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Web-based destination marketing: Do official city culture and tourism websites' in Turkey consider international guidelines?

Abstract

The Internet plays a significant role in attracting visitors and facilitating their trip planning and reservations. Therefore, it is essential for city tourism websites to evaluate and improve website performance in order to keep and increase their online presence and competitiveness in the marketplace. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the official websites of City Culture and Tourism Directorates (CCTD) in Turkey based on the facilities and services offered by the websites. In order to examine the content and function of these websites, content analysis is used and a structured around 40 checkpoints. In total of 79 CCTDs websites were analyzed. The survey revealed that websites are generally informative but lacked interactive facilities. Most city tourism websites do not currently maximize the capability of the internet in destination marketing. While the most frequently features in websites are culture/history information, links to main page, communication information, image gallery, video, links to other sites, search capabilities and index page. The results also show that CCTDs are not utilizing the Internet to its full potential to effectively market their destinations. It is recommended that these organizations evolve their websites into marketing tools to capitalise on the potential internet market.

Keywords:

Internet; destination marketing; websites; content analysis; Turkey

Introduction

The dramatic development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has changed the way people search for and digest information. As the World Wide Web became prevalent around the globe, more travelers used the Internet as a medium for searching tourism information and planning their trips (Zhou, & DeSantis, 2005, p. 789). Because of its role in information provision and unprecedented level of connectivity and the ability to communicate efficiently and effectively directly with customers at modest cost (Maswera, Dawson, & Edwards, 2008, p. 187), the Internet is becoming increasingly important as a destination marketing tool for tourism organizations, including city and national tourism offices (Lee, Cai, & O'Leary, 2006, p. 815).

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Today, tourism information is among the most popular and frequently visited information on the Internet (Zhou, & DeSantis, 2005, p. 89). Lo, Cheung, and Law, (2002) state that travelers mostly prefer to search information about destinations. Hence, tourism websites play an indispensable role in people's travel decision-making before their departure (Zhou, & DeSantis, 2005, p. 789; Kao, Louvieris, Perry, & Buhalis, 2005, p. 227). According to DoubleClick (2005) one out of every two online purchases is preceded by research on a search engine. In the case of the travel purchases, nearly three out of four travel buyers consulted search engines before making a purchase. Besides, according to Nielsen (2008), 81 percent of online shoppers have read product or retailer reviews by other customers when doing their holiday shopping. Already, eMarketer estimates that online travel sales in the five major travel markets of Europe – France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK –total nearly \$49 billion 2007, up 27% over 2006 and it will reach up \$81 billion in 2011 (www.emarketer.com).

According to the report 'Survey of Visitors to Official Destination Web Sites' produced by USDM.net, an average of approximately 20 percent of Web site visitors decided to visit the destination after visiting the Web site (www.usdm.net). According to the TIA's (2003) report on travelers' use of Internet, destination-related searching, including searching for things to do, dining, entertainment, and local events, gained more popularity in 2003 than in previous years, Destination-related online planning is steadily becoming more popular each year (Lee, Cai, & O'leary, 2006, p. 816). Additionally, the Web-based destination marketing system has been widely used as a distribution channel and marketing tool by destination marketing organizations (DMO) in the promotion and management of tourism destination (Buhalis, 2003; Yuan, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2003). Parsons, Zeisser, and Waitman (1998) indicated that web-based marketing leverages the unique capabilities of new interactive media such as the Internet to create new forms of interactions and transactions between consumers and marketers, as well as integrate interactive media with the other elements of the marketing mix. However, in today's competitive market-place and technology-driven society, just having a web presence no longer brings visibility and accessibility to the destination (Wang, 2008, p. 55). Hence, there are some crucial points for effective web-based destination marketing applications.

Parsons et al. (1998) argued that the following five interrelated factors are essential for successful digital marketing strategies: attract (attract customers to the applications through audience creation and branding); engage (generate users' interest and participation through interactive interface/navigation and interactive content); retain (make sure consumers come back through dynamic content and online communities); learn (learn about consumers' demographics, attitudes and behaviors from different sources) and relate (relate back to consumers to provide customized interactions and deliver value through personalized/customized communication and real time interactions).

