

# IDENTIFICATION AND USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN THE PROMOTION OF CROATIAN TOURISM

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## ABSTRACT

The development of information and communication technology has created a solid technological framework for the application of new technologies in different environments. The implementation of cyberspace tools has changed social interactions in general as well as the technologies and advertising methods. Today, information and communication technology allows users to access information via telecommunications. The means whereby messages are conveyed include, among others, the Internet, wireless networks, advanced mobile devices, and other communication media. Numerous studies have shown that an appropriate use of electronic marketing activities can be useful in achieving various tourist promotion goals. However, today's level of technological development allows modern consumers, i.e. users, to search for information on a tourist destination in real time, and also before they arrive at the destination through mobile technology. The paper starts from the assumption that in the near future tourist destinations that provide information to consumers through information and communication technology will benefit the most. The aim of the paper is to define key factors conducive to increased online presence and use of online services. The research conducted will give a clear picture of the current situation in terms of the use of information and communication infrastructure in the promotion of tourism which can be used to develop and propose an appropriate strategy for the management of electronic marketing activities aimed at promoting Croatian tourism.

**KEY WORDS:** e-marketing, mobile marketing, information and communication technology, smartphone.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Information and communications technologies are the backbone of marketing activities in modern business. The use of techniques, tools and services, collectively termed electronic marketing, enables optimisation of all the elements of the marketing mix. For that reason, it is justified to underline its potential in all economic activities, including tourism. Today, business entities have, for the most part, recognized the possibilities of electronic marketing resources. The rapid development of the Internet, which has become omnipresent in the 21st century, has changed forever the way people do business and communicate. According to Internet World Stats<sup>1</sup> software for data collection and analysis, in 2016,

3,393,000 individuals had access to the Internet. Around 40% of the world population has an internet connection today, as compared to 1% in 1995. Recent trends in the development of business activities show significant reliance on information and communications technologies, which will cause an increase in online bookings, primarily through mobile devices with Internet access. The rapid development of information and communications technologies and their application through e-marketing techniques and tools, in particular in the distribution and sales, has allowed all stakeholders in the tourism industry to penetrate the market more easily and increase their market share.

This paper aims to explore and define the main characteristics of a specific component of information and

<sup>1</sup> Data adapted from Internet World Stats: Internet Growth Statistics:History and Growth of the Internet from 1995 till Today: <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/> (accessed 17.06.2016.).

communications technologies, i.e. electronic marketing, in tourism. The focus of the paper is on the current use of e-marketing techniques and tools and analytical monitoring of their effectiveness, as well as the use of mobile marketing tools that can be implemented into effective destination advertising strategy. The overall goal of the paper is to identify the current extent of use of information and communications technologies in the promotion of Croatia as a travel destination, as well as to analyse and understand the effort put in these activities. The survey results will help identify the areas where satisfactory progress has already been made, as well as those requiring improvement.

There is a causal relationship between marketing, as a social science discipline, and market changes; hence, the definition of marketing has changed over the years due to economic changes. Today, marketing is defined as the social and management process responsible for satisfying customer requirements profitably. Marketing as such represents a philosophy aimed at satisfying and striking a balance between the main variables that influence the functioning of the market, i.e. creating and satisfying demand through the optimal mix of four elements - product, price, distribution and promotion. As a result of the development of modern technology, one more variable had to be added to the marketing mix – social networking. Its widespread popularity among consumers has enabled electronic marketing to take a step further. Marketing is involved in all economic activities, including tourism, which is often defined by practitioners as an aggregator of other activities, including marketing activities. Due to a specific nature of marketing management in the tourism industry, which entails the combination of tangible and intangible elements, new models of marketing in the hotel and hospitality industry have been developed.

In recent years, tourism product developers have focused on the transformation of Croatia into a travel destination whose offer extends beyond a family vacation, sun and sea. Emphasis is placed on target market strategies and strategies on tourism product systems aimed at tailoring promotion to each region.<sup>2</sup> Almost all segments targeted by Croatian tourism use modern information and communications technologies and have, for the most part, adopted electronic marketing resources as tools for searching for and obtaining information. It is therefore necessary to develop a quality strategic approach to targeted market segment, whereby tourism product developers and consumers will be brought together in an online environment.

