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**NEW TRENDS IN TOURISM  
DESTINATION BRANDING  
BY MEANS OF DIGITAL  
MARKETING**

**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary business is largely based on digital information. Traditional media forms lose battle in a new global surrounding. Therefore, knowing specific terminology and postulates of new conditions in the digital information market is essential. Globalization is an inevitable process overtaking all economic activities, including tourism sector intertwined with various advertising activities in order to place and sell its products and services. Digital marketing is thus more and more used. In that context, world tourism organizations and national tourist agencies play a role of communicator, trying to create desired mental image of a specific country as a tourism destination in the minds of final consumers. They use branding to make one country uniquely recognizable in the market. The aim of this paper is to present new trends in tourism destination branding process

by using the means of digital marketing. The main purpose of this research was to analyse marketing activities and communication strategies of European countries, perceived as the largest tourism market, and compare them with the tourism promotion of Croatia in various markets. The results of the analysis of Croatian activities in promoting its tourism destinations imply there is still a large potential to improve implementation of digital marketing means by preparing the strategy of integrated market communication. The analysis of marketing activities of tourism developed countries shows trends in digital marketing that can serve as a model for development of Croatian tourism brand in global digital surrounding.

**KEY WORDS:** digital marketing, communication strategy, destination branding, tourism product

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## INTRODUCTION

According to statistical data, almost half of the world population today (46.4 percent) uses the Internet (Internetworldstats, 2015). The trend of growth in the number of Internet users continues on yearly basis and technologies and Internet services which have appeared in the last decade, primarily social media and mobile technologies, particularly contribute to such trend. The abovementioned is supported by the fact that over 1.5 billion people use Facebook and over a billion use YouTube. It is estimated that there are 7 billion mobile phone subscribers today and that the mobile-broadband coverage includes 95% of world population (ITU, 2015). Taking into account the growth of Internet usage and its services as well as their advantages in business, it is expected that companies will continue with the trend of larger investments in digital marketing in the forthcoming period. It is estimated that by 2019 in the USA the digital marketing expenditures in total marketing budget will grow from current 30 percent to 35 percent, whereas the total digital marketing costs in 2019 will altogether amount to 100 billion dollars (Frick, 2015).

Lately, digital marketing has been taking an increasingly larger portion of overall marketing activities and has become the integral part of today's concept of marketing. The literature data show that almost 1/3 of the total marketing budget is allocated for digital marketing (Breikss, 2011). At the same time, the trend of investment growth in digital marketing is natural due to the characteristics of contemporary media. Digital marketing strategies imply choosing the appropriate digital marketing means via one of the digital channels (Chaffey, Smith, 2008, p. 40). Some of the characteristics refer to adaptability, freedom of choice, user control, cost savings and most importantly, interactivity. Digital marketing relies on Internet technology and simple features of digital surrounding, but all authors emphasize interactivity as the key characteristic.

Interactivity influences performance quality, motivation, amusement, cognitive abilities, learning, normativity and social interaction. McMillan (2002) emphasizes that interactivity influences the attitude toward the web site, relevance of the topic, returning to a web site, referring others to the web site, purchasing from the web site. Interactivity influences better processing of information about a web site and a certain product (Sicilia et al, 2005).

Steuer (1992) presented the model of interactivity aimed at telepresence, i.e. experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium. Telepresence refers to the mediated perception of an environment which can be seen in the virtual reality. The model presents transition from single-dimensional to two-dimensional concept of interactivity in which it has a developed two-dimensional matrix, which refers to vividness or "ability of technology to produce a sensorially rich mediated environment" and interactivity, which refers to the extent to which media users can participate in changing form or content of perceived environment (Steuer, 1992).

The experts in this profession classify interactivity in several ways. Based on the message flow, interactivity can be classified as: two-way non-interactive communication, reactive communication, quasi-interactive communication and fully interactive communication (Rafaeli, 1988). Authors Bordewijk and Kaam (Mahmoud, 2009) perceive interactivity through a two-dimensional model with eight controls of information sources and controls of time and choice of subject (Mahmoud, 2009). Gerz model was presented in 1995 and it is multi-dimensional in its features, dimensions of this model include: the level of available possibilities, the level of possible modifications, quantitative number of available possibilities and modifications and the level of linearity and nonlinearity. The author gives detailed structure of each dimension in several levels (Jensen, 1998).

More contemporary models, developed under the influence of web, appeared at the beginning of the century. The first specialized model for cyber interactivity is the model of the author McMillan (McMillan, 2002), developed on the basis of dimensions: direction of communication and control over the process (McMillan and Downes, 2000).