Wang, and Fesenmaier (2006) posited that a successful web based marketing strategy depends on the implementation and coordination of three interrelated aspects: efficient use of web site features/capabilities for information provision, effective web

site promotion techniques and effective online customer relationship management programs. In addition, favourable organization and technology environments and innovative management approaches are also found to be prerequisites for successful web marketing (Goode, & Stevens, 2000). Wang (2008) argued that in order to develop a successful website to support its marketing activities, DMOs have to focus on several key areas and make sure that each of them not only work individually but also cooperatively.

Although there are many studies on tourism website analysis, only a few of them focused on destination marketing organisations. In addition, there are no prior studies on Turkey DMOs. In order to fill this research gap, this research makes an attempt to establish a checklist of criteria for assessing City Culture and Tourism Directorates (CCTDs) website. Research findings are expected to contribute to improving the general performance and problems of CCTDs. Additionally, findings would be beneficial for DMOs when using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for promotion.

Literature review

It is commonly accepted that the goal of a DMO website is to integrate its online activities with its marketing and visitor servicing strategies. In order to establish a successful DMO website, designers should abide to the criteria for successful websites (Qi, Law, & Buhalis, 2008). Before defining the most common website features based on the previous researches in this field, firstly the importance of needs to be highlighted. As is true for any other business promotion, a website is one of the most effective tools for communication in today's world and websites are fast becoming the first source of information about any commodity a customer is looking for and tourism is no exception (Pathak, & Kumar, 2008, p. 323). The destination websites play a critical role in promoting the destinations as well as the individual services and facilities of a destination. Therefore, website's features should be selected carefully.

Doolin, Burgess, and Cooper (2002) suggested that website should offer opportunities for the consumer to interact with the web site through (a) value-added features such as sending electronic postcards or recording their experiences and reading others' experiences in web based guest books and (b) the provision of online customer support via internal site search engines and searchable databases. Zhou, and DeSantis (2005) suggested the following solutions to improve the city tourism websites: implementing digital interactive mapping, providing visa/policy and currency converting information, presenting local information such as weather and time, having sitemap and multi-lingual capabilities.

The another important issue is that of naming the website. Pathak, and Kumar (2008) recommended that websites should be named to include 'tourism' word in the name so that the tourist can locate the sites easily and the websites should be properly optimized for the internet search engines and should be submitted to popular search engines such as Google etc. for ranking. Furthermore, the websites should include online

booking facility for accommodation reservation and links should be provided to the websites of the hotels. Also, websites should provide relevant information on health and hygiene (Pathak, & Kumar, 2008, p. 328).

Hudson, and Lang (2002) indicated that websites are expanding to include an increased attention to content about the local area and updateable pages that allow the businesses to post daily or weekly reports of information relevant to their service offering. Fun applications include electronic postcards that customers can e-mail to others directly from the website and virtual tours which are a series of 360 degree images of facilities and local areas should be hold to entertain customers (Hudson, & Lang, 2002, p. 159).

According to Wang, and Fesenmaier (2006), although traffic building is essential to web marketing success, a more critical managerial challenge for web marketers is how to keep and maintain the traffic generated. Thus, effective customer relationship management programs are necessary to retain customers to the site and convert visitors into repeat customers. These programs may include value adding offerings to customers such as free news, e-mail newsletters, personalization/customization, and special offers/best buys; security functions such as secure transactions through SSL, a privacy policy, and a web seal certificate. Maswera et al. (2008) suggested that, to encourage purchasing through websites, organizations should include privacy and security policies on their websites. Kao et al. (2005) revealed that users' desired information generally pertains to transportation, local maps and accommodation, which are necessary for planning their trips and the website satisfaction is positively correlated to the intention to reuse and recommendation of the website to other users (Kao et al., 2005, p. 235).

As well as defining the features that should be offered on websites, it is important which techniques will be used for the evaluation of websites. In that respect, a study of 553 websites of national airlines, national parks, government-run and private tourism promotion organizations, car rental companies, travel agencies and tour operators was conducted by Maswera et al. (2008) focused on tourists use of these websites to identify the information they need before deciding whether to visit the countries concerned. The results showed that the most popular category of features for all the tourist organizations was customer relationship management with two features - email and contact details being present on all websites.

