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Knowledge Sharing with Customers on the WWW: Approaches by National Tourism Organizations

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Introduction

The importance of knowledge management has been emphasized increasingly in recent literature. Knowledge has been regarded as the most important corporate asset in an organization (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). But what is knowledge? According to Harris (1996), "when information is combined with context and experience, it becomes knowledge". Hence, knowledge is the integration of information, context, and experience (Ponelis and Fairer-Wessels, 1998). In the tourism context of this paper, there are two components of knowledge: (1) customer knowledge--understanding of customers by marketers that leads to more effective marketing actions; and (2) destination knowledge that either the travelers or travel experts acquire through experiences or other channels. It is more than just information about a destination – it is more than "what's available at a destination" but "how can elements from a destination be packaged to provide a good travel experience".

Travel and tourism is the Internet's second largest commerce area after computer technology (Sheldon, 1997). A wealth of industry travel products and services and travel related businesses are easily accessible over the WWW. This research investigates the role of the WWW in facilitating knowledge sharing as a marketing tool for tourism. The WWW technology provides a new knowledge medium in which artificial intelligence methodologies and systems can be integrated with hypermedia systems to support the knowledge processes. The WWW serves as a natural facilitator for knowledge management, especially knowledge sharing, due to its unique interactive features (Sheldon, 1997).

Why Travel and Tourism?

The metamorphosis of the travel and tourism industry poses challenges. This calls for a new paradigm to cope with the changes reshaping the industry and consumption patterns, and new programs to market destinations to travelers (Poon, 1996). A leading role in marketing a destination as a whole package to the rest of the world is usually played by the National Tourism Organizations (NTOs), which are the national tourism authorities in each country (Mill and Morrison, 1992). The Internet and the WWW provide NTOs a very effective communication channel to market destinations to the public. However, the WWW also provides an opportunity for NTOs to capture customer knowledge associated with shifting preferences towards travel products and destinations, and travel behavior patterns. Integrating customer preferences and behavior patterns into destination marketing strategy and product development is paramount for NTOs. The key to achieving these goals is to make use of the available information technology, especially the Internet and the WWW, to embrace a new but very important management tool: knowledge management (Fesenmaier et al., 1999).

The management of customer/market information and customer relationship has been identified as one of the main objectives for knowledge management (Dash, 1998). Online environments have provided enormous opportunities for NTOs to capture valuable knowledge in a convenient, cost-effective and timely manner. NTOs can use this mechanism to create an environment where information and knowledge about a destination are disseminated and shared with customers. Knowledge about potential and actual travelers can be captured, utilized and even shared with other players in the industry.

Knowledge Sharing as a Marketing Tool for NTOs: a Research Model

The purpose of this research was to examine possible mechanisms for NTOs to use over the WWW to share destination knowledge with potential customers for marketing purposes. When knowledge is transferred or shared from one individual to another, the knowledge is drawn into the receiver's context and experience (Bohm 1994). We identify five major knowledge activities that are of interest to NTOs (and their customers): 1) knowledge acquisition, 2) knowledge dissemination, 3) knowledge sharing, 4) knowledge embedding, and 5) knowledge embodiment. Knowledge sharing plays the central role in the whole process, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Key Knowledge Activities of National Tourism Organizations
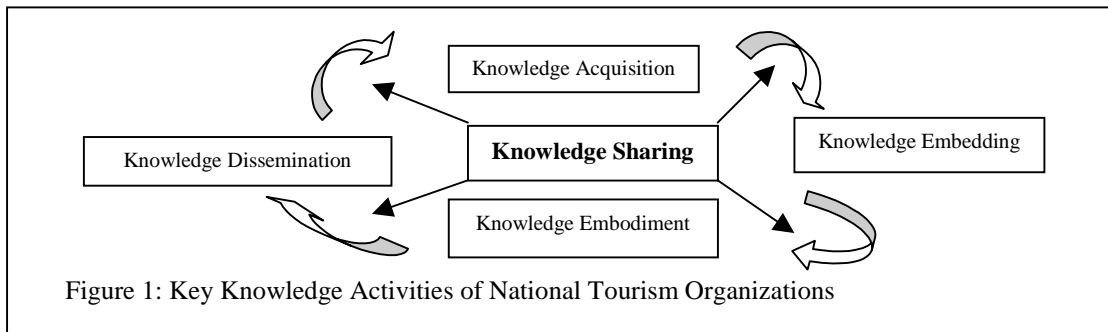
Knowledge sharing is the contextual engine that allows the other knowledge management activities to be integrated. Knowledge sharing activities are an active part of the knowledge management process. First, through knowledge sharing with customers, NTOs achieve the goal of capturing or acquiring customer knowledge. Second, through knowledge sharing with members of the organization, NTOs assimilate knowledge into the organization and embed them in the market and product planners. Third, through knowledge sharing with members of the organization, knowledge embodiment is achieved in the form of new marketing programs or travel services/products. Finally, by knowledge sharing with customers, NTOs disseminate destination knowledge through the WWW.

