

The Application of the Integrated Direct Marketing and Internet Communications in Tourism Industry

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Abstract

This research involves a number of key connotations, namely Internet marketing, marketing communications, the elements of direct marketing, Web sites, as well as lodges.

The technique in which these key terms have been defined for the tendency of this study is considered below.

The study considers direct marketing to be: "...a system of marketing by which organizations communicate directly with target customers to generate a response or transaction". This response may take the form of an inquiry, a purchase, or some other form of action on the part of the targeted recipient category (Belch & Belch, 2004).

Internet marketing can be expounded and described in a number of ways. This study employed the definition by Imber and Betsy-Ann (in Ngai, 2003:24) who define Internet marketing as: "...the process of building and maintaining customer relationships through online activities to help and simplify the exchange of ideas, products and services that satisfy the goals of both buyers and sellers".

Keywords: internet communications, direct marketing, website, hotels

1. Introduction

In recent times however, with the advent of the internet and the information super highway, components such as indirect marketing and internet/interactive marketing has been included in the marketing communications mix to reflect the new ways in which marketers communicate with their target market segments in the modern marketplace (Belch & Belch, 2004). The inclusion of direct marketing in the market communications mix is also corroborated by the more recent work of Armstrong and Kotler (2005) however the authors excluded internet marketing as a components.

The components of the marketing communications are often viewed as separate independent activities by most firms. However, the integration of these components is viewed by contemporary marketing philosophy as very important for the development and execution of successful marketing communications programs. According to Shimp (2003:6), the practice and process of carefully coordinating and integrating the different components of a firm's marketing communications mix is known as integrated marketing communications, or IMC for short.

Although there are different definitions or descriptions of the concept of IMC, one of the most prominent descriptions is by Armstrong and Kotler (2005). They describe IMC as "...the concept under which a company carefully integrates and coordinates its many communications channels to deliver a clear, consistent, and compelling message about the organization and its products".

It can thus be inferred from their description that, an IMC is capable of producing stronger and highly consistent brand message along with greater sales if coordinated and executed effectively. The consequence of this coordinated IMC also includes enabling the firm disseminate the right brand message to the right customer segments at the right place and time (Kotler, 2003).

In their work Brassington & Pettitt (2003) noted that the Internet has grown to become an ever increasing vital marketing instrument and has had a tremendous impact on marketing approaches as well as communications

strategies. Briggs (1997) remarked that the internet as a tool for marketing communications, is a novel and incredibly powerful tool and its effect on marketing strategies and outcomes cannot be overlooked. In light of this observation, Hoey (1998) stated that the incorporation of electronic media into the marketing communications mix is necessary and important.

Unlike traditional marketing media, the internet through the World Wide Web (WWW or Web) is unique and possesses unique properties and thus an entirely unique environment for carrying out marketing operations. Hoffman & Novak (1996) thus remarked in their work that there is a need for the reconstruction of traditional marketing activities to make it easier to implement them in a web-based environment.

This proposed research work thus concentrates on the direct marketing and internet communications and studies ways through which this component could be “reconstructed” in a web-based environment for a firm’s online and real time communications in the marketplace.

One common feature of the internet environment are websites. As numerous as they are on the internet, so also are their objectives numerous. However, Du Plessis et al. (2003), notes that one objective is common and primary across all websites featured on the internet and this is marketing communications.

Taking this into account, the study concentrated on marketing communication in an Internet environment and specifically investigated ways in which the elements of the marketing communications mix could be employed via a tourism firm’s Web site.

There are many advantages of the internet however, one of the most important, is the international exposure many local firms get by having a presence on the internet. This according to Rao (1997) and Timmers (2000) also enables such firms to access and acquire a larger number of customer base from all over the world.

Previous studies cases in a tourism and hospitality context have evaluated Web sites of accommodation establishments according to certain categories of evaluation criteria in various countries. Table 1 below indicates the different categories of evaluation criteria, the type of accommodation establishment, as well as the geographic scope used in these previous studies.

Table 1. Previous Research Work Which Evaluated Websites of Accommodation Establishments.