Electronic marketing, as a component of information and communications technologies, is of strategic importance

in modern tourism promotion. However, in some types of tourism, these resources are insufficiently used. Online and offline marketing techniques and tools are vital elements of any tourism development strategy, in particular when it concerns the development of a travel destination. Over the past fifteen years, significant changes have occurred in the tourism market worldwide. They primarily concern the development of new travel destinations and new selective types of tourism, as well as the continued growth of tourism, both in terms of quality and quantity, as a result of which it has acquired the status of the fastest-growing industry.<sup>3</sup>

Today's tourism is characterised by faster, cheaper and simpler travel, an increasing quality as well as diversity of services, all of which are a result of the omnipresence of media and readily available modern technologies. There is a growing offer of programmes that allow tourists to plan their activities in the travel destination of their choice, in advance. In addition to its price and quality, the most important element of the tourism product is its content, in particular in terms of its originality, promotion of a healthy lifestyle, and sustainable management of natural resources.

Many authors agree that the information technology has fundamentally changed marketing activities (Persaud and Azhar<sup>4</sup>). The changes are also evident in tourism (Hossain and Amin<sup>5</sup>, Amirkhanpour; Vrontis and Thrassou<sup>6</sup>). New opportunities created by the development of information technology have encouraged business entities to develop long-term relationships with their customers, which gave rise to relationship marketing. The Internet enables the customer to have a direct contact with a business entity at any time, day or night, from any location, so that he/she can obtain the information needed and make a purchase. The information can be personalized to the individual customer needs and wants. The Internet also allows customers easy and quick access to information about competitors' products and services. On the other hand, it enables business entities to find new customers, while providing services to the existing ones, by using the database to develop customer profiles and steer them towards products and services that suit their needs and preferences.<sup>7</sup> Electronic marketing can be defined as the process of creation, pricing, distribution and promotion of goods aimed at satisfying customer needs and desires profitably, by using the possibilities of digital technologies and the Internet. According to Strauss, J., El-Ansary, A. and Frost, R., electronic marketing is the use of information technology in the process of creating, communicating and delivering value to customers, as well as in customer relationship management to the benefit of both the organization and its stakeholders. This is the application

<sup>2</sup> The master plan and development strategy of the Croatian tourism: [http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2013\\_05\\_55\\_1119.html](http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2013_05_55_1119.html) (accessed 22.01.2016.)

<sup>3</sup> Magaš, D. (2000.) *Razvoj hrvatskog turizma; Konceptija dugoročnog razvoja*, Rijeka, 2000., pp. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Persaud, A., Azhar, I. (2012.) *Innovative mobile marketing via smartphones: are consumers ready?*. Marketing Intelligence & Planning, 2012. pp. 418-443.

<sup>5</sup> Hossain, T. (et al.). (2015.) *Innovative Mobile Marketing Strategies for Tourism Sector using Segmentation for Targeted and Effective Marketing Programs*, Full Papers Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Management & Information Systems, 2015, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285228324\\_Innovative\\_Mobile\\_Marketing\\_Strategies\\_for\\_Tourism\\_Sector\\_using\\_Segmentation\\_for\\_Targeted\\_and\\_Effective\\_Marketing\\_Programs](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285228324_Innovative_Mobile_Marketing_Strategies_for_Tourism_Sector_using_Segmentation_for_Targeted_and_Effective_Marketing_Programs) (accessed 22.04.2016.)

<sup>6</sup> Amirkhanpour, M. (et al.). (2014.) *Mobile marketing: a contemporary strategic perspective*. International Journal of Technology Marketing 5, pp. 252-269.

<sup>7</sup> Ružić, D. (et al.). (2009) *Elektronički marketing, II. prošireno i izmijenjeno izdanje*, Factum, Osijek, 2009., pp. 62.

of the information technology in traditional marketing practices.<sup>8</sup> Internet marketing is one of a range of terms used to describe electronic marketing, as it is most commonly referred to. Online marketing is another common synonym, used as a collective term for all types of electronic marketing. Other alternative terms include cyber marketing, Internet marketing and web marketing.<sup>9</sup> According to a broader definition, e-marketing involves the implementation of marketing activities of a company through extensive use of information and telecommunications technologies.<sup>10</sup> The literature offers an even broader definition of the concept of marketing that has been influenced by modern digital technology. Chaffey et al. assert that electronic marketing is the use of the Internet and other digital media to achieve marketing objectives and support the modern marketing concept.<sup>11</sup> Numerous definitions of e-marketing are based on a generally accepted definition of marketing. For instance, Mohammed et. al., define electronic marketing as the process of creating and maintaining customer relationships through online activities in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas, products and services and meet the objectives of the parties involved.<sup>12</sup> All of these definitions, as well as many others, suggest that marketers can use the possibilities of the Internet in all elements of marketing.<sup>13</sup> A general conclusion can be made that electronic marketing complements traditional marketing activities. It is closely linked with the development of information and communications technologies and seeks to implement the traditional activities of the marketing mix (variable) via the Internet.

