

**ARTIGO PUBLICADO NOS ANAIS DO II ATCM – ADVANCE
TOURISM MARKETING CONFERENCE.
“DESTINATION AND EVENT MARKETING”.
VALENCIA UNIVERSITY: VALENCIA – SPAIN, 2007.**

Using Interactive Strategies to Promote Tourist Destinations on the Web

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Abstract

Purpose

This study aims to propose better interactive strategies to be used by tourism managers to promote tourist destinations on the web

Methodology/Approach

Websites of the top 15 destinations in Brazil were investigated, analysing the resources and services available.

Findings

In spite of the importance and fast growth of e-commerce in recent years, none of the websites analysed offered the possibility to book or pay for a reservation through the web. In addition, websites usually only make the phone number and an e-mail address available. Neither a discussion forum nor a tourists' comment section existed on the websites analysed. It was possible to verify that popular destinations such as São Paulo, Fortaleza and Salvador (SSA) make available in an appropriate manner the telephone numbers and e-mails of the listed products, as well as those of the local tourism organisations. However, destinations such as Belo Horizonte, Porto Alegre and Brasília, the capital city, offer few or no e-mail addresses or telephone numbers of the local tourism authority, with only the contacts for the tourism products existing on the websites made available.

Originality/value of paper

New proposals and suggestions are made to develop and improve the promotion of tourism through the web.

Keywords: Interactive strategies, Web promotion, Tourist destinations, Marketing

Type of paper: Empirical paper – research paper

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1. Introduction

In recent years, tourism promotion has entered a new era, thanks to the web. This has mainly been a natural evolution promoted by marketing and by the new technologies of communication that became available. Information technology, particularly the web, has been used more and more in tourism promotion. As a result of this, new strategies have been created in order to use this new form of communication in a more suitable and rational way, particularly in terms of costs and actions. Consequently, it is necessary to promote the resources, the structure and the advantages of the web, as well as the best interactive strategies that might be used. This will help tourism managers to be aware of its potential and relevancy to destination marketing.

Wind et al. (2002) consider that as a result of the new technologies and the subsequent change in human behaviour patterns, five new principles have been added to marketing: customisation, community, multiple channels, interaction and competitiveness as well as a set of actions that have to be oriented in terms of marketing strategies on the web.

It is relevant to mention that apart from the strategies of communication and commercialisation usually developed through the web, it is also necessary to create other strategies focused particularly on the interaction between tourists, residents and tourism enterprises in order that tourism can be developed in a sustainable way. Without a correct, adequate and significant use of the strategies based on the resources, structures, design, products, services and information that might be available on the websites, the promotion of destinations may not achieve its objectives and aims.

Facing this new scenario, based mainly on the constant development of technology and the growth of web users, most tourist destinations are using the web as a promotional tool. Nevertheless, certain strategies of promotion on the web are very restrictive, and achieve little competitive advantage for destinations. Hence, the objective of this paper is to formulate better and more adequate interaction strategies on the web in order to promote tourist destinations in Brazil.

According to a research undertaken by E-marketer, the number of web users in Brazil is going to grow (33%) more than in the USA and England (respectively 19% and 12%) in the next few years. In 2008, Brazil will have more than 35 millions web users, 11 times more than in the year 2000 (Infoexame, 2007). Besides that, Brazil, together with Russia, India and China, has several leading companies in this market, developing cutting-edge IT tools and resources. Within this context, this study investigates the websites of some key tourist destinations in Brazil. It aims to contribute in the development of interactive strategies to support several other international tourist destinations.

2. Using the Web to Promote Tourist Destinations

According to Lovelock and Wright (2001), the 1990s is considered in the history of Promotion as a decade of transition to a new phase called Digital Promotion. The main reason for this was the use of digital resources, such as the Internet and the web, motivated by the changes in the consumption and communication patterns of the clients. Among the key changes of consumption are: different lifestyle (e.g. women at work, small families, active mature markets), reduction in spare time, a wide range of new products and services, a decline in brand loyalty and changes in communication.

