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ASSESSMENT OF FORMS AND EXTENT OF TOURISM WEB PROMOTION IN SERBIA

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Abstract: The subject of this paper is Web promotion of tourism in Serbia. Promotion was understood as one of the four basic elements of marketing on the Web. The paper analyses the main forms and the extent of use of Web tourism promotion. The focus is on domain characteristics, quality of presentation, visibility and search engine rank, Internet promotion techniques and number of visitors. Structural observation was the main method used to analyze 260 travel and tourism related websites in Serbia. However, as Serbia is in the process of political and economic transition, it is still characterized by insufficient technical development of the Internet and its low level of utilization by the tourism industry. Based on the obtained results the extent of use of Web tourism promotion in Serbia and its forms were assessed.

Key words: web promotion, tourism, Serbia.

Introduction

The subject of this paper is the web promotion of travel and tourism in Serbia. The promotion was understood as one of the four basic elements of the marketing mix (product, price, promotion and place) on the Web. The web promotion, as the basic component of Internet marketing, can be understood as organized business activity, which aims to promote company, product or idea over the Internet (Stankov, 2009). Having just a website, does not necessary mean that a company uses the web promotion (Roldan, 2004). The existence of a website is just a starting point for the use of the Internet marketing (Sweeney, 2008). A website cannot be fully functional without the use of the Internet promotional techniques. The most important Internet promotional techniques in tourism industry are search marketing, Internet advertising, online PR and e-mail marketing (Bickart, Schindler, 2001; Chaffey, 2003; Krstić 2003; Manolis, 2005; Sweeney, 2005).

From the beginning of the Web, tourism industry embraced the new technology. (Stankov, 2007). The relationship between tourism and Internet is obvious. Travel agencies on the Web can show images of almost every destination in the world to

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potential customers. In the same way, hotels can show images of rooms, dishes in restaurants or answer to customer's questions (Ćurčić, 2006). In 1996, 50% of the all-global Internet transactions were travel and tourism related (Niinenen, *et al.*, 2006). In Europe, online travel sales reached 49.4 billion Euros (Marcussen, 2008). The scope of the global Internet market is immense. Great possibilities for sending, transferring information and constantly growing number of Internet users, create marketing segments for almost every type of business (Ćurčić, 2007).

During fast development of the Internet in developed countries, Serbia was facing terrible economic and political situation, which caused a delay in the adoption of the information and communication technologies. In 2007, the Internet penetration rate was 22.7% of the total population. This rate is two time smaller than European average (48.1%) and tree time smaller than EU average (59.9%). In the region, only Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania have lower Internet penetration rate (Stankov, 2009). From 1996, despite negative characteristics of the Internet development in Serbia, the number of the Internet users was constantly growing. In 2007, that number was estimated to 1.700.000 (Stankov, 2009). Still, development potential of the Internet is huge. Serbia will very soon reach the level of the development in the neighbouring countries. Tourism is important part of the Internet in Serbia. In 2006, travel and tourism were among top searches, besides music, computer, science and education (Beogradska otvorena škola, 2006).

Within this context, the main purpose of the paper is the assessment of basic forms and extent of use of the web promotion of tourism in Serbia. The focus of this paper is on domain characteristics, quality of presentation, visibility and search engine rank, Internet promotion techniques and the number of users. The structural observation was the main method used to analyze travel and tourism websites.

Methodology

The structural observation is a systematic method that researcher use to generate numerical data based on the observation of expected situations (Cohen, 2007).

Based on the researches of Baloglua and Pekcan (2006) and Hashim, *et al.* (2007), the author defined element of structural observation and the expected situation. The study included 260 of the travel and tourism website in Serbia. The term travel and tourism website was understood as a website of a domestic travel and tourism company and organization. The structural observation included following groups of websites: travel agencies, accommodation facilities, travel and tourism organizations, transport companies and tourism portals.

Table 1. Categories, elements and expected situations of structural observation of travel and tourism websites

Categories and elements	Expected situations
1. Domain name	
<i>a. Adequacy of a domain name</i>	Adequate / Inadequate
<i>b. Adequacy of TLD</i>	Adequate / Inadequate
<i>c. Existence of country code (yu or rs)*</i>	Exist / Does not exist
2. The year of website foundation	Year
3. Website type	Static / Dynamic
4. Website credibility and functionality	
<i>a. Website owner</i>	Exists / Does not exist
<i>b. Copyright and data citation</i>	Exists / Does not exist
<i>c. Update</i>	Exiss / Does not exist
5. Quality of content presentation	
<i>a. Navigation</i>	
• <i>Manu bar on all website pages</i>	Exist / Does not exist
• <i>Functionality of the navigation</i>	Good / Bad
• <i>Quick search</i>	Good / Bad
• <i>Site map</i>	Exist / Does not exist
<i>b. Color contrast</i>	Good / Bad
<i>c. Foreign language availability</i>	Full / Partial
6. Visibility and search engine rank (Google, Yahoo, Pogodak Krstarica)	Exist / Does not exist / Rank
7. Internet promotional techniques	
<i>a. Links</i>	Exist / Does not exist/ Number
<i>b. Links' structure</i>	Travel and tourism sector, Non-tourism sector
<i>c. Banners</i>	Exist / Does not exist / Number
8. Online PR (news section, chat, forum, online poll)	Exist / Does not exist
9. Elements of the e-mail marketing	Exist / Does not exist
10. Rank – by the number of visitors and county of origin	Rank, Country