Wang, and Fesenmaier (2006) examined the factors affecting the success of the web marketing strategies of American CVBs. It is stated that most of the CVBs are effective in using core information features such as accommodation information (96.9%), activities/attraction information (96.5%), and an events calendar (93.1%). And most of the CVBs are relatively effective in using the techniques to promote their web sites include web address in their organization's print materials (91.9%), register with search engines/directories (84.2%), place magazine ads (75.8%) and register keywords for search engines (74.6%). In addition to the results of the evaluation of the CVBs' customer relationship management programs show that customer loyalty programs

(20.0%), direct e-mail campaign (19.6%), incentive programs (19.2%), personalization/customization (17.3%) and e-mail newsletters (16.9%) are most used ones. This study confirmed that a successful web marketing strategy requires the integration and coordination of Web site features, Web site promotion techniques, and customer relationship management programs (Wang, & Fesenmaier, 2006, p. 247).

In a later study, Wang (2008) examined the critical factors of the web-based destination marketing system used by DMOs in the USA in five areas: website function design, website promotion, website-performance measurement, web-marketing impact assessment and organization technology environment. The findings on the American convention and visitor's bureaus (CVB) website function design suggested that these DMOs are still in the preliminary stage of technology exploitation. Measured by the extent of use, the most popular applications are focusing mainly on the information level, followed by applications at the communication level. Applications at, both, the transaction and relationship levels are not being widely deployed by DMOs. It appeared that most of the CVBs are simply taking the web as an online brochure for basic information dissemination, not being able to provide higher-level business functions through the use of technology (Wang, 2008, pp. 66-67).

Zhou, and DeSantis (2005) examined the content and functions of fifty-five city tourism websites covering North America, Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa through the content analysis. It showed that usability challenges exist in various aspects in, both, content and functions. Many problems reflect a lack of user-centered design and interactivity in the city tourism website development (Zhou, & DeSantis, 2005, p. 794). The study that evaluated the official websites of Indian tourism development corporations based on the facilities and services offered on the websites were examined by Pathak, and Kumar (2008). It revealed that the tourism websites are not just an online channel for providing information about tourism potential in India but also an electronic platform for generating desired tourism business (Pathak, & Kumar, 2008, p. 327). Lee, Cai, and O'leary (2006) analyzed 50 US states' official tourism websites through a content analysis of slogan, visuals, graphics and verbal expressions and also the sites' web-based brand-building systems. Results show that many of the websites do not currently maximize their utility as marketing tools due to lack of consistency among their elements (Lee, Cai, & O'leary, 2006, p. 825).

In Turkey, the organisation in charge of destination management is City Culture and Tourism Directorates (CCTD). The aim of this study is to provide an updated and comprehensive overview of CCTDs' website, in terms of features and information which are able to make websites more effective. Subsidiary aim of this study is to determine the features that are used most frequently on the CCTDs' websites.

Research methodology

City Culture and Tourism Directorates (CCTD) are formal organizations set up to planning cultural and touristic activities of provinces based on the general plans of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT). In other words, they work on promoting

provinces of Turkey, both, nationally and internationally. For this reason it is the main information resource for potential travelers and, therefore, decision of information presented as well as features of websites used in promoting provinces are extremely important.

Therefore, the study included all 81 CCTDs websites. Under this name there were two websites under construction which were not included in this study. Since the purpose of study was to describe the information and features of the websites, we used the method of content analysis, as the method most commonly used in this line of research. In particular, the analysis was performed by using scanning method with a purpose to describe a current situation as it is.

For the purpose of website evaluation, a standardize form has been used, with a list of all possible features that the site can have and, for each feature, a presence (1) and absence (0) coding was used. Two assessors were used, as recommended by Wan (2002), to deal with a problem of possible personal bias. During the website evaluation, any possible discrepancies in opinion of two assessors were clarified through constructive discussion. The evaluations of websites were carried out connecting to internet 1024 mbps/speed on a personal computer whose technical features are capable of doing it (Intel Centrino Duo Core 2 Duo T7300 2.0 GHz CPU). The sites were evaluated during evening hours when connection was not busy. Data was analyzed with frequency method by using SPSS13.0 statistic package.

