. The way the website is designed, the information provided and the functional characteristics can make a difference between an ordinary and a successful travel agency. This article provides an analysis of the websites of the best known travel agencies in Brașov County. The evaluation highlights that, in terms of product, non-product and reservation features, the analyzed websites meet the desired characteristics. But as concerning payment, functionality and customer relationship management features, these elements are poorly highlighted. This assessment suggests the preference of travel agencies to address to local inhabitants, thus demonstrating their propensity on the outgoing component of the intermediary activities they carry out.

Key words: tourism website, website evaluation, travel agency, e-commerce.

J.E.L. classification: M31, Z33.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of information technology occurred inevitably in the tourism industry, as well as in the entire global economy. In recent years, the Internet has become a new channel for the commercialization of products conventionally sold through traditional outlets (Hernández *et al*, 2009, p. 362). As a matter of fact purchasing online travel products has become the most successful business of e-commerce (Kim *et al*. 2007, p.591). In 2017, in Romania, according to the Ministry of Tourism records, there are in operation 2.653 licensed travel agencies (Romanian Ministry of Tourism, 2017). In Romania, travel agencies are required to have their own website, as a mandatory element in obtaining the tourism license (National Authority for Tourism, 2013).

The goal of this paper is to evaluate the travel agencies websites, being thus analyzed the best known travel agencies in Brașov County. For this purpose, the author proposed an overall assessment of these websites, based on the specific features and dimensions highlighted by Cao and Yang (2016). The analysis is concluded with a set of proposals meant to increase the professionalism in creating and managing travel agencies websites.

2. Literature review

The development of technology and the evolution of e-commerce activities have a strong relationship (Chu *et al*, 2007, p.156). E-commerce differs from traditional commerce for a number of reasons: the client is in front of a computer and its physical movement is no longer necessary, time and energy consumptions are low, the purchase is customized by numerous filters that can be accessed, and the performance security is currently very high.

While the Internet has become the primary information source for travel planning and certain channels such as online travel agencies dominate the online information space, today's consumers continue to utilize a variety of channels, both online and offline, to obtain rich and personally relevant information for upcoming trips (Xiang *et al*, 2015, p.246). By gathering and organizing

information, offline channels can provide scene experience, personal and professional information and advice to meet travelers' demands on a continuous basis (Kim *et al.*, 2007, p. 601). Owing to the rapid development of economy and the innovation of information technology, travelers' consumption demand has become more diverse and travel agencies need to develop continuously, as they cannot rely only on lowering the price to attract consumers (Long *et al.*, 2017, p.303).

Travel agencies and online travel agencies (OTAs) deliver travel-related products/services and provide travel-related information and various services to customers (Kim *et al.* 2007, p.592). OTAs especially, but nowadays also traditional tourism agencies, have online platforms that provide customers with information, tools and ways to plan, book and buy tourist services. The emergence of OTAs proposes a networked travel agency sales model and a more interactive communication that is convenient for tourists (Cao *et al.*, 2016, p.284). At first sight it may be argued that in comparison with the traditional agencies, OTAs have a certain handicap, since they do not have direct face-to-face communication and cannot provide customized information and travel services. Their main asset is, therefore, the website, which in case of meeting quality and creativity features, enables humanized, uncomplicated, secured and more customized services. Nevertheless, for the entire tourism distribution system, websites play an important role in providing tourism information, enabling customers to make reservations, fulfilling tourists' requirements, and meeting their expectations (Liao *et al.*, 2017, p.262).

The website core functions are considered the following (Chu *et al.*, 2007, p.156):

- transaction incubation – which furnish participants and the host with basic information processing capabilities;
- transaction negotiation – which facilitate the negotiation of a commercial transaction;
- transaction formation – in which transactions are finalized, participants are authenticated for payment, and digital products are sent to the purchaser;
- transaction management - functions which enable the online coordination of multiple interrelated activities. They can be used to assist in the management of online business processes, enabling the integration, consolidation, optimization, and control of e-business processes.

The most notable characteristics which substantiate the rapid growth of e-commerce in tourism are security, ease of use, finding low prices, accessibility, responsiveness, speed, content quality, personalization, design and presentation, booking flexibility, ability to book all travel services in one transaction, interactivity, sorting options, playfulness and technology integration (Susser *et al.*, 2006, p. 406; Kim *et al.* 2007, pp.592-595; Hernández *et al.*, 2009, p. 364; Chiou *et al.*, 2010, p. 285).

Website content is one of the main factors influencing the visit to a tourist destination. When choosing a destination, visitors get detailed information such as address, pictures, a map, facilities, reference rates and reviews (Cao *et al.*, 2016, p.283). Because of their role in providing information, tourism websites are becoming increasingly important and they are the most frequently visited online information source by travelers (Chiou *et al.*, 2011, p.1473). At the same time, it was acknowledged that more websites that allow online booking have emerged, diminishing the role of traditional travel agencies (Vijoli, *et al.*, 2016, p. 154).