* During the research there were process of changing of the national domain from yu to rs

The authors used “way-back machine” available at the website Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>) to determine the year of a website foundation. The year of the oldest recorded data on the website was identified as the year of website foundation.

The visibility and the position on search engine are determined using simple search on global search engines *Google* and *Yahoo*, and on two domestic search engines *Pogodak* and *Krstarica*. *Google* and *Yahoo* are the most used search engines in the world (Laycock, 2007). The keywords for search engines in the

selected group of websites were based on the names of travel agencies, hotels and transport companies. This way of keyword selection is based on the research made by Scheggia *et al.* (2005). In the case of well-known company names, the company location was added. The existence of the website URL among the top 10 results was considered as the existence of the visibility for the concrete search engine.

The position of URL among top 10 results indicated the rank of a website for a search engine. The average rank for each group of websites was based on the average of all positions.

Alexa Web service was used to determinate the number of unique visitors and visitors' country. The most visited website is ranked with number 1 (Alexa – The Web Information Company, 2008). In addition to ranking according to the number of visits, the authors determined the percentage ratio of visitors by the countries from which they accessed the domestic travel and tourism websites.

Domain name features

The complete URL address of a website, including the domain name, can be sort of an advertising panel. The Internet users will more often choose URL that makes sense and that carries a message, than those that are not associated with the subject of a website (Kostić, 2003).

When it comes to companies (including companies from the travel and tourism industry), an adequate domain would consist of a company name and a term that closely describes the main company activity (tourism, travel, tours, etc.). The additional terms may be omitted if a company has the brand that contain words closely describing companies' activities (for example www.yugotours.co.rs) or when it comes to companies with famous brands and long tradition (for example, www.jolly.rs). Recognizing mentioned criteria, authors came to result that 78.1% of tourist websites have an adequate domain name. An inadequate domain name have 21.9% of websites.

An important factor that determines the adequacy of the domain is TLD or Top Level Domain. The domain names can be grouped by various criteria. The simplest is grouping domain names into two basic types: CONE (Com., Org., Net., Edu) and CC (Country code) (Ratkaj, 2002). Country code is important for several reasons. The large number of CONE TLDs is taken, unlike the country codes. State labels in TLD provide a regional website credibility and higher degree of

user personalization. Within the tourism sector, country codes confirm to visitors the country identity. In the middle of 90s, almost all countries in the world had their own country code, even those with limited access to the Internet, (Yu, 2003). The study found that 68% of travel and tourism websites have country code in their TLDs.

Basic website features

The research included the year of foundation of a website, website type, credibility and update information. The first websites related to tourism subjects appeared in 1998. Until, 2001, constant growth of new tourism websites was noticed. In the next two years slower growth was noticed, but in 2004, growth continued (36 new websites appeared). Then there was slower growth in the next two years. The expansion started in 2007, and compared to 2006 (32 new websites), the number of new websites was doubled (Figure 1).