Other authors say that interactivity lies in the process or characteristics of media communication. Based on the definition, Massey and Levy (Heeter, 1989) carried out the research on presence of interactive features of sites, such as e-mail links, comment forms, chat rooms, search engines, registration forms, online ordering, games, questionnaires, etc. (Heeter, 1989). All researchers of these features operated under the assumption that the more of these features were found in web communication, the more interactive the communication was likely to be. Features can be divided into those that facilitate a two-way communication and those that enable control over communication.

Since there are, according to some authors, over twenty communication strategies and since digital channels multiply in these modern days, choosing the most appropriate strategy is becoming more and more difficult. In order to focus only on those elements of the strategy which are the most important for their consumers, companies will give more important role to interactivity when choosing any object or subject in marketing. Taking into account that we must combine a bigger number of means to implement digital strategies, we must investigate interactivity of other means and channels. Introducing interactive features quadruples the realization of larger number of set objectives, in comparison to web sites where interactive features are not present, and increases the number of engaged users.

According to introductory features of new technologies and digital marketing, we need to pay special attention to obvious advantages

of technologies in branding a destination as a tourism product. Several important moments in destination branding and tourism product will be further introduced.

Today's consumers live in the society satiated with communication where information is available on a daily basis or even more often. In accordance with that, people have already started to create their defensive mechanisms which enable them to find their way through the chaos of information. Information that seizes their attention should be in the form of simple and concentrated messages. The platform for positioning any brand should pay attention to basic types of messages that are delivered to targeted consumer (non-ambiguity, simplicity, visibility, informativity). The whole branding and positioning system must be clear, both in terms of communication with the targeted market and in terms of clearly emphasizing competitive advantage, which needs to be easily visible in order to be quickly memorized by the consumer. Consistency and persistence are necessary in communicating the basic idea of a brand. If the brand is tourism destination, the unique destination argument must be based on true values of the destination which are the starting point for creating motivating, honest, communication-simple and easily-recognized advantage for positioning the destination on the tourism market. The phases of planning a positioning strategy must include detailed operationalization of marketing investments, which include planned tasks, projects and activities in the implementation phase necessary to achieve the targeted position.

The whole process of positioning should be defined by the combination of desired features of targeted group of consumers and current position of the destination in relation to demand and supply of the competition. With these steps, we determine the appropriate level of strategic activities necessary to achieve the desired position.

Important differences between destinations and other tourism products are in that the brand

derives from creating a homogenous product which is given a price in the appropriate way and the method of distribution and promotion in reference to defined market segments. Telišman-Košuta (2011) mentions functions which are performed in the process of delivery of goods and services to the costumers: informing, contacting, adapting, promoting, negotiating, delivering, financing and risk taking. The usual channels of distribution of tourism products are tourism agencies, tour operators, specialists, representatives, consortiums and reservation systems, global distribution systems (GDS) and the Internet.

Champions of tourism destination marketing activities meet these requirements with more difficulty because they do not offer homogenous product, the prices are not unique and they are conditioned by a larger number of more fluctuating components; the control of distribution system is different from the one for only one product. This means various markets positioning and branding with a promotion through one campaign. The process of tourism destination branding must contain a comprehensive SWOT analysis or revision of the destination as well as determining and evaluating weaknesses and strengths of the destination. Branding refers to four key areas: surrounding, product, market competition, definition of vision, identity and proposal of values (functional, emotional and symbolic) for every targeted market segment, application of strategy and tactics – positioning, strategy of differentiation and communication strategy. In this phase, image, personality and value of the brand are monitored in the tourist consciousness in order to discover a possible discrepancy between the identity and image of the brand. Tourism represents the area with a high level of marketing implementation. The reason for that lies in the specificities of the tourism market, i.e. tourism product as the object of exchange. Intangibility of tourism product and inability of its physical transfer and presentation to the future user before purchase makes this product

highly dependent on the information we give about it (Jegdić, 2014).

Unfortunately, Croatian tourism is even today characterized by insufficient differentiation between products and services, non-dynamic system of national marketing, not enough globally branded destinations, inadequate tourism infrastructure in a destination, inherited orientation of local population towards seasonality and deficiency towards branding through new media. Tourism offer has been significantly growing in the past twenty years, due to the change in preferences of tourists who aim at having more dynamic holidays then before and constantly seek new content in their holiday and leisure time. On the other hand, competition of new and traditional tourism destinations, which try to keep and attract new tourists with diversity of their offer, has been growing. Many additional offers have been profiled in the past years and can be represented through special interest tourism (Mikačić et al., 2006).

## OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to analyse the new trends in tourism destination branding process by using the means of digital marketing. Introductory part contains the overview of the professional literature on digital marketing and further text will present modern means of using new technologies in destination branding.

## METHODOLOGY

The sources used in this paper include foreign and Croatian professional literature, books, professional and scientific articles. This paper gives an overview of trends that can serve as a model for development of Croatian tourism brand in a global digital surrounding. Croatian Tourism Development Strategy is the basis of comparative analysis of this paper.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

International exchange is always functionally related with domestic market, international market and economic interventions (Andrijančić and Pavlović, 2012). Tourism is the key for development and prosperity of a country. More and more countries open their destinations and invest in tourism, thus turning it into a driving force of socio-economic progress through creating new jobs, improving infrastructure, raising trade and export income. During the past six decades, tourism has gone through a large expansion and has become one of the biggest and fastest growing sectors in the world (UNWTO, 2016). Regardless of the occasional shocks, tourism has been developing continuously in the past and showed strength and resistance of the sector. At the global level, international tourism trade grew from 25 million in 1950 to 278 million in 1980, 674 million in 2000 and 1,186 million in 2015 (UNWTO, 2016). At the same time, international tourism income by destinations around the world jumped from 2 billion dollars in 1950 to 104 billion dollars in 1980, 495 billion dollars in 2000 and 1,260 billion dollars in 2015 (UNWTO, 2016).

In comparison to 6% in 2014, international tourism now accounts for 7% of world exports of goods and services. In the past four years, tourism has grown faster than world trade. As a world export category, tourism ranks third after fuel and chemicals and in front of food and automotive products. In many developing countries, tourism is the first export sector. Number of international tourist arrivals (overnights) in 2015, increased to 4.6% to a total of 1,186 million worldwide, which presents an increase of 52 million compared to the previous year. It was the sixth consecutive year of above-average growth in international tourism after the global economic crisis of 2009. In 2015, tourist flows were influenced by three main factors: unusually strong exchange rate fluctuations, the fall in oil and other commodity prices and increased global concern about safety and security. In real

terms, revenues from international tourism grew by 4.4% (taking into account exchange rate fluctuations and inflation) with a total income estimated at \$ 1.26 trillion worldwide in 2015 (1,136 billion euros) (UNWTO, 2016).

From the abovementioned, it is clear that tourism is booming and that a large number of destinations are opening on the market. The rise of the Internet and the spread of new technologies have transformed the tourism sector in unseen ways. This represents huge opportunities but also a major challenge for national and other marketing organizations that need to keep pace in a constantly changing and competitive environment (UNWTO, 2014). Effective digital marketing (or e-marketing) has become crucial on the global stage. Many countries have introduced clear and unambiguous actions of investments in digital marketing in their own national tourism strategies.

Tourism Development Strategy by 2020 says that the structure of Croatian tourism products in the past decade has changed only to a small extent, which is indicated by the curve of seasonality. As the competitive advantage of our tourism product, our national Strategy still puts sun and sea in the first place. According to the Strategy, particularly relevant products of cultural tourism include: urban tourism, heritage tourism, event tourism, creative tourism and religious tourism. All of them are much undefined forms of tourism that vaguely offer only operational service name. As already mentioned in this paper, clarity, concreteness and coherence must be characteristics on which the platform for the development of tourism will be operated.

According to the national Strategy, the quality of Croatian tourism in relation to Spain, France, Italy, Greece and Turkey shows that Croatia has improved the relative perception of its image in comparison to the main competitors. While in 2004 the image of Croatia was worse than the image of all major competitors, with the exception of Turkey, in 2010 the survey showed a slightly

higher proportion of tourists who rated the image of Croatia better than the image of Spain, Italy and Greece. The beauty of the landscape and environmental preservation are the elements of tourism offer which are seen as Croatian advantage over its competition.

Urban and architectural coherence of destinations in Croatia are perceived by tourists as equal to the competition. Although environmental preservation is an element of tourism offer our visitors judge better than for the competition, in 2010 Croatian advantage in comparison to Spain, France and Greece gradually decreased. Investing in environment protection is also one of the huge factors of perception of a country's image. Croatia has to communicate clearly the importance of preserving nature in its Tourism Strategy. The growth of the quality of hospitality industry services in Croatia did not result in changing the position of Croatia in comparison to its main competitors. The perception of relative quality of accommodation and food and drinks offer stagnated in the observed period. The perception about the accommodation in Croatia is that it provides greater value for money than in competing countries. In 2010 research, Spain and Greece were close to Croatia when it came to the perception about the accommodation, while Turkey managed to provide the tourist market with the set of services of bigger value. Only in 2000, a more serious turn in the reconstruction of tourism facilities and our tourist destinations began and since then Croatia has recorded a significant rise in the tourist market.