Evaluation Criteria Categories	Types of Accommodation Establishment Studied	Geographic Scope Covered	Previous Study
Website characteristics were evaluated in order to establish a relationship to marketing efficiencies	Lodges	South Africa	Nothnagel (2006)
Websites were evaluated according to site design characteristics (i.e., interactivity, navigation and functionality) and site marketing practices	Luxury hotels	Turkey	Baloglu&Pekcan (2006: 171-176)
Websites were evaluated based on seven criteria, namely impression, content usefulness, accuracy, navigation, accessibility, online reservations and timeliness of information	Top 25 limited –service chain lodging operations	United States	Ham (2004: 295-308)
Four categories namely technical aspects, user friendliness, site attractiveness and marketing effectiveness were used to evaluate the websites.	Bed and Breakfast organizations	United States	Kline, Morrison & St. John (2004:253-267)
Three general user criteria (i.e., user interface, variety of information and online reservations) were used to evaluate the websites in this study.	International Tourist Hotels and Tour Wholesalers.	Taiwan	Wan (2002: 155-160)

As pointed out above, a common purpose of all Web sites is marketing communications (DuPlessis et al., 2003). Nevertheless, only one of the studies listed in Table 1 have focused on the Web site specifically as a marketing communications medium but focuses solely on the South African market. as a consequence; for this reason, this study attempted to address this gap.

The Web sites of tourism firms will then be evaluated according to a new list of evaluation criteria, based on the different elements of the marketing communications mix.

As noted above in Table 1, previous studies that evaluated the Web sites of accommodation establishments were conducted in South Africa, Turkey, Taiwan and the United States of America (Nothnagel, 2006, Baloglu & Pekcan, 2006; Ham, 2004; Kline et al., 2004; Wan, 2002). Quality control is an important management concern in the hospitality sector.

This study, therefore, addressed this gap and evaluated the Web sites of all the hotels that have been graded by the Jordan tourism board. The minimum lodge accommodation requirements set by the JTB are presented in Appendix.

Taking the above into consideration, the problem statement and research objectives formulated for this study are presented below:

1.1 Problem Statement

A number of previous studies (cf. Baloglu & Pekcan, 2006; Ham, 2004; Kline et al., 2004; Wan, 2002) have analyzed and evaluated Web sites in a tourism and hospitality context. These studies have evaluated the Web sites of accommodation establishments in various countries based on certain categories of Web site features.

None of these studies explored the Web sites from a tourism and hospitality perspective based on the elements of the marketing communications mix. These studies were also not conducted within a Jordan context and although other accommodation establishments were investigated, no previous research specifically investigated the Web sites of hotels. Hence, this study attempts to address these gaps.

Taking the above into account, the main purpose of this study is to examine the Web sites of hotels graded by the Jordan tourism board, based on Web site features classified under the elements of the marketing communications, from a Jordan perspective. This investigation will determine the extent to which graded hotels effectively use their Web sites as online marketing communications tools.

It is important to note that the specific Web site features to be investigated in this study are referred to as online marketing communications techniques.

1.2 Objective of the Study

The objectives of this study were formulated in view of the research problem to investigate investigate the extent to which online marketing communications techniques in relation to direct marketing were employed by the Web sites examined in this study.

1.3 Research Questions

In order to effectively provide answers to this generic question, the following *specific research questions* were formulated for each of the marketing communications mix elements investigated in this study:

- *Research question 1:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide telephone number?
- *Research question 2:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide a fax number?
- *Research question 3:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide a physical address?
- *Research question 4:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide a postal address?
- *Research question 5:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide an e-mail link that activates the visitors own e-mail software?
- *Research question 6:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide an online response form?
- *Research question 7:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study include site map?
- *Research question 8:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study include a search index?
- *Research question 9:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study offer visitors a virtual tour?
- *Research question 10:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide a “What’s New”

section?

- *Research question 11:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide a calendar of events?
- *Research question 12:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide local weather information?
- *Research question 13:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide a location map with directions to the lodge?
- *Research question 14:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study provide jokes and/or cartoons?
- *Research question 15:* To what extent do the Web sites to be investigated in this study allow visitors to view the site in multiple languages?

2. Literature Review

A lot of scholars have offered varying definitions for the internet marketing phenomenon. However one definition that stands out in literature is that which implies that internet marketing is a unique process for the generation and maintenance of relationships between consumers and firms through simple to complex online interactions geared towards the facilitation of an environment conducive for the exchange of goods, services as well as ideas amongst firms, consumers and suppliers.

These ways include the dissemination of firm and product related information to potential customers, suppliers and other third parties; it can also be used to offer for or make purchases of goods and services as well as to make reservations depending on service type.

While the internet and internet marketing has changed the way marketers market and indeed the overall way business is conducted in this millennium, there has however, been some issues associated with internet marketing. In most literature, these issues have been associated with the two most prominent categories of levels of internet use in marketing. These categories according to Wilson and Abel (2002) include: business enhancement and revenue enhancement categories.

