

A RESEARCH ON THE ROLE OF İNTERNET İN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURİSM BUSİNESSES: GAZİANTEP MODEL

Mehmet Demirdöğmez

Sultan Belli

ABSTRACT

Recently the internet is accessed evermore world wide. At the same time, e-trade has become an important marketing instrument for most business branches. The internet is used by tourism businesses too for many purposes, which have significant roles in the world trade. Nowadays, the usage and necessity of the Internet and its boundaries are controversial topics among researchers and tourism businesses' managers. The main purpose of this essay is that to determine what is the role of the internet for the development of tourism businesses. In this context, qualitative research methodology is preferred in this research for the purpose of comprehensive evaluation on development of tourism businesses. Interviewing, which is one of the qualitative research techniques, is used as a method for obtaining data from 5 and 4 star hotel managers and Group traveling agency managers in Gaziantep. Interviewing is one of the common data gathering techniques, it involves asking questions and getting answers from participants in a study. There will be interviewing with these business managers with predetermined questions, and questions will be detailed, particularly the specific prominent issues of them. Interviewing questions will be developed through Akova and Sarisik's (2006) article that, "research about the importance and role of the Internet in traveling agencies", it will also be applied with hotel businesses and traveling agencies.

Key words:tourism businesses, internet, marketing, Gaziantep.

INTRODUCTION

There has been astonishingly rapid developments in information technologies. These rapid developments forces businesses to change and improvement. Therefore, with the technological developments, the increase in competition and the pressure coming from consumers; they felt the necessity to restructure themselves and their systems. Specifically the internet and the other instruments of e-commerce has been an important development in terms of marketing. Thanks to the advantages favoring both companies and consumers, which are their target group, it has gained acceptance and begun to become widespread in a short time. The internet, created important changes in the tourism industry in terms of marketing. It was used and still continues to be used extensively by industries such as catering, accommodation, travel and leisure.

The increase in the transactions made via the internet, increases the number of users considerably and these two concepts continually feed each other. Thus, the volume of e-commerce has been gradually growing. The fact that 45% of the population in Turkey, that is a great proportion of the 39 million internet users, have credit cards can be considered as another significant factor contributing to the growth of e-commerce. Also the growth rate in vacation-travel category in Turkey has been announced as 35% (joint study of Tübisad, Etid, Deloitte in 2015).

Tourism industry, which is considered to be one of the world's largest and rapidly growing industry of the last fifty years, is on the way of becoming the world's largest industry and creates added value for more than 50 other industries. In direction with this developing understanding of tourism and varieties, this figure increases even more (Oflaz, 2010).

Tourism stands out as one of the industries where the use of internet is the most. It is clear that there significant developments concerning the use of the internet in travel agencies with regards to its role in connecting companies with their customers.

Tourism companies can use the internet for their marketing activities such as advertising, sales, distribution and customer relations. Furthermore, many tourism companies can use the internet in their interaction with other tourism companies as well. (Sarı and Kozak, 2005, p.257).

Definition of the Internet

Literally meaning “a network among networks”, the internet can be defined as a worldwide network comprises of computer networks formed in accordance with common standards. According to another definition, the internet is a communication network established among computers. The internet system was born as a result of the efforts of United States of America Department of Defence to establish a resilient, non-centralized computer network against any nuclear attack. Since the main purpose of this system was communication, a connection must be established between the computers that form the network. To do that, a common language is used. Through the use of TCP/IP, computers can communicate with each other and transfer information. With millions of computers interconnected on the internet, millions of people from around the world can easily communicate with no limitations and in a cost effective manner. Through the course of time, the internet first was institutionalized and then commercialized (Çevik, 2009, p.205; Özdipçiner, 2010, p.7; Çakır,2004, p.171, Budak, 2010, p.23). Today the internet, initially designed to connect a couple of institutions, transformed into a massive structure to which millions of people from all around the world can connect. The number of individuals and organizations that use the internet increases with each passing day (Özdipçiner, 2010, p.7)

The internet has characteristics that differentiates it from other media tools. Aksoy (2009) lists the sui generis characteristics of the internet as follows:

- Presents the possibility of a worldwide communication and operation.
- Provides information that exactly fits in with the “complete information” mentioned within the theories of economics. The information provided are quick and cost-effective.
- The interactive communication on the internet offers an opportunity for a meaningful and asynchronous dialog between the seller and the buyer.
- Businesses can operate regardless of geographical distances.
- A communication network that never closes and is accessible 24 hours in a day.
- Differing from the one on one model on phone and one to many model on the television, it provides a many-to-many communication.