Research findings and comments

First element that we have looked at is the provision of content in foreign languages, as the task of the CCTDs is to promote provinces to, both, domestic and international markets. However, only 5,1% of websites have the language toolbar. CCTDs websites representing this feature are İzmir (English and German), Samsun (English, German, Arabic and Russian), Kütahya (English), and Bartın website (English and German). Even these few sites with the language toolbar, features content in foreign languages in a very limited way. With such a low level of attention paid to the foreign markets, it is not surprising that only one website gives information about the local currency.

According to the results, the first ten most frequent features in CCTDs websites are culture/history information (100%), link to homepage from inner pages (100%), call centre (100%), transportation information (97,5%), picture gallery (97,5%), video (97,5%), links to other related websites (94,9%), animated pictures (94,9%), search option (92,4%) and e-mail/ fax and other contact details (91,1%). Also 94,9% of websites provide animated pictures. Obviously, CCTDs have recognized the intangible nature of tourism products and have, therefore, relied extensively on visual communication to give potential visitors the feel of products and services offered. Climate information seems to be indispensable feature of each website, but the information is about the provincial climate in general, rather than on daily weather forecast. Likewise, almost every website (97,5%) has transport instruction on how to get to the province. However, only half of the websites support the transport information with maps.

While the CCTDs have paid a great deal of attention to transport information on how to get to the province, they have put much lesser effort to ensure that the visitors get the information on how to get around once in the province, as only 6 websites features trip guide (Adıyaman, Ağrı, Ankara, İzmir, Aksaray and Bayburt). Although webpages are well linked within the site, and also almost every site gives link to other relevant sites (94,9%), the links with the tourism sites are much less frequent (32,9%) while none of the sites has a link to the reservation sites. Only six sites provide a link to the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (www.goturkey.com) who coordinates the activities of the government and private sector and under which auspice the CCTDs are set up.

Table 1

FEATURES OFFERED ON CCTDS WEBSITES

Features taking place in websites	Yes	
	n	%
Link to home in every page of website	79	100.0
Culture/history information	79	100.0
Call center/Detailed contact	79	100.0
Video	77	97.5
Picture gallery	77	97.5
Information on transportation	77	97.5
Use of animated pictures	75	94.9
Links to other related sites	75	94.9
Online search in website	73	92.4
Contact (e mail/fax)	72	91.1
Website map	69	88.6
Events calendar	65	82.3
Shopping information	53	67.1
Climate information	51	64.6
Hotel information/Search	44	55.7
Maps	39	49.4
Research data/Customer data	28	35.4
Links to other tourism sites	26	32.9
Restaurants information	17	21.5
Use of flash	6	7.6
Trip guide	6	7.6
Online brochure	5	6.3
Multilingual capabilities	4	5.1
Rent a car	3	3.8
Feed back form	3	3.8
Visitor comments	2	2.5
Search for packages	1	1.3
Privacy policies/terms and conditions	1	1.3
Newsletter	1	1.3
Currency information	1	1.3
Chatting/newsgroups	1	1.3
Virtual postcards	-	-
Registration	-	-
Online transaction security	-	-
Online shopping	-	-
Online reservation	-	-
Links to reservation sites	-	-
Guarantee and Return Policies	-	-
Frequently Asked Questions	-	-
Contests/prizes	-	-
Total	79	

It also appears that these sites are well set up when it comes to navigating them. Moreover, the rate of websites using site map feature is 88,6%. It should be mentioned that 92,4% CCTDs websites have a search function in website toolbar. These features enable site visitors to reach pages that they want easily and promptly. However, when it comes to the tools that enable greater communication with visitors, these are rather neglected. Only two sites provide option for visitors to make comments, three sites feature feed-back form, while only the website of the province of Karamaran has set up newsgroup titled "Karaman Culture Club". This news group is oriented to people living in Karaman more than to the visitors of the province or potential visitors. When it comes to the material that can be downloaded, it seems that these websites are not much better. Only five websites features downloadable brochures, newsletter is available at only one site, while none are using the postcard feature.

