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Website Effectiveness – Are We Measuring the Right Things?

The quest for the ultimate measure of website effectiveness has started to draw attention from an increasing number of tourism researchers and is slowly but surely beginning to resemble a search for the Holy Grail. It is a promising endeavor for the modern knights of tourism as it provides the potential for fame and wealth given the willingness of the tourism industry to sponsor such a mission. With websites becoming an integral part of the marketing mix of tourism organizations and with shrinking war chests requiring justification of every dollar spent, there is a clear practical need for Website effectiveness measurement. Unfortunately, maybe blinded by the shiny and golden prospect of their reward, tourism researchers have started to sell all kinds of approaches to their benefactors in the industry as the ultimate way to measure website effectiveness, luring many tourism practitioners into thinking that there is indeed such a thing as a perfect and universally applicable measure – a Holy Grail of website effectiveness measurement that can solve all problems and for which it is worth killing established methodological standards.

The Web is different in that it is a rich, interactive medium that integrates a wide array of IT applications. However, it still has many characteristics of traditional advertising media. Thus, it seems very peculiar that website effectiveness research often starts from a naïve perspective, ignoring decades of advertising effectiveness research that are very well documented in the general advertising and tourism literatures. Given the unique technology-supported base of Web marketing efforts, there is an obvious merit in measuring the technical performance (downloading time, number of broken links, etc.) of websites. But such control measures are equivalent to checking brochures and magazine ads for typos or the legibility of small print, etc. While such things are important and necessary to consider, they represent hygiene factors and, therefore, might negatively influence effectiveness when missing. However, a brochure (or website) is not automatically an effective advertising/promotional piece if it does not have any technical flaws. Similarly, the presence of certain features (forms, pictures, online booking, etc.) can indicate technical sophistication but does not necessarily say anything about the quality of a website with respect to its ability to effectively market a tourism business or destination.

Perhaps most important is that many of the existing approaches ignore the unique marketing goals of the tourism organizations that create the websites. A request for proposals form might be important for convention destinations but not for a destination which solely attracts leisure visitors. Having a Japanese translation of the website only makes sense if one would like to cater to Japanese tourists. Where did all our knowledge of target marketing go when it comes to measuring Website effectiveness? One could argue that general website effectiveness measures are important for benchmarking purposes, but why would one ever want to compare oneself to a benchmarking partner who does not share the same goals? It seems to be rather nonsensical to

evaluate a website based on the presence or absence of information, features or applications unless those have been identified as instrumental to the achievement of the organization's marketing goal. And especially if these approaches include dubious quality ratings conducted by one or two graduate students, the outcome will neither match the organization's goals nor the consumers' perspectives. Bad measures are not better than no measures. Therefore, basing marketing decisions on a measure that is barely connected to the organizational or consumer market reality and/or distorts reality appears to be a rather dangerous move.

Effectiveness is an economic concept that compares achieved outputs to employed inputs. Current approaches focus on output measures and largely fail to juxtapose those to the required inputs. But even if they did, is economic viability really the only thing we would like to measure? The term "effective" means producing decided, decisive or desired effects (Merriam-Webster Online, 2004). Thus, tourism website effectiveness research needs to specify a range of potential effects based upon the existing advertising knowledge and practices and seek to develop approaches that can successfully measure a Website's contribution to these desired outcomes. However, besides considering the usual metrics we also need to take the special opportunities into account that the Web provides for tourism marketing. Websites offer marketers an increased ability to create unique information search and decision-making experiences with an enormous potential for persuasion (Fogg, 2002; Shedroff, 2001). Simple use metrics and conversion measures can hardly capture these aspects. Also, if we know that a website only influenced the decisions of half of its visitors, does this really help us design better tourism websites? We should be able to do better than trial and error.

The effectiveness discussion has been a central issue in MIS research and the debate has been an ongoing one for quite some time. What we can learn from it is that there are many approaches to measuring all sorts of things but, although there are definitely approaches that are worse than others due to serious methodological concerns, there is clearly no one measure that can address all aspects of website effectiveness and that is free from methodological problems. Thus, in order to be able to answer the question of whether we are measuring the right things, we need to decide on what we would like/need to measure to evaluate the achievement of specific tourism web marketing goals and find the most appropriate tool for it. Most importantly, we need to critically reflect on the limitations of the various approaches and educate those who rely on them to draw practical implications for their Web marketing. Moreover, we should concentrate on measures that can really help us find better ways to design websites. Maybe the term effectiveness is distracting us from what we should really measure. After all, it is persuasiveness that websites should strive for. Based on existing measures we need to find a set of metrics and tools that can help us evaluate the different dimensions of website persuasiveness. The ultimate goal is to change consumer attitudes and/or behaviors, but there is not and never will be an ultimate measure for it.

References

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