Cao and Yang (2016, p.284) analyzed e-commerce activities in tourism, i.e. attraction websites (AWs), official tourism websites (OTWs), and online travel agents (OTAs), enhancing thus the websites' role to reflect the real situation at a destination. Starting from the conclusions formulated by Chiou *et al.* (2011, p.1465) who analyzed tourism websites' five main features (place, product, price, promotion and customer relationship), and by Ye *et al.* (2016, p.13) who assessed four websites' performance attributes (customer relationship, information, security and function), Cao *et al.* (2016, p. 286) completed a set of features comprising six dimensions used for the analysis of e-commerce adoption on tourism websites (product information, non-product information, reservations, payment, functionality, and customer relationship marketing). Travel agencies should appreciate consumers' perceptions of web functionality, web content, and information security, because this information significantly influences online tourism services continuance (Liao *et al.*, 2017, p.262). Moreover, the attributes should be improved by providers to enhance overall customer satisfaction with travel agencies websites in order to secure their strategic development (Ye *et al.*, 2016, p.14).

3. Research methodology

The features proposed by Cao *et al.* (2016, p. 286) to evaluate travel agencies websites comprise six dimensions:

- a) *Product information.* Comprehensive attributes of the information provided regarding services, help, safety, and lodging options;
- b) *Non-product information.* The informational content present on the websites in terms of both variety and suitability to tourists' needs;
- c) *Reservations.* Options involving online transactions, bookings, and services;
- d) *Payment.* The payment method of choice;
- e) *Functionality.* Accessibility of desired information on the website, links to other tourism websites, and ability to execute the users' commands;
- f) *Customer Relationship Marketing.* Through constant conversations with tourists, and capturing the tourist preferences and behavior on the website, managers can acquire more insights into the demands and preferences of tourists and provide adequate means to retain customer loyalty and increase sales and opportunities to up-sell to tourists.

The evaluation of travel agencies websites was conducted among the best-known tourism intermediaries from Braşov County and the sample included the following eight travel agencies: Kron-Tour Lufthansa City Centre (KT), Viotop Travel (VT), Micomis Travel & Tours (MTT), Paralela 45 (P45), J'Info Tours (JIT), Smart Tours (ST), Eximtur (E) and TUI Travel Centre (TTC).

4. Results

The travel agencies websites were consulted and the results of the analysis are presented in table no.1.

Table no 1. The analysis of travel agencies websites in Braşov County

Dimension (Features)	KT	VT	MTT	P45	JIT	ST	E	TTC	Percentage of website features (%)
1. Product information									
Description of product and services	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Rates/fares	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Photo gallery	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Virtual tours	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	25
Interactivity	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Privacy and security	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
FAQs	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	25
2. Non-product information									
Weather/climate	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	25
Travel directions	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	12,5
Local transport information	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	12,5
Where to stay	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Safety	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
News	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Travel tips	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	87,5
Contact details	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Multiple languages	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	37,5
Visa Information	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0
3. Reservations									

Checking availability	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Making online reservations	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Tracking reservations	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Cancelling reservations	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Cancellation policy	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Amending reservations	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Creating customer accounts	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	87,5
4. Payment									
Credit cards	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	37,5
Debit cards	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	37,5
Electronic cash	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	25
Virtual credit cards	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0
Currency converter	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	12,5
5. Functionality									
Reciprocal links	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	50
Blog/Chat	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	12,5
Search function	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	25
Site map	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0
Maps	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	62,5
Games	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0
Free downloads	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	12,5
6. Customer relationship management (CRM)									
Community/Forum	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0
E-mail address	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Feedback	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0
Promotions and special offers	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Email newsletter	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	87,5
Call-back services	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100
Customer surveys	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0
Comment box	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	12,5
Travel customization	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0
Online consulting	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	37,5
Complaint handling	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	25

Source: Author's own research

The analysis highlight that the assessed websites are focusing in presenting product, non-product, and reservation elements, which in essence, are the main data requested by tourists when searching travel services and products. A special attention should be granted to non-product features, i.e. weather, travel directions, local transport information, multiple languages and visa information, elements that emphasize the fact that, in the vast majority, the travel agencies address mainly to local inhabitants, thus reflecting their focus on outgoing travel activities and Romanian potential tourists. Being primarily interested in selling tourist services, the reservation feature is very well represented. At the same time, it is worth mentioning the obvious weaknesses of payment features, suggesting the lack of confidence in electronic payment methods. Functionality features are also poorly presented within the assessed websites. As for the CRM features, elements like community/forum, feedback, customer surveys, travel customization, online consulting or complaint handling, issues important for modern and experimented visitors are poorly highlighted, likewise.

5. Conclusions

The efficiency and relevance of the content and functionality of the website are essential attributes for a travel agency's development. Managing continuous improvement and readjustment to permanently changes in tourists' preferences are, to an increasing extent, priority activities. The website represents an increasingly important mean not only to collect travel information, but also to buy tourist products. Companies in the tourism field should be aware of the need to approach the customer and to build a long-term relation with him (Chițu, *et al.*, 2013, p.101). On this line, the website could greatly influence consumer loyalty.

Travel agencies' managers who strive to differentiate themselves from competitors should consider the website as an important tool in their company's overall marketing and management strategy. As a result, the customers may develop their loyalty and tend to use online tourism services time after time again (Liao *et al.*, 2017). The possibilities to approach the websites' management are unlimited, the lack of creativity being the main cause of failures (Stăncioiu, 2004).

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