Through advanced technology, people can be more engaged on the internet. Today, a three year old child begins to use computer, uses facebook when he/she is five and by the age of seven he/she establishes a friendship network and maintains environments where he/she can easily advertise his/her old books, clothes and toys. Small-medium-large scale companies met with the internet at the same time. Since large scale enterprises are slower, small scale enterprises challenge large ones (Baloğlu and Karadağ, 2008, p.11).

Upon the development of communication technologies and the rapid increase of internet usage, the world sees the formation of a new economic structure. Also the number of websites advertising and providing information about a product, service, individual or organization increases rapidly. Consequently; geographical borders are lifted, markets where the seller and the buyer meet gained a new dimension and the sellers, seeing the whole world as potential customers, have shifted their trade activities into web-based systems (Civan and Bal, 2002, p.1011, Çevik, 2009, p.206).

One of the important developments with regard to the tools of electronic commerce is mobile phones and the related applications that form the mobile communication. Mobile internet access, makes it possible for individuals to book online reservations with travel organizations, flights and hotels, obtain information about weather conditions, access maps, get information

about the nearest restaurants via mobile phones. In short, it makes it possible to access to the internet environment, which is normally accessed via computers, through mobile phones (Çevik, 2009:206).

In Turkey, where large amount of investments have been made on IT and technology in recent years, the number of internet users, which was around 2 million in early 2000s according to the International Telecom Union (ITU), has increased by 1750 percent in the last 10 years. 35 million of Turkey's population, which is around 78 million, have access to the internet (<http://sgb.kulturturizm.gov.tr>). Thus, it is possible to say that there is a great increase in the rate of internet access and usage both around the world and in Turkey.

Use of the Internet in Tourism Industry

In this period, which is defined as information age, the technology that we use frequently makes our lives easier in many areas. Being one of the technological developments, the internet has become widespread and turned out to be something that people cannot do without. In globalising world, each and every individual feeling the need to prove oneself, has been able to reach to the farthest places in the world and also reduced the cost of acquiring information to a minimum. Today, we now live in a world where all the things happening in it can be found out by anybody (Çakır and Yalçın, 2012, p.9). When we take a look at the internet usage rate of the world, we see that this rate is growing with each passing day. As of 30 December 2015, the estimation for total world population was 7.259.902.243 people and the number of internet users were 3.366.261.156. These figures indicate that more than 50% of world population use the internet. Recent figures indicate that has been a 832,5% change (<http://www.internetworldstats.com>).

Although industries such as airline transport and travel agencies within the tourism industry are one of the first industries where the internet is used for commercial purposes, companies within the hospitality industry realized the commercial significance of the internet a little late and they began using the internet somewhat late in comparison with other businesses within the tourism industry. Towards the end of 1990s, the internet has begun to be used extensively in hospitality agencies and there has been a great increase following the 2000s (Kozak 2006, p.273).

It can be said that the tendencies of the companies within the tourism industry to utilize the internet for commercial purpose are maintained to date and tourism continues to be one of the industries where the use of the internet is most common (Öz, 2010, p.76-77). Airline companies extensively try to contact the customers directly and the technology provides this opportunity (Alamdari, 2002). Also the internet helps the potential customers to find out about hotel options and compare hotel prices without the necessity of contacting sales representatives (Connolly et al. 1998). The possibility of online sale of services related to traveling and tourism, forms the second largest online trade area after computer hardware (Ekiz and Babacan, 2012, p.45).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study aims to determine the role of the internet regarding the development of hotel companies and travel agencies within the tourism industry and examine the purposes the internet is used for. Within this scope, a qualitative method is preferred in order to be able to make a comprehensive evaluation regarding the role of the internet on the development of tourism companies.

In the study, the "interviewing" technique, which is a qualitative research method, is used to to gather data from 5 hotel administrators and 20 travel agency representatives. Interviewing technique has earned its place as an efficient data gathering method among many disciplines of social science in the last quarter of the twentieth century (<http://kolayaof.com>). This technique involves an interactive communication process based on predetermined questions addressing certain topics and the relevant replies given by the participants. The planned and purposeful nature of the interview technique differentiates it from a regular conversation and

turns it into a data gathering effort planned on the basis of certain targets. (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005, p:119-120).

In this study, interviews were carried out with the company representatives on the basis of predetermined questions that are detailed and focused on problematic areas which stands out within businesses.