Digital Promotion can be considered as a set of promotional actions and goals included in the general context of marketing that, through the use of digital resources, aims to achieve the targeted aims of the marketing strategy. According to Cruz (2005) it is possible to add to this definition that promotion of destinations on the web is the set of strategies that aims to promote, communicate, persuade, interact, inform and offer operational support to tourists, residents and tourism enterprises involved with tourism, making use of the resources, structures and technological tools available on the web.

Wind et al. (2002) state that, when compared to other forms of promotion, the web creates added-value to marketing as it is based on the offer of customised products and services, providing assistance before, during and after the sale. It offers benefits to the Destination Management Organisation, as it is easy to change the products available and their prices and provides secure and trustworthy interactions. Tourists also benefit, as it is convenient in terms of access to all sites; provides entertainment while searching and buying products; and offers education and personal development through precise and trustworthy information.

Based on these definitions of web promotion, it can be realised that this new technology is not an isolated and random way to provide a promotional campaign on the web. Unfortunately, this situation is not always the case as can be noted on many websites for Brazilian tourist destinations. Most of them aim to attract tourists through the offer of general products and services with specific discounts, without offering information, products and services specifically related to support sustainable tourist activity.

This situation of tourist promotion on the web occurs mainly because it is still in an initial phase of development, and lacks the required infrastructure. Several destinations are still testing and verifying this new means of communication as a tool of marketing, despite the fact that the web has been used for more than ten years in other sectors, such as automobile, telecommunication, education and clothing. In order to bring these websites up to date, it is necessary to set up promotional strategies that are able to achieve the objectives established by the tourism marketing organisations of the Brazilian destinations.

New technologies have changed the priorities in terms of promotion as, previously, it was the enterprises that established the flow of communication and used technologies only as an instrument of support. Now, with the creation of the web, the power is transferred to the clients as they have at their disposal a technology where they are able to compare prices, with support 24/7 and personalised services.

Therefore, it is extremely important that tourism managers are constantly updating their knowledge in order to find out the best technological resources to develop the promotion of destinations on the web. This will lead to a better and broader communication and trade of tourism products and services through interaction among tourists, residents and enterprises.

It is important to highlight that the interaction strategies do not aim to bring visitors searching for a deal to the website, as do some websites specialised in auctions. The aim is to communicate, inform, persuade and have an influence on the tourist's and resident's behaviour in order to develop a more efficient relationship among them.

Although it is possible to consider that the interactive web strategies created and developed in this study may be applied to any tourist destination, the need to be flexible when adapting them to a given destination should be taken into consideration, as these strategies must be based mainly on the image and market position of the destination.

3. Interactive Web Strategies

When compared to call centres, the new technological resources allow a better interaction between tourists, residents and tourism enterprises. The web is currently the technology that allows the set up of interactive strategies in a faster and better way between the destination and its demand. This is mainly due to the existing resources that allow a bilateral communication, which is flexible enough in the process of communication. Peppers (1997) states that the new technologies of communication make it possible to interact with millions of people at the same time, with client participation in almost every process of the company. It is also possible to affirm that this interactivity is available to most destinations, regardless of their size and market.

It is important to consider that the search for the clients' personal information is one of the priorities of the promotion of tourist destinations on the web, as it allows a better relationship with the demand. Without any doubt interactive strategies are the best option to obtain such data. There are several reasons to develop interaction strategies through the promotion of tourist destinations on the web. According to Vassos (1997) the main reasons are the opportunity to have feedback about the website, products and services, and to create a relationship with the users. Molina (2002) states that interaction with the demand creates opportunities to set up unique products, services and tourist experiences, which make tourists aware of what is available on the website and at the destination.

Interactivity has three significant characteristics of communication. According to Venetianer (1999) the first is the ability to communicate with clients; the second being the ability to get feedback from them. These two characteristics make the third one possible, which is the ability to reply to the client once more, establishing a dialogue where it is possible to inform, listen and learn in a cyclical and bilateral way. To create this opportunity of dialogue with clients through the web, it is important to make few questions each time, or preferably one at a time. This helps to make the interaction more convenient without annoying the client or even losing the client for not making the right use of the interactive strategies. A good solution is to create a database throughout the time with the individual information collected.