Information and communications technologies can be complemented by electronic marketing resources. Some of the applications that can be used in tourism are:<sup>14</sup>

- Instant Messaging
- Internet Relay Chat, chat rooms, Internet Discussion Forums, bulletin boards
- Location Based Services - mobile phone and GPS related
- Social Network Services
- Social Guides
- Social Bookmarking
- Social Reputation Network
- Video blogs, Blogs, Micro-blogs
- Social Citations
- Peer-to-Peer Social Networks, File sharing
- Virtual Presence
- Virtual Worlds & Massively Multiplayer Online Games
- Wikis & Collaborative Writing/Editing

A common feature of the above applications is that users are invited to participate in the creation of content. A participant becomes an active user of the application through a browser, and has control over content that is being used. These applications are collectively called Web 2.0. The main characteristics of Web 2.0 include openness, freedom and collective intelligence. The architecture of WEB 2.0 enables users to have control over the website data. The Internet is used as a platform from which the user can consume content through the browser on his/her device (a mobile phone, tablet or desktop computer). Some authors claim that the concept of e-business entails that a large portion of business activities is carried out in virtual space, whereby the information is separated from the subject (entity) to which it relates.<sup>15</sup>

The use of Web 2.0 applications and ICT in tourism increases the speed and ease of conducting business transactions and, as a result, increases market competition. Tourism businesses must continually adapt to modern technologies, integrate new and faster systems and meet the needs of consumers worldwide. Goods no longer need to be held in stock, waiting to be ordered; instead, products are created and services are provided in accordance with the specific client requirements.

In practice, there is an “ideological clash” between the “official” content (websites of tourism businesses, brochures, descriptions, traditional categorization, etc.) and Consumer Generated Media, i.e. content generated by users who have visited a travel destination and reviewed the products and services, often posting various multimedia content. It is therefore necessary for tourism businesses to develop an information and communications strategy in order for information presented in an online environment to be aligned with marketing activities, and focused on sending a quality promotional message to tourists.

## 2. APPLICATION OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES IN THE TOURIST BOARDS OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

The paper aims to identify the current level of application of information and communications technologies in the promotion of Croatia as a travel destination. To that end, a survey was conducted to identify the level of use of e-marketing techniques and tools. The authors assume that a more effective use of information and

<sup>8</sup> Strauss, J. (2016.) E-marketing. Routledge, 2016. pp. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Reedy, J. (et al.) *Electronic Marketing, Integrating Electronic Resources, into the Marketing Process*, The Dryden Press, Harcourt College Publishers, 2009. pp. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Panian, Ž. (2000.) *Internet i malo poduzetništvo*, Informator, Zagreb, 2000. pp. 87.

<sup>11</sup> Chaffey, D. (et al.). *Internet marketing: Strategy, Implementation and Practice*, 2nd edition, Prentice Hall, prema Škare, V. (2005.) *Primjena Internetskog marketinga kod izdavača dnevnih novina*; Ekonomski fakultet Zagreb, 2005., pp. 523-524.

<sup>12</sup> Mohammed, R. (2003.) et al. *Internet marketing: Building advantage in a networked economy*. McGraw-Hill, Inc., 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Ružić, D., Andrić, B., Ružić, I. (2010.) *Internet Marketing in Hospitality- Balance, Options and Trends*, Full Papers Proceeding CROMAR Conference, 2010. pp. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Lew, A. A., *Social Software in Tourism, Event Management and Tourism Education*, [http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~alew/docs/Alan\\_Lew\\_Social\\_Software\\_Tourism\\_Teaching.doc](http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~alew/docs/Alan_Lew_Social_Software_Tourism_Teaching.doc) (accessed 22.02.20014)

<sup>15</sup> Panian, Ž., Čurko, K. (2010.) *Poslovni informacijski sustavi*. Element, Zagreb, 2010. pp. 44.

communications technologies leads to an adequate use of electronic marketing resources. The following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1:** The current use of information and communication technologies in the activities of tourist boards of the Republic of Croatia shows that the potential of the available infrastructure is used for electronic marketing.

The authors assume that tourist boards define and implement targeted marketing strategies aimed at promoting a tourist destination in which they operate. One of the main goals of these strategies is to create a framework for the efficient and effective dissemination of information. In other words, a tourist board office should act as a link between tourism businesses operating in the area for which a specific tourist board is responsible, and potential tourists, i.e. service users who want to visit a particular destination, are currently there or have already visited it. In order for the generated content to be efficient, a marketing plan needs to be developed to facilitate better information visibility and dissemination to key consumers, with an aim to attract them to a particular destination. To achieve this, the key factors of information and communications technologies as well as methods of using them have to be identified.