The field study includes the hotels and travel agencies located in Gaziantep. Interviews have been carried out with the authoritative representatives within these enterprises. 20 of these participating agencies are Group A travel agencies. Three of them are 4 star hotels. Two of them is 5 star. The average duration of interviews were half an hour. The interviews were recorded by taking notes. Afterwards, the data acquired through interviews have been analyzed.

FINDINGS

As a result of the overall assessment of the interviews conducted with participants representing hotel and travel agencies, we tried to evaluate the role and importance of internet use in the development of companies within the tourism industry.

Determining the Reason of Internet Usage by Travel Agencies and Hotel Companies

It is possible to say that all the companies interviewed use the internet for 5 years in average. Travel agencies generally use the internet in domains such as ticket sales, hotel booking and renting cars. Hotel companies expressed that they need internet access all the time.

Travel agencies and hotel companies in the tourism industry have WEB pages. However, when we take a look at the frequency of updates made on WEB pages we can say that, in comparison with hotel companies, travel agencies tend to perform updates more frequently. While travel agencies perform updates on a weekly or monthly basis hotel companies make these updates once in every 6 months or once in a year.

The justification of travel agencies and hotel companies participated in the study for creating WEB pages can be listed as follows:

1. Reaching more customers,
2. Reaching to customers more easily and fast,
3. Making it possible for customers to easily contact with the companies,
4. Reaching out to the customers who cannot be contacted face to face
5. Advertising
6. Promotion

When we examine the information included on WEB pages; address, phone number and other contact information are included on the WEB pages of companies. However it can be seen that sale prices and policies and the applicable promotions are not included.

Determining the Role of the Internet in the Development of Travel Agencies and Hotel Companies

The companies in tourism industry make use of the internet quite extensively. Although travel agencies usually carry out reservation procedures via phone. Hotel companies carries out most of their reservation procedures through the phone while partially using fax.

With regards to the travel agencies participated in the study, we can say that the use of internet considerably increases their sales activities. However it is not possible to say that there is a considerable increase with regards to hotel companies.

It can be said that using the internet has no cost reducing effect for tourism companies.

According to the opinions of the participants, we can indicate that the use of internet increases the profit margin.

Word of mouth marketing through previous customers is the most efficient marketing distribution channel that the tourism companies make use of. “ The best advertisement is a walking advertisement.” “The customer expresses his/her own opinion with no commercial concern.”(Company A) “ Word of mouth feedback is carried out.” (Company B)

As the second best one, we can consider WEB pages and e-mail. Also it is possible to say that brochures and catalogs have lost their importance in terms of advertising in the tourism

industry. “We can say that catalogs lost their importance in recent years because of WEB pages.” (Company C)

RESULT AND SUGGESTIONS

This study has been carried out to determine the role and importance of internet in the development of tourism companies. Within this framework, the results of the field study can be summarized as follows;

1. All of the tourism companies use the internet applications. However both travel agencies and hotel companies regard the internet as a means of communication rather than marketing. Reasons for creating web pages such as “Reaching out more customers, Making it possible for customers to easily contact with the companies” supports this approach as well. When travel agencies and hotel companies use the internet for marketing purposes, they can boost their competitive power both within the country and abroad as well as reduce the costs of their businesses. Considering the internet with such a purpose can provide organizations important opportunities.

2. A great number of accommodation and travel agencies around the world perform their reservation and sale procedures via the internet. In this study, all tourism companies use the internet and have web pages. However, the result of this study suggests that the companies’ reasons for creating web pages do not include significant factors such as facilitating reservation and sales. Studies suggest that the most important reason for customers to avoid purchasing via the internet is distrust. On the event that travel agencies and hotel companies can ensure the required environment of trust, they can reduce their costs, maintain their presence and have the opportunity of growing further.

3. The internet is considered as the most efficient marketing distribution channel that the tourism companies make use of. Ear-to-ear advertising of previous customers is emphasized as the most efficient channel. The internet is considered as the second most efficient channel. On the other hand, it is not possible to say that catalogs and brochures bear any importance as marketing distribution channels. If travel agencies and hotel companies manage to consider the internet as the primary marketing distribution channel they can improve their chance of growth.

The data of this study has been acquired by conducting interviews with the representatives of 25 organizations in a limited area. Therefore suggesting that these findings represent the general situation might not be a correct approach. However, it can contribute to the limited literature on the subject matter that is currently available.

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