Based on these principles, the destinations should offer on their websites a small and simple form or survey made of a few required fields. It is important to ask the right questions in different stages. For example, when the users access a given web page or when a service is required the option is given to answer one or two questions about their preferences, always related to the topic searched. It is also possible to make indirect questions. For example, if the user is searching for a list of budget hotels located in the destination, one possibility could be "In which region would you like the hotel to be located?". This can then lead the user to a web page where only budget hotels in the required region are listed. This will result in a higher degree of satisfaction from the users' point of view, saving time looking for a hotel in a long list of properties. From the managers' perspective, this approach helps to assess the number of users that required this type of hotel.

Another option for establishing a higher degree of interactivity with the clients is the creation of a Discussion Forum. This forum is a site (technological resource) where any user can have access in order to give a suggestion or opinion, to make a complaint, commentary, show preference or criticism, read and discuss the opinions of others about the products, services and information offered on the web. This helps the tourist to have real knowledge about the place to be visited.

Davis and Meyer (1999) state that a Discussion Forum allows an opportunity of interaction, dialogue and participation, sometimes also creating polemic situations, as real and potential tourists have the opportunity to interact among themselves, as well as with residents and tourism organisations. This type of forum creates an excellent opportunity for tourism managers to interact

with tourists, residents and companies, as it is possible to get a more accurate and fast feedback about the existing products and services.

Another option that needs to be used to improve the interaction with tourist demand is the use of different e-mails on the website. This has become the most used way of communication to exchange messages and documents between clients and companies. Due to this, tourism managers have to use e-mails as an effective channel of communication to promote their products to real and potential demand in a more interactive way. Nevertheless, in order to achieve this, there is a need for each tourist product to have its own e-mail address. Local tourism organisations also have to make the e-mails and telephone numbers of different departments available.

The greatest benefit for tourism enterprises and destinations to receive e-mails from the demand is to get updated information about the behaviour of real and potential tourists. This helps in the process of tourism promotion and tourism planning of the destination. If a reply is requested, tourism managers have to answer as soon as possible, as users are used to receiving a prompt reply, usually within 24 hours after having sent the message.

In order to increase the opportunities of interaction on their websites, it is also possible to suggest a web page where tourists can make comments about the products and services existing in the destination. This resource is useful for the user to obtain tips and information, as this gives a more positive and real image of the destination. It should be stated that there is a significant difference between the sections "Tourists' Comments" and "Discussion Forum". The former aims to offer information like a notice board; the latter favours discussion and debate, being a direct channel of communication among the users.

4. Methodology

Having defined the problem and established the objective of this study, a literature review was conducted in order to link the themes directly and indirectly related with this topic. The methodology used in this research is as follows.

Among the 5 500 tourist destinations existing in Brazil, it was decided to select the top 15 most visited destinations in 2001, which accounted for 28.3% of domestic tourists. Consequently, it was possible to obtain relevant results for this research once the sample used accounts for an important part of the major destinations in the country. Another aspect to be taken into consideration is that the destinations selected consist of large and small places, located in the coast and in the countryside, offering a variety of tourist products such as sun and sea, culture, events and health tourism.

To investigate the interactive strategies developed by these destinations on their websites, 13 indicators were applied as suggested by WTO (1999) and Cruz (2005), as shown on Tables 1 and 2. Each indicator was associated to a scale with three grades was used, with the following characteristics:

- **Inexistent:** such an attribute was not found on the website;
- **Insufficient:** the attribute was found in a very simple way or not used appropriately;
- **Sufficient:** the attribute was structured in an appropriate way, and was used properly and coherently on the website.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In order to better visualise the results obtained for each variable, colours were given to each grade. According to Table 3, the attribute ‘sufficient’ was classified as dark gray, while ‘insufficient’ and ‘non-existent’ were associated with light gray. This helps to highlight the best strategies used among the 15 websites analysed.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