Ideally, such websites should not only serve the visitors in terms of practical information provided, but also help the tourism attractions and services in promotion and distribution. In that respect, the websites are failing both, the businesses and visitors. Only about half of the websites provide information about accommodation providers with specific details such as address, contact and basic description. Only about one fifth of the sites provide some level of information on restaurants available in the area, while only three sites provide information about car rentals. The only website presenting package tour information belongs to Adıyaman province. It is only the retail sectors that is more readily featured in these websites, as 67,1% give information about shopping opportunities, but mostly at the level of recommendation about what to buy, but not where to buy.

Although each site, as already pointed out, features general contact information and, in most cases, e-mail/fax information (91,1%), only seven sites have personalized it by providing the names and contact details of the CCTC officers, while only on one site the e-mail is given for a direct contact. It is seen that more recent features such as security information for online shopping, conditions of guarantee and give back, competitions/awards, membership and online reservation have not been used in none of the CCTDs websites.

A disparity in the information provided is somewhat surprising, given that 84,8% of CCTDs websites were prepared by the Data Processing Coordination Center of the Ministry for Culture and Tourism, while the rest were prepared by the City Culture and Tourism Directorates. The Directorates, unlike the specialized center of the Ministry, rely mostly on the professional web design companies

Based on this analysis, we can argue that, currently, the sole purpose of the CCTDs websites is to provide information so most of these sites function as a brochure and are very static, since most of the online processing and interaction features available are not used and, furthermore, in some cases they are not updated regularly or feature wrong information. For example, the CCTD website of the Bilecik province, the name and contact of Karabük province is given. Even more serious is the fact that in many

cases the news and announcements section is outdated, featuring information from 2007, when most of the sites were set up or upgraded. Since then, they have not been updated.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study aimed to assess the official websites of City Culture and Tourism Directorates (CCTD) in Turkey. Some features which can make CCTDs websites more effective and more attractive have been ranked. The survey revealed that websites are generally informative but lacked interactive facilities. The results also show that CCTDs are not utilizing the Internet to its full potential to effectively market their destinations. While website is being prepared, multiple language option should be used by taking care of people being addressed at first. While translating, it is necessary to act according to nature of language and cultures of visitors. Local information (history, transportation, time, visa, exchange rates, festivals, climate, tipping policy etc.) should be presented comprehensively. Culture and tourism interactive map of province should be reachable in the website. Games, puzzles and competitions or e-postcards about destination should be used in order to make the website funny.

Websites should consist interrogation potentialities for accommodation, travelling and the other facilities (airline, rent a car, museum, restaurant, festivals, theatre, tour, conference, shopping etc.), online reservations (able to pursue, change, delay) and purchasing applications should be able to be done. While addresses of websites are being defined, using words consisting visit (visit istanbul), enjoy (enjoy antalya), go (go izmir) would facilitate search. All details about words used should be thought out in an attentive manner (readability, length, positioning, and download possibility). Social networks (like facebook, myspace and twitter), sharing websites (youtube, flickr), comment websites (tripadvisor, travelpost) should be used in introducing applications effectively. Users should be able to interact with the content, they should be able to add comments, pictures, and videos, they should be able to vote for tourism products. Visitors should also be able to reach and use websites via mobile devices. The critical point for gaining success in web based applications is producing consumer oriented projects. Consumers will be satisfied with right definition of their needs and continuous growing in these needs and also applications having strong background.

This study has a number of limitations. First, data was mainly collected at the public level DMOs in the Turkey. Therefore, the study findings may not be relevant for private DMOs. Additionally, given the rapid changes in ICT, the CCTDs participated in the current study might have changed their ICT applications and web-based marketing strategies. In addition to conducting a longitudinal study of the CCTD websites, other destination websites can be evaluated in future studies. Another future research possibility is to compare and contrast different groups of CCTD websites in different countries and using other separation methods such as per capita income and number of tourist attractions. More extensive researches that will be done in this area will be helpful more at the topic of benefits of internet in destination marketing and new applications.

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