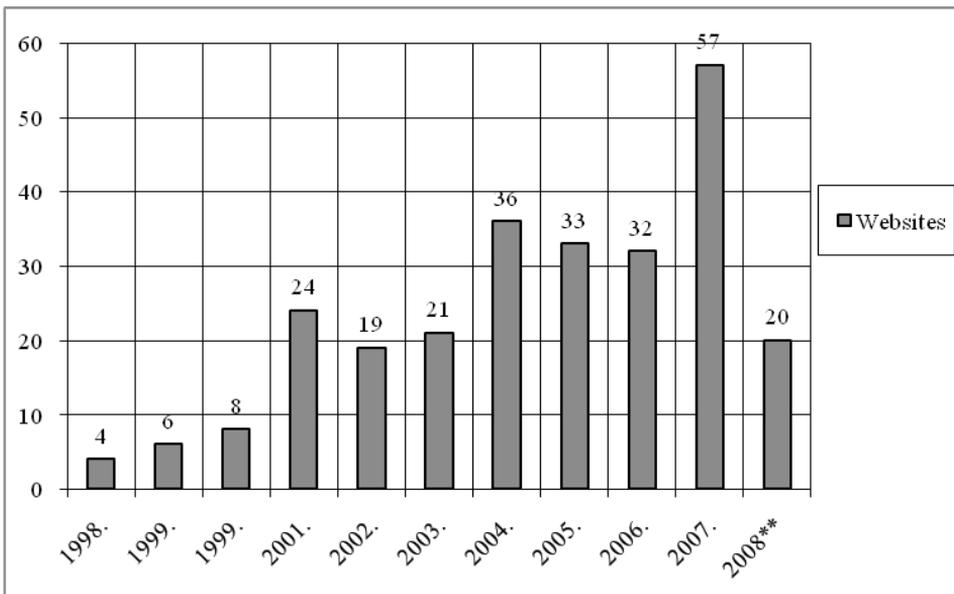


Figure 1. The number of new travel and tourism websites from 1998 to 2008

** In 2008, research period was ended in October 18.

The basic characteristic, important for every website user is its functionality. Two basic types are dynamic and static websites. For the tourism sector, it is of great importance that websites have dynamic characteristics, which provides them

greater opportunities of two-way communication and creating new services. The results show that 63.1% of travel and tourism websites are static, and 36.9% are dynamic. Given the above importance of dynamic websites for the promotion, it is argued that the situation in this area is unsatisfactory. The reasons of such bad situations are lower costs of creation and running static websites, lack of educated staff, and low understanding and interest for promotional potential of dynamic websites.

The research also included basic parameters of website credibility: website owner, copyright, data sources and update information. The existence of the information on the website owner is crucial for the determination of website credibility. The information about a website owner is important for the commercial websites. In travel industry, on the supply side, there are a large number of heterogeneous businesses and it is important to know who is offering the service. Apart the information about the owner, copyright is also important.

The research showed that 90.8% of travel and tourism websites provide information about the owner. Although it seems most convincing, the only acceptable result has to be that all travel and tourism websites have this information. This means that information about the owner should be required element of every website. The optional opportunity to provide information on copyrights used 77.7% of websites.

To maintain accuracy of information on the website is very important to cite sources. Citing sources of the information allow the user possibility to test and obtain additional information.

To determine the actuality of data the author used information about last update. This is especially important in tourism sector that deals with the information such as first and last minute offers, reservations deadlines, and changes in travel arrangement, weather conditions, exchange rates, traffic reports and other. Only 6.9% of travel and tourism websites show update information.

Quality of content presentation

As noted in Table 1 the quality of the content presentation of travel and tourism websites is determined based on the quality of navigation, visual assessment of the colour contrast and the availability of content in foreign languages.

The quality of navigation is established based on determining the existence of the main menu on all website pages, quick search options, site maps, and manual

verification of navigation functionality. The study found that 86.1% of websites have the main menu on all website pages. The site maps have 9.2% of websites, while 24.6% of websites have a quick search option. Manual check has showed that 71.1% of websites have navigation that is fully functional and simple to use (a clear and logical navigation interface).

The realization of the basic principles of legibility is to take care of sufficient contrast between the background colour and colour of text. Poor legibility leaves a negative impression on the visitors and websites cannot achieve direct and indirect effects of the promotion. Without further detailed analysis of the contrast colour, the research determined the number of websites that have good or bad contrast, respecting the basic rule of good contrast - dark text colour and light background. It was determined that 82.3% of websites have good, while 17.6% have bad contrast.

The study determined how many websites provide content in a foreign language, whether it is complete or partial availability, and what the structure of available languages is. Almost half (47%) of websites provide their content at least in one foreign language, but only 30% are fully available in a foreign language.

In the structure of foreign languages, there is the dominance of English with 71%, followed by German with 13%, French with 6%, Hungarian with 4%, Italian and Russian with 2%, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Romanian and Japanese with 0, 5%. The choices of languages that appear, match the target markets that are defined within the Tourism Strategy of Serbia (2005). However, there is a lack of website content in languages from the other major travel markets (Spanish, Polish, Greek, Czech, Slovak and Scandinavian countries).

Visibility and position on search engines

According to research results, the best visibility on local tourism websites was established on the Internet search engine Pogodak. Almost three quarters (74.6%) of links appear in the first 10 results of this search engine. Pogodak is a local search engine, so it was expected to have the best results. Google is on the second place with 70.8%, followed by Krstarica with 61.9% and Yahoo with 46.9%. The visibility of travel and tourism websites on leading local and global search engines is quite low. Even the result of about 75% of visibility is not satisfactory, knowing the vital importance of the visibility on search engines.

The same sequence as in search engine visibility is present in average rank results. However, the rank results, which occur in the first 10 results, are good. The best rank result showed Pogodak with average rank of 1.69. The second is Google with 1.9, followed by Krstarica with 2.27 and Yahoo with 2.42.