To undertake the analysis proposed in this study, it was necessary to obtain the URL address of the official tourist destination websites - those that the local tourism authority are responsible for the development and planning of the promotion. As shown in Table 4, among the 15 top destinations, three had no official websites, i.e. Santos, Itanhaém and Ubatuba. According to the criteria considered above, they were excluded from the sample.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

5. Analysing the Interactive Web Strategies

Table 5 shows that the websites usually only make the phone number and an e-mail address available. Neither a discussion forum nor a tourists’ comment section existed on the websites analysed. It is possible to verify that destinations such as São Paulo (SAO), Fortaleza (FOR) and Salvador (SSA) present the telephone numbers and e-mails of the listed products, as well as those of the local tourism organisations, in a very appropriate way. However, destinations such as Belo Horizonte (BHZ), Porto Alegre (POA) and Brasília (BSB) offer few or no e-mail addresses or telephone numbers of the local tourism authority, with only the contacts for the tourism products existing on the websites made available.

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Among the interactive resources presented sufficiently in Table 5, the case of Fortaleza (FOR) should be highlighted, where the telephone numbers and the e-mail addresses were available both for the organisations related to the tourism activity, as well as the contacts for the several departments of the local tourism authority. Similarly, the resources available for São Paulo (SAO) were also available, with the added advantage that it was possible to contact directly the person responsible for each department of the local tourism authority.

In spite of the importance and fast growth of e-commerce in recent years, none of the websites analysed offered the possibility to book or pay for a reservation through the web (see Table 6). This means that tourism enterprises were losing an opportunity to make a commercial transaction with their consumers. What is more, the only website to list the prices of the available services and products were Salvador (SSA). Another aspect to consider is that only the websites of São Paulo (SAO) and Curitiba (CWB) displayed their products separately in an appropriate way, such as accommodation and restaurants. Nearly all websites presented the addresses of the products available on-line, with Rio de Janeiro (RIO), Salvador (SSA) and Curitiba (CWB) also providing a link to the website of the tourism companies.

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

From the data presented above, it is possible to conclude that most of the top 15 Brazilian tourist destinations do not use in an appropriate and significant way the resources, structures, design and tools available on the web to develop an efficient way to promote using interactive web strategies.

6. Final Comments

With the increase growth of e-clients in recent years, the web has become one of the most used ways to promote a destination. The study presented here highlights the need for Brazilian tourist destinations to develop more efficient interactive strategies on the web, mainly due to the difficulties of using new technological resources available on-line.

All the strategies developed in this study can be applied not only to destinations in Brazil, but also to those located overseas. As these technological resources are available to any type of destination, they can be used by small and large organisations, as currently the costs associated with them are not very high.

Based on data gathered, it was possible to verify that the majority of websites presented the telephone number and the email address of the tourism enterprises so that users can communicate with them. On the other hand, few websites provided the e-mail addresses and the telephone numbers of the local tourism authorities. None of them offered a Discussion Forum or a place for Tourists' Comments. In general, the interaction resources used were few and very simple. Finally, there is an absence of payment and booking options.

Considering the limited and the absence of interactivity offered by the Brazilian tourist destinations in terms of web promotion, it is possible to propose some strategies that could be used by tourism managers based on the aspects considered on Table 7.

INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

It is worth commenting that the strategies considered in this study must be compatible with local culture and needs, as every destination has its own peculiarities and characteristics. Due to this, it is necessary that tourism managers have a certain degree of flexibility and creativity in order to adapt such strategy, distinguishing themselves from other destinations in terms of promotion on the web. In order to achieve this, it is crucial to define the mission and the objectives of targeting e-costumers.