According to Wilson & Abel (2002); the business enhancement category involves all of those activities geared towards facilitating communication, conducting brief or extensive market research, and all of the activities involved in using the internet to enforce or reinforce the image of the firm or its brand(s). The authors note that such tools as the email services and forums or discussion groups are common ways businesses ensure that they maintain effective communication between and among customers, suppliers and the firm itself- a phenomenon highly needed for the success of the firm in delivering the right product to its customers at the right price, specification, quantity, quality and place (Wilson & Abel, 2002).

In conducting marketing research, the internet has often time served as a source for secondary research as a variety of information from different can be obtained through the internet. These information can not only inform the business organization about its existing or potential customer's choice of goods and services but can also provide an insight into the activities of the firm's competitors, as well as insight into potential new niche markets to venture into, their characteristics and the best approach to employ in a bid to service that market (Wilson & Abel, 2002:85-88).

In enhancing their corporate, brand or social responsibility image and by extension their overall image, firms have been known to apply their website and web pages towards the dissemination of important image building information, scenery and other effects such as its mission, vision and value statements or propositions as well as selected image enhancing news items and sound bites, milestones and achievements (Wilson & Abel, 2002: 85-88).

While the business enhancement category focuses on improving the image, operations and image of the firm, Wilson & Abel (2002) revealed that the revenue enhancement category focuses on all of those activities related to electronic commerce and well as the electronic versions of the organization.

Armstrong & Kotler (2005) that the electronically supported processes which enables the exchange of goods and services is known is generally referred to as e-commerce they note that the difference between brick and mortar and electronic markets is that the former consist of physical market places while the later consists of virtual market spaces. These virtual market spaces are used by e-organizations as well as brick and mortar organizations alike to offer their goods and services online while consumers use them in likewise manner, but this time to search for,

identify and make direct or shipped purchases utilizing the various forms of electronic payment systems which exists today. (Armstrong & Kotler, 2005: 485).

While a business enhancing website may appear different from an e-commerce website, they are both actually the same and often time contain the same information except for the fact that the e-commerce website goes a step further in allowing and enabling visitors and customers to make immediate purchases or place orders or reservations for goods or services that they want (Wilson & Abel, 2002: 85-88) .

The extent to which businesses adopt or employ the internet in their marketing activities differ from firm to firm and from industry to industry. Firms which employ internet marketing extensively and credit or depend on internet marketing for the majority of its sales and thus revenue is often referred to as a true e-organization or in some cases e-business. These types of firms usually adopts a decentralized networking-based organizational structure and its activities are often directed to a global target market and is programmed to offer its goods and services 24 hours every day and more often than not, 7days a week (Wilson & Abel, 2002: 85-88).

While a lot of firms maintain an online presence today, not all firms are achieving effective marketing communications. Hoey (1988) notes that in order to ensure effective marketing communication through online presences and by extension websites, it is important to concentrate on the most important component of the marketing mix. The marketing mix is referred to as one of the most prominent and fundamental concepts in the field of marketing (George, 2001; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003), and in the following section, this thesis work will present a concise overview of the fundamental components of the direct marketing and internet communications as well as highlight from literature, the various ways, the internet has influenced and revolutionized these elements.

3. Methodology

All the Web sites included in the population will be accessed by typing each hotel's Web site address (URL). Data will then be collected by means of a quantitative content analysis, following a similar approach used in previous studies. Data will be collected from the home pages of the graded hotels during a period of one month.

A simple coding system will be applied for entering data where the number 1 will be allocated where an online marketing communications technique was present and the number 0 will be allocated where the feature was absent from the site. Field editing will not be necessary for this study as the Web sites can be accessed at any time where the necessary facilities were available. Central editing will however, be applicable in order to detect obvious errors that may have occurred during data entry.

The data will be captured and analyzed in Microsoft Office Excel 2013 and then SPSS. The findings will then be reported by means of frequency tables which represent the frequency distribution for each variable of interest. Frequencies and percentages will be used to show how frequently the online marketing communications techniques were employed in the Web sites under investigation.

Comparisons were also made and reported between the three, four and five star hotels. This will be done to determine whether differences existed with regards to the online marketing communications techniques employed in the Web sites of graded hotels based on their star grading.

One and two star hotels will not be included in these comparisons as only one Web site was included in the population for one star lodges and only four sites were included for two star lodges. Hence, it was not feasible to include these two star grading categories in the comparisons.

4. Result

Table 2and chart 1 presents a summary of the percentage with which individual techniques of each element of the direct marketing communication were applied across hotel grades. The ensuing charts present a summary of the occurrence of each of the techniques for each of the marketing communications mix elements.