The survey was divided into 9 segments and included the tourist boards as business entities. The study was conducted on a sample of 95 offices that comprise the Croatian Tourist Board. The sample was divided into groups based on their level in the organisational structure, i.e. county tourist boards, city tourist boards, municipal tourist boards and local tourist boards. As it is governed by different regulations and has a separate budget and different strategic goals, the central office of the Croatian National Tourist Board performs its marketing activities independently and was therefore not included in the survey. The survey sample included 11 county tourist board offices, 35 city tourist board offices, 43 municipal tourist board offices, and 6 local tourist board offices. The questionnaire was created using a commercial online survey software - SurveyGizmo. Online questionnaires were sent to the official e-mail addresses of the tourist board offices in the period from October 2014 to January 2015. The questionnaires were filled in by the directors of tourist boards or heads of online advertising. Survey results were analyzed using Microsoft Excel, SurveyGizmo statistical analysis software, and software package for statistical analysis in social science (SPSS).

Since there is no general consensus on measuring information and communications technologies performance, an in-depth analysis was conducted of the current use of electronic resources in the tourist board offices which forms the basis for future effective development of electronic marketing. With a view to identifying the extent to which the potential of available

infrastructure is being exploited through electronic marketing activities, the authors established 10 criteria using data from recent publications and situational analysis. Meeting all 10 represents a high level of implementation of information and communications technologies, i.e. Internet presence achieved through electronic marketing for all business purposes. The criteria include:

1. The business entity has its own website;
2. The website is less than 3 years old;
3. The business entity uses a newsletter as a means of communication with target groups;
4. The business entity sells products or services via the Internet;
5. The business entity uses e-mail as a means of communication in the pre-purchase activities;
6. The business entity uses some form of online advertising;
7. The business entity uses at least one of the tools of direct marketing via its website;
8. The business entity uses software for monitoring the performance of its website and web pages;
9. The website of the business entity is mobile responsive;
10. The business entity has created a mobile application (which it financed in whole or has co-financed and which has a logo or design associated with the tourist board).

The sample, comprising the observed business entities, was divided into groups based on their level in the structure of the system of tourist boards (county, city, municipality, locality). Due to constraints faced by some tourist boards, it was unrealistic to expect exceptionally good results. It was proposed to include in the analysis only those tourist boards that meet at least 5 of the 10 proposed criteria. In other words, if a business entity is found to meet at least 5 criteria, it would be included in the scope of analysis. The data indicate that the criterion of having their own website is met by all respondents (100%), while the criterion of communication via e-mail is met by a large percentage of respondents (93.7%). It is of note that 81.1% of websites in the observed sample is less than three years old (it should be mentioned that the respondents who indicated that their website was being redesigned were also included in this group, because the redesign process was completed by the time the data were processed). Of note is also the high level of application of direct marketing tools via the tourist board website. Almost all of these tools have been implemented by tourist boards. The percentage of respondents who satisfy the criterion of using the newsletter as a means of communication with target groups was the smallest (24.2%). The results are presented below.



**Table 1.** Level of implementation of information and communications technologies, i.e. Internet presence through electronic marketing resources.

Criteria	n	No. of business entities that meet the criterion	%
<b>The tourist board has its own website</b>	95	95	100
<b>The website is less than 3 years old</b>	95	77	81.1
<b>The tourist board uses a newsletter as a means of communication with target groups</b>	95	23	24.2
<b>The tourist board promotes products or services via the Internet</b>	95	39	41.1
<b>The tourist board uses e-mail as a means of communication in the pre-purchase activities</b>	95	89	93.7
<b>The tourist board uses some form of online advertising:</b>			
Facebook	95	32	33.7
LinkedIn	95	1	1.1
Twitter	95	4	4.2
Google Display Network	95	21	22.1
YouTube	95	10	10.5
Specialized blogs	95	8	8.4
<b>The tourist board uses software for monitoring the performance of websites and web pages</b>	95	38	40.0
<b>The tourist board uses at least one of the tools of direct marketing via its website:</b>			
Newsletter	95	83	87.37
Site map/site search	95	76	80.0
Virtual tours/panoramic images	95	69	72.6
Event calendar	95	89	93.7
Weather forecast	95	77	81.1
Map	95	87	91.6
Travel itinerary	95	46	48.4
Language option	95	87	91.6
<b>The website of the tourist board is mobile responsive</b>	95	57	60.0
<b>The tourist board has a mobile application (which it financed in full or co-financed, and which has a logo or a mark of the tourist board)</b>	95	42	44.2

Source: Author(s)

In this section of the paper, the authors seek to determine whether there is a correlation between variables and the budget that tourist board offices have allocated to online promotion. The survey involved measuring the percentage of investment in online marketing by each group of the observed tourist board offices. The results indicate that city and county tourist boards have the largest budget. This was used to test the statistical significance of the correlation between the budget allocated by tourist board offices and the following variables:

- Do the tourist board offices use software for monitoring the performance of websites and web pages?
- Have the tourist board offices conducted a paid advertising campaign on social platforms over the past year?
- Has the tourist board implemented some of the techniques of mobile advertising and to which extent?
- Is the website of the tourist board mobile responsive?
- Does the tourist board have a mobile application (which it financed in full or co-financed, and which has a logo or design associated with the tourist board)?