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COMPONENTS	INDICATORS	GRADES		
		Ine	Ins	Suf
Interactive resources				
1. Phone number of listed products	Percentage of phone numbers available on the web	0	< 50%	≥ 50%
2. E-mail address of listed products	Percentage of e-mail addresses available on the web	0	< 50%	≥ 50%
3. Phone number of local tourism authority	Number of telephone numbers available on the web	0	< 3	≥ 3
4. E-mail address of local tourism authority	Number of email addresses available on the web	0	< 3	≥ 3
5. Discussion forum	Daily number of discussions / opinions in the forum	0	< 5	≥ 5
6. Tourists' comments	Daily number of tourists' comments	0	< 2	≥ 2

Table 1: Indicators of interactions.

COMPONENTS	INDICATORS	GRADES		
		Ine	Ins	Suf
Services offered				
1. Prices of listed products	Percentage of prices/total number of products	0	< 40%	≥ 40%
2. Timetable of listed products	Percentage of time and days/total number of products	0	< 50%	≥ 50%
3. Address of the listed products	Percentage of Address/ total number of products	0	< 70%	≥ 70%
4. Link to the website of tourism companies	Percentage of Links/ total number of products	0	< 70%	≥ 70%
5. Possibility to book a reservation	Percentage of Reservation/ total number of products	0	< 40%	≥ 40%
6. Possibility to pay a reservation	Percentage of a Possibility to pay a reservation /total of number of products	0	< 40%	≥ 40%
7. Product separately by specification	Percentage of Product separately by specification/ total number of products	0	< 50%	≥ 50%

Table 2: Indicators of services.

Abbreviation	Attributes	Colours
Ine	Inexistent	
Ins	Insufficient	
Suf	Sufficient	

Table 3: Grades and colours.

Tourist destinations	Abbreviation	Website address
São Paulo	SAO	www.cidadedesapaulo.com
Rio de Janeiro	RIO	www.riotur.com.br
Fortaleza	FOR	www.turismo.ce.gov.br/fortaleza.htm
Salvador	SSA	www.salvadorbahia.ba.gov.br
Natal	NAT	www.natal.rn.gov.br/sectur
Belo Horizonte	BHZ	www.belotur.com.br
Porto Alegre	POA	www.portoalegre.rs.gov.br
Santos	<i>SNT</i>	<i>Do not have a website</i>
Recife	REC	www.recife.pe.gov.br/pr/secturismo
Itanhaém	<i>ITN</i>	<i>Do not have a website</i>
Brasília	BSB	www.setur.df.gov.br
Curitiba	CWB	www.viaje.curitiba.pr.gov.br
Porto Seguro	BPS	www.portosegurotur.com.br
Caldas Novas	CLV	www.caldasnovas.go.gov.br/turismo.htm
Ubatuba	<i>UTB</i>	<i>Do not have a website</i>

Table 4: Website addresses of the destinations studied.

Interactive resources	SAO			RIO			FOR			SSA			NAT			BHZ			POA			REC			BSB			CWB			BPS			CLV		
	Ine	Ins	Suf	Ine	Ins	Suf	Ine	Ins	Suf	Ine	Ins	Suf	Ine	Ins	Suf	Ine	Ins	Suf	Ine	Ins	Suf	Ine	Ins	Suf	Ine	Ins	Suf	Ine	Ins	Suf	Ine	Ins	Suf			
1. Phone number of the listed products																																				
2. E-mail address of the listed products																																				
3. Phone number of the local tourism authority																																				
4. E-mail address of the local tourism authority																																				
5. Discussion forum																																				
6. Tourists' comment																																				

Table 5: Interactive resources existing on the websites.

Interactive strategies on the web promotion should be based on:

1. Availability of phone numbers, addresses and emails of all tourism products and services existing on the destination.
2. Availability of phone numbers, addresses and emails of the local tourism authority.
3. Offer of technological resources that allow the exchange of opinions and open discussions for all users (tourists, residents and tourism enterprises).
4. Availability of prices, discounts, timetables and local products and services existing at the destination.
5. Links to the websites of all products and services available.
6. Offer of technological resources that allow to book and pay for products and services available on the website.
7. Classification of products and services according to their operational and technical specifications.

Table 7: Interactive strategies on the web.