Also, it is clear that the Croatian Tourist Board has not done much in marketing of continental tourism, which is mentioned in the Tourism Strategy: "Basically it created too few reasons (products and services) to travel and stay in Croatia in the off-season, partly because of the lack of entrepreneurial interest and partly because of the barriers in business development and insufficient actively managed processes by the public sector" (Tourism Development Strategy, 2012).

It is commendable that the strategy includes deficiencies in the branding of tourism: insufficiently defined jurisdiction of commercialization and development of tourism products at the national, regional, destination and the private sector level. The system of promotion of Croatian tourism is not optimized with respect to the return on invested assets (generally too offline and not enough online advertising). Visual identity and promotional messages based on the national tourism brand are outdated, which makes future market position difficult. Regional and destination brands (with a few exceptions) are neither market-accepted nor relevant to the emitting markets. Neither the national nor the regional level in Croatia have accepted a system of special quality grades of accommodation facilities that would ensure recognition of special quality and / or differentiated offers.

Quality grades for other objects of destination offer (restaurants, bars, tourist infrastructure, etc.) have not been introduced. Croatian tourism does not have a consistent, hierarchically structured and efficient web platform. Regional and local levels have mostly passive approach to electronic marketing and web social services. Computer literacy of people in the tourism sector is generally insufficient. Promotion and sales are based too much on experience and too little on research. There is a lack of high-quality data analysis of the main emitting markets and types of customers coming from those markets. At all levels, there is insufficient knowledge of best practices in the region and beyond, as well as of new trends in marketing and sales. Trend analysis and forecasting consequences that affect the organization and create public opinion have not been established. The process of strategic communication that builds beneficial relations between the Croatian tourism and its public (internal and external) is in its earliest beginnings (Tourism Development Strategy, 2012).

Thus, it is clear that Croatia has a lot of room for improvement. These measures for improvement are not described in details, but are only listed.

Croatian tourism necessarily needs to introduce new technologies as the leading means of marketing activities. According to professional literature, this is necessary in order to be able to keep up with trends in other countries and to follow the positive trends in the world and in Europe. There are new and modern platforms, based on Internet technologies, available for destination branding. Countries that are tourist forces use all possible platforms and it is time for Croatia to start investing in them. Before that, serious work is needed to improve the overall identity and destination branding (we cannot constantly offer only the sea and the sun, which is unfortunately, included in the Strategy). Some of the means of modern technology necessary to communicate and create a clear message and identity are the following: web sites (more accessible and user-friendly and mostly interactive - the influences of the lack of interactivity are mentioned in the introduction); web domains (which must be clear and easily accessible, designed to be visible and distinctive; the choice of a domain is a strategic problem which needs to be addressed from the long-term point of view, avoiding short-term compromises); SEO (search engine optimization, which provides a content management system and web information architecture that both allow visibility of the desired content and optimization for targeted phrases associated with the desired identity); e-mail marketing (which is highly personalized, but also the cheapest form of marketing campaign); mobile e-marketing (refers to smartphones, tablets, etc., and allows a very high interactivity through the development of applications for tourists); the management of social networks, etc. (UNWTO, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

World tourism market is increasingly intertwined with various promotional activities of the tourism product placement. This struggle involves the world's travel agencies and national tourism boards that have the role of communicator and strive to create the desired perception and associative picture in the mind of the consumer.

By branding, they seek to achieve the unique market recognition of the tourist product. Important differences between destinations and other tourism products are in the fact that the brand derives from creating a homogenous product which is properly given its price, properly distributed and promoted in relation to defined market segments. Tourism Development Strategy by 2020 says that the structure of Croatian tourism products in the past decade has changed only to a small extent, which is indicated by the curve of seasonality. Our national Strategy still emphasizes the sun and the sea as the primary competitive advantage of our tourism product. It is highly necessary to carry out a professional structuring of Croatian tourism brand and its architecture in order to change the perception of emitting markets about Croatia as the summer vacation destination only. By development of professional branding system, Croatian identity as a mixture of rational, emotional, social and cultural benefits available to potential guests becomes understandable and based on real competitive advantages.

The awareness and visibility of Croatia should be paid special attention in the following years in order to maintain a positive image of Croatia in the key markets. In accordance with the desire to reposition Croatian tourism, it is necessary to establish an intensive and coherent use of new technologies, including the most modern platforms.

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