Use of Internet promotional techniques

The research included following Internet promotion techniques: Internet advertising, online PR and elements of e-mail marketing. As presented in Table 1 the research determined frequency of the number of websites by the appearance of new section, chats, forums and online polls. In addition, the frequency of appearance of banners, their average number and structure was determined.

The results indicate that 40% of the websites have links that lead to other websites. The average number of links is 4.53 by website. The sector structure of links was used to determine their adequacy. The large number of links (44%) lead to „non tourism“ sector. However, 55% of links lead to relevant websites. The most of links lead to travel and tourism organizations (17%) and accommodation sector (16%), following by travel agencies (6%) and transportation companies (6%). Of the total number of websites, 35.4% have banners, while their average number by a website is 3.55. It is generally known that the banners have little effectiveness. However, if complementary banners are shown on the official websites of well-known travel agencies, organizations or hotel their effectiveness is far greater.

Table 2. The number of websites by the appearance of new section, chats, forums and online polls

Website group	News section		Chat		Forum		Online poll	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Travel agencies	31	31,0	2	2,0	3	3,0	31	31,0
Accommodation facilities	14	23,3	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	1,6
Travel and tourism organizations	36	72,0	1	2,0	1	2,0	7	14,0
Transport companies	13	43,3	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0
Travel portals	16	80,0	1	5,0	9	45,0	3	15,0
Total	110	42,3	4	1,5	13	5,0	42	16,1

The representation of new sections, chats, forums and online polls, as a form of direct communication with website visitors, can show the level of online PR use. As shown in Table 2, new section has the highest level of use (42.3%), following by online polls (16.1%). Other forms of direct communication have very low representation.

The last researched Internet promotional techniques was the e-mail marketing. Even in the early stages of development of the e-mail marketing, experts have found numerous advantages of this way of communication (Lewis, 2002). Today, effective marketing cannot be imagined without using this way of communication. The research determined the frequency of appearing of mailing list. The results show that only 13.8% of the websites provide this option. This technique has the largest use in the group of travel agencies (23%). A large number of Internet promotional techniques are in form of onsite communication. Therefore, providing visitors' e-mails should be priority in order to continue communication (Cox, Koelzer, 2004; Baggott, Sales, 2007).

Website rank based on the realized number of visitors and country of origin

As noted, the survey of website rank based on the realized number of visitors and the country of origin was conducted by using Alexa Web service.

In Serbia, all the results ranking less than 200.000 represent websites that generally have good traffic (Stankov, 2009). According to the results of the research, the average ranking of travel and tourism websites is 6.281.186, which is extremely unfavourable. Top rankings have travel portals (2.930.372), followed by tourist agencies (3.346.790) and transport companies (3.786.452). The lowest rankings have tourist organization (9.005.754) and accommodation facilities (12.336.560). Only one website is in the category up to 100.000 (<http://www.putovanja.info>) and one in category up to 200.000 (<http://www.jat.com>).

The study found that 73.1% of visitors come from the territory of Serbia and Montenegro. Other visitors come mainly from the territory of former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia) and other European countries (Hungary, Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Poland, Czech and other).

Conclusion

Many countries have realized benefits and vast opportunities of the Internet promotion. In the future, travel and tourism will be important part of this global network.

A website is the key element of the Internet promotion. A company website is the final place where tourist will be drawn by different online promotional techniques. The largest number of domestic travel and tourism websites has a form of an

electronic brochure that does not allow use of advanced Internet promotional techniques. The most of travel and tourism websites in Serbia have good domain names with country code included. Despite of that, there is a need for the standardization of domain names in order to create recognizable brand.

The prevailing websites are the static ones that greatly restrict the promotional effects of travel and tourism presentations on the Internet. The static websites are also main obstacle for applying advanced Internet promotion techniques. English is dominant among the foreign languages on domestic travel and tourism websites. Although appearing, foreign languages (except English) are not represented in sufficient number to domestic websites, so the promotional effects are mostly limited to English language speakers. In the first place, the holders of promotional policies must direct the promotional efforts to improve visibility on the search engines, as one of the key categories of Internet marketing.

There are many promotional techniques on the Internet, but domestic travel and tourism companies use only few of them. The present techniques are the simplest ones, mostly obsolete forms such as banners and simple posting of links. The online PR is almost unused and represents the key field for more intensive use of the Internet marketing. In the forthcoming period, the online PR will shape the global image of Serbia as a travel destination. The e-mail marketing, as the first Internet promotion technique and the most used one in developed countries, in Serbia is completely neglected.

Previously mentioned characteristics of domestic travel and tourism websites fit into the overall picture of undeveloped Internet “market” in Serbia, and represent main obstacles of the use of tourism promotion on the Internet.

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