Table 2. The Percentage with Which the Specific Online Marketing Communications Techniques Were Employed in the Web Sites of Three, Four and Five Star Hotels

Categories and online marketing communications techniques	Percentage with which technique was employed by three star Hotels (n= 7)	Percentage with which technique was employed by four star Hotels (n= 11)	Percentage with which technique was employed by five star Hotels (n= 15)
Telephone Number	100.00	100.00	100.00
Fax Number	100.00	100.00	100.00
Physical Address	100.00	100.00	100.00
E-mail Link	100.00	100.00	100.00
Location map	82.00	85.30	95.40
Postal address	100.00	100.00	100.00
On-line response form	79.00	85.50	90.70
Site map	80.45	80.80	90.40
Virtual tour	89.30	89.90	92.34
Local weather information	33.00	55.00	77.00
Multiple Languages	100.00	100.00	100.00

The analysis section above shows the attitude of hoteliers in Jordan towards applying the direct marketing. To put these findings in the right perspective. The table clearly shows how three, four and five star hotels combined; apply the direct marketing on their websites. Perhaps the direct marketing element of the marketing communications mix is one which is highly favored by Jordan hoteliers. The frequency distribution for the occurrence of each technique for the direct marketing element of the marketing communications mix is presented. It can be seen that all three hotel grade levels had telephone numbers, fax numbers, email links, physical address, postal address and multiple language techniques of the marketing mix on their websites. With regard to local maps, online response forms, site maps and virtual tours, five star hotels recorded a higher percentage of application than four star hotels, which in turn had higher percentage of application than three star hotels in that order. Note that for the advertising element of the market communications mix, all three hotel grade levels had links to other sites on their websites.

In summary, an examination of the application of the elements of the direct marketing communications on the websites of three, four and five star hotels revealed that. This calls for action on the part of hoteliers to embrace best practices and strive to completely apply the element of the direct marketing communication on their online platforms.

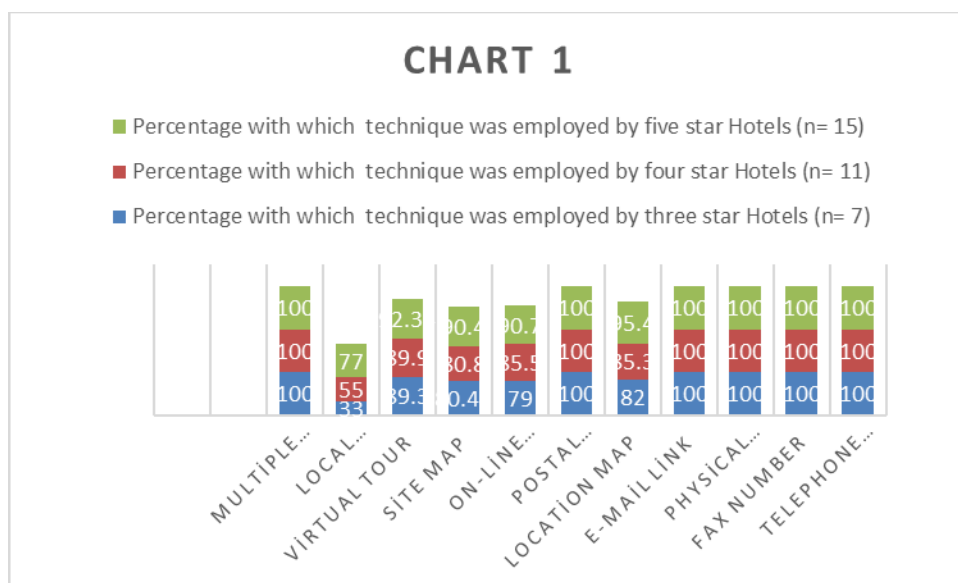


Figure 1. Target and Limitation

This study targeted the approximately 61 websites of three, four and five star hotels in Jordan. However, as customary with the web, some of these websites could not be accessed due to one problem or another. 7 of the websites were undergoing reconstruction, 9 of the sites exhibited technical errors which totally obscured the little (if any) information existing on them. while 4 of the lodges were maintained by a third party, providing incoherent information on both websites, 1 of the websites only contained information advertising that it was currently up for sale. Thus all in all 20 websites were excluded from the target population. Making a total of 41 websites available for examination and thus making up the sample population for this study.

5. Conclusions

This study set out to understand the degree to which three star, four star and five star hotels applied elements of direct marketing. All in all, the websites of 41 hotels graded by the Jordan tourism board also known as JTB were examined and the degree to which they employed the inherent techniques of each of the direct marketing and internet communications were determined. A structured content analysis of the websites of the sample hotels were analyzed by determining the presence or absence of the techniques in question. Findings showed that the direct marketing and elements and their corresponding techniques were fully employed in the websites of all of the participating hotels. While this study did not take it upon itself to understand the reason for the partial deployment of certain mix elements and not others, this would make an interesting future research area for consideration.

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