Preliminary Results: Survey of NTO Web Sites

This study is the initial step of an ongoing research project that models knowledge management activities of NTOs in the web environment. It was intended to evaluate the web sites of international NTOs in facilitating knowledge sharing activities and management. It attempted to see how NTOs have used the web environment to facilitate and manage knowledge sharing activities and to optimize their on-line destination marketing communication efforts.

The organizations that were chosen for the study are the national tourist offices of the top 15 tourism destinations of the world in terms of tourism receipts. The 15 countries are the United States, France, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, Hong, China, Thailand, Singapore, Switzerland, Canada, Poland and

Australia. The selection of the subjects does not imply that the chosen subjects maintain a higher level of knowledge activities or possess a higher level of sophistication. The data were collected between February 15 to February 25, 1999. All observations were made based on the main web site of each NTO and any modifications made by the NTOs after February 25, 1999

were not taken into consideration. Among the top 15 countries, three countries do not have an official web site for the NTOs: USA, China and Poland. The other 12 have official web sites. Each web site was evaluated based on their knowledge sharing mechanisms.

Result showed that posting messages without feedback seems to be the most popularly used approach for knowledge/experiences sharing on the web sites (Table 1). Four out of 12 NTO sites had consumer message posting area where consumers can visit sites like a "guest book" and either share their travel experiences, tell travel stories or post a note on destination impressions. These sites are Singapore, Switzerland, United Kingdom and Austria. Most NTO web sites use mechanisms similar to a "travel expert's suggestion box" where experts actually share their expertise and knowledge about the destinations and provide one way suggestions or tidbits on itinerary planning. Among the 12 websites, 10 have similar devices such as itinerary suggestions, travel tips, trip planner and answers to frequently asked questions, etc. Only Italy and Germany have not included this mechanism.

Posting messages with synchronous feedback such as online chatting among consumers or online chatting with experts was uncommon. No web site facilitated chat room or discussion group mechanisms for activities such as consumer to consumer online interaction or consumer to expert online interaction. However, both Singapore and Switzerland's websites provide customers limited interaction with an "expert". The user can submit basic information such as dates of visit, length of stay, interested activity categories, etc., and expert systems in real time can suggest a customized itinerary based on the customer's online input. This is an application of a travel expert system which provides limited online two-way interaction between the customer and the expert.

Discussion

Posting messages with no feedback can include mechanisms for consumers to post messages over the web to share subjective evaluations and recommendations or criticisms about the destinations travel products. This is a one way transmission of knowledge/experience from the

consumer. Posting messages with synchronous feedback through mechanisms such as chat rooms, or asynchronous feedback through mechanisms such as a customer/consumer opinion exchange box or customer e-mailing are steps at a higher level of knowledge and experience sharing. From one way posting (without feedback) to two-way communication (with asynchronous feedback), to two-way real time interaction (with synchronous feedback), the level of sophistication moves up.

Both parties benefit from the process. For the contributors, it is an emotional and experience sharing outlet, either positive or negative. For fellow consumers, it is good peer evaluation about a destination. The NTO can benefit from these "conversations" or communications to gather consumers' preferences for target marketing. This window allows the NTO to either passively study the messages posted by consumers or take an active role by posting travel suggestions or having online discussion groups exchange views about the destination. This channel also allows the NTO to improve the destination's image. By handling complaints or negative feedback, they can strive to provide better travel experiences. Lastly, they can take customer knowledge back to the organization, embed and share the customer knowledge with members of the organization and embody customer knowledge in improved or new travel products/services.

Conclusion and Future Research

While the process of knowledge/experience sharing is crucial, NTO web sites appear to lack the necessary mechanisms to move the knowledge sharing activities to higher level. Such mechanisms are important to optimize their online marketing efforts and to stay competitive. Our future research will examine and evaluate all the knowledge processes of NTOs. We expect that an integrated knowledge management system for NTOs will be proposed as a result.

Table 1: Knowledge and Experiences Sharing Mechanism

Country	Post message with no feedback		Post message with synchronous feedback		Post message with asynchronous feedback		Sum total
	Consumer posting message	Expert posting message	Online chat among Consumers	Online chat with expert	Bulletin Board for consumers and experts to interact	Consumer and expert asynchronous exchange of messages	
France	N	Y	N	N	N	N	1
Italy	N	N	N	N	N	N	0
Spain	N	Y	N	N	N	N	1
U.K.	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	3
Austria	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	2
Germany	N	N	N	N	N	N	0
Hong Kong	N	Y	N	N	N	N	1
Thailand	N	Y	N	N	N	N	1
Singapore	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	3
Switzerland	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	2
Canada	N	Y	N	N	N	N	1
Australia	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	2

Data source: official NTO web sites of the above countries

References available from the first author and at http://ait.unl.edu/doc2/faculty/nah/amcis99km.htm.