In the first iteration, the statistical significance was measured depending on the level of the tourist board in the organizational structure. The results show that there is a correlation between the two observed items in the observed sample at the following levels:

- City tourist boards: There is a statistically significant correlation between the budget and paid advertising campaign on social platforms ( $r = .535^{**}$ ,  $p = .001$ )
- County tourist boards: There is a statistically significant correlation between the budget and paid advertising campaign on social platforms ( $r = .611^{*}$ ,  $p = .046$ ).

Statistical analysis indicates that the budget affects paid advertising campaigns. Effective use of electronic marketing techniques and tools can increase visibility in an online environment, i.e. enhance the performance of advertising campaigns. Survey results indicate that the respondents use, to some extent, the techniques and tools of electronic marketing. However, to reach the user more effectively, a carefully developed marketing plan needs to be laid out that will include paid advertising, which has the potential to facilitate successful communication with the user and the promotion of tourist destinations. The conclusion has been drawn that the existing tourist boards in the Republic of Croatia use information and communications technologies and have implemented Web 2.0 applications in their electronic marketing activities. Yet, it is noteworthy that the budget affects the application of these tools in that it enables a travel destination with a larger budget to use paid advertising, multimedia creation, paid content creation and contests, thereby increasing its visibility and communication efficiency.

The survey results show that the observed sample meets five of the ten criteria, which means that the tourist board offices use the potential of the available infrastructure resources in their electronic marketing activities. The hypothesis is thus confirmed and accepted. However, it should be noted that there is a substantial amount of untapped potential to be exploited in electronic marketing since the tools for the implementation of Web 2.0 strategies are already built into the system. It is also evident that some Web 2.0 applications are used to a limited extent, while others, such as social-networking platforms, newsletters and web analytics, are used to a very small extent.

## CONCLUSION

Multimedia enables tourism business entities to let their consumers choose the source and the channel of information that suits them best. Web 2.0 applications enable business entities to offer customers their products and services in a faster, safer and more interactive way.

As an aggregator of other activities, tourism also acts as a silent exporter, offering tourists the products and services of a travel destination. Thus, tourist boards, as the main source of information for consumers and as travel destination promoters, are in charge of the promotion of products that are sold in the travel destination in which they operate. In addition to theoretical considerations, the paper describes empirical research conducted on a sample of respondents composed of tourist boards, based on their level in the organizational structure. The research included an analysis of the current level of application of e-marketing techniques and tools. The aim of the research was to test the proposed hypothesis. The results obtained have confirmed the hypothesis (The current use of information and communication technologies in the activities of the tourist boards of the Republic of Croatia shows that the potential of the available infrastructure is used through electronic marketing). However, it should be noted that there is a substantial amount of untapped potential to be exploited in electronic marketing. It was found that the respondents have implemented, in their online marketing strategies, the electronic resources and Internet services mentioned earlier in the paper. However, it was also found that the percentages of use vary considerably, which shifted the focus of the research towards examining the level of content sharing using WEB 2.0 application. The rest of the research was based on the development and evolution of information and communications technologies, specifically, the components of Web 2.0 that have the potential to help create a recognizable identity in the virtual environment using the budget allocated for that purpose. Namely, Web 2.0 enables direct communication of businesses with customers who are constantly logged onto Internet services using their smart devices. This enables the implementation of the elements of the marketing philosophy whose application used to be limited. The formulated research problem served as the basis for conducting an analysis of the extent of use of electronic marketing resources by the tourist boards. A list was made of services that can create the potential for an effective promotion of tourism products and services. The results obtained confirm the hypothesis. However, it should be noted that certain Web 2.0 applications are used at higher organisational levels, while others, in particular certain social-networking platforms, newsletters and web analytics, are used to a small extent only. To ensure long-term sustainable and competitive results, a more comprehensive use of electronic marketing tools and techniques is needed. The scope of electronic marketing activities should be extended to include all social media platforms used by potential customers with an aim to identify and attract them.

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