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Attitudes towards internet use among travel agencies in greece

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ATTITUDES TOWARDS INTERNET USE AMONG TRAVEL AGENCIES IN GREECE

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Abstract

Internet has tremendous potential for creating business opportunities. Travel agencies should take advantage of the Internet and refocus their business strategies to maintain their competitiveness in order to avoid being replaced. The purpose of this study is to explore agents' attitudes towards Internet applications and also to find out the current state of Internet use and the relative maturity of the websites among travel agencies in Greece. An on-line survey addressed to all tourism agencies which are members of Official Greek web directories, provides the attitudes of travel agents. The findings of the study indicate that Greek travel agencies consider Internet as a means to expand and complete online business, keep up with competition, and do more effective marketing. However security issues and lack of interpersonal communication are the main barriers for Internet adoption. Findings suggest that the current delay regarding full use of Internet adoption will probably last for at least the near future.

Keywords: Internet use, travel agencies, websites, perceptions on Internet.

1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is thought to be among the largest industries in the electronic marketplace, owing to the intangible and digital character of the distribution of tourism products. Surveys have shown that travel products are among the most popular products to buy on-line (Nysveen & Lexhagen, 2001). The Internet serves as a medium providing on line access to travel industry actors at destinations worldwide (Ancar & Walden, 2000). Traditionally, distribution in the tourism industry is characterized by intermediaries such as tour operators and travel agencies (Nysveen & Lexhagen, 2001; Cooper et. al., 1993). Nowadays, the tasks of the traditional intermediaries are changing, and these organizations are being given new roles in the distribution channel (Bailey & Bakos, 1997; Nysveen & Lexhagen, 2001). The new business environment, which is being formed, is both an opportunity and a risk for small- and medium- sized enterprises (Hass, 2002). Travel agents are responding to the opportunities and challenges of the Internet age by establishing their own online presence. However, simply using Internet as a means to establish presence or to become known to the Internet users is not enough. There has to be a more deep approach and as Porter (2001) claimed Internet technology must be used to reconfigure traditional activities. According to Bedard (2005) the ability to offer both traditional and Internet based services gives agencies an added value.

This study aims to investigate agents' attitudes towards Internet applications, the current state of Internet use and the relative maturity of the websites among travel agencies in Greece.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The new role of travel agencies

The Internet is changing the role of travel agencies, and according to Marino (1999) and Maselli (2002) there are small agencies in local markets using the Internet as a tool and doing very well in the new environment. Walle (1996), Govers et al. (2000) and Ozturan & Roney (2004) claimed that a key strength to travel agencies is the ability to provide personal information and advice to travelers continuously, along with consultancy service for corporations (Chu, 2001; Alamdari, 2002) and will remain secure if their advice-offering capability were strengthened by the presence of the Internet (Law et al., 2004; Standing & Vasudaman, 1999; Tsai et al., 2005). Law et al. (2001, p.124) argued "in order to gain competitiveness, travel agents should position themselves between travel service/product suppliers and customers by offering value added services. If travel agencies on the web would be intelligent agents of consultants to travelers, they could acquire considerable customers". Wynne et al. (2000) claimed that travel agencies could gain competitive advantage by improving the real world shopping experience. They would help make decisions on the destination, the best time to go, and the most convenient place to stay in the most efficient way (Beirne & Carry, 1999).

2.2 Internet use among travel agencies

Previous studies have also examined the spread of internet among travel agencies and the perceptions of travel agents towards usage, in the new, global, different economic environment. The first approach was made by Standing et al. (1998) who investigated Internet use among travel agencies and from the results of their survey it can be seen that many benefits of electronic commerce via the www are not being realized from travel agencies. However, in a later study, Law et al. (2001) found out that travel agents have positive attitudes towards Internet applications and they believe that they can take advantage of the Internet technology to provide value-added services for their customers. Murphy and Tan (2003), examined the organizational use of e-mail by travel agents and concluded in poor e-mail

customer services. Internet use among travel agencies in Turkey was studied by Ozturan & Roney (2004) and the results show that even though there is an increase use of the Internet, Turkish travel agencies use it simply as an additional mode of communication. Their websites do not possess the interactive features required for Internet marketing.

2.3 Factors influencing ICT and Internet adoption

Several research studies have also revealed an increased rate of adoption and diffusion of ICT and multimedia within the tourism and hospitality industries (Morrison and Harrison, 1998; Sigala et al, 2000; Sigala, 2002;) and the adoption is affecting the operations and competitiveness of all players (Sigala, 2001a). In the e-commerce and Internet adoption, manager/owner, organizational and environmental characteristics play a significant role (Sigala, 2003b). According to Zein et al. (2005) and Davis et al. (1989) technology adoption depends on the way it is perceived rather than on a rational analysis of business or technological advantage. Thong (1999) pointed out that two decision-maker's characteristics impact on IT adoption: manager-owner innovativeness and IT knowledge and Drew's (2003) findings illustrated that lack of interest in e-commerce by the manager-owners prevent SMEs' e-commerce adoption. Moreover, if employees of SMEs have more knowledge of the technological innovation and e-commerce, the businesses may be more willing to adopt e-commerce (Tiessen et al., 2001; Sigala, 2001b). Sigala (2003b, p. 14) pointed out also the barriers to Internet adoption, more specifically, she mentioned "the main barriers to e-commerce and Internet adoption are simply the concern that the Internet or the website would not lead to more efficiency, lower costs or more revenues and the feeling that the Internet or a website is not suitable for a particular business". Furthermore, Vijayan (2000) reported the uncertainty about real business value and web existence with an emphasis to determine the return of the investment and (Riemenschneider et al., 2003 p.282) mentioned "they do not see or are not aware of, clearly anticipated benefits and they do not feel social pressure to bring the IT into their firms".

2.4 Websites Content

The term "Content" refers to the information features or services that are offered in the website (Huizingh, 2000). Considering the information features that are offered in a travel agency's website, Beirne & Curry (1999) claimed that for the effective on-line selling, a cyber-travel agency should offer on-line catalogue, product search engine. Liu & Arnett (2000) highlighted that benefits given by a website to customers include tourism information, interactive communication, company information, electronic board, site link and membership registration. A brief introduction to the agency itself, marketing activities, safety protection in transaction, what is new? Electronic media functions, on line products purchasing, questions and answers services, and frequent visitor programs tend to be preferable items for consumers according to Lu (1997) [in Yung (1998)]. A better understanding of the web-based competitive environment, for travel agencies in Korea provided Park (2000) with his study and suggests that many travel agencies do not develop their own websites and although travel agencies are using the web, they did not utilise capabilities of websites. The study also suggests some implications for successful cyber tourism marketing, including the establishment of a website, an-line selling, customer supports and cyber marketing mix strategy on the web. He mentioned that a travel agency, which has a loyal web community, would have a good competitive position for Web-based tourism marketing. Raymann-Bacchus and Molina (2001) claimed that opportunities for differentiation appear to rest with developments in electronic transactions, providing interactivity and rich data, and taking online reservation and itinerary planning to new heights of sophistication.

3 METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate travel agents' perceptions on Internet issues, an on-line survey was conducted. Greek Travel Pages (GTP), which is considered to be the most comprehensive directory of Greek

Tourism, communicated the survey. GTP maintains an up to date database of all Greek tourism organisations including travel agencies. GTP notified 2300 travel agents via e-mail sent about the on-line questionnaire web site. Travel agents willing to participate visited a tailor made web site replied to the questionnaire and data were recorded to a database. The notification was sent to all GTP members. The survey was carried out over a two-month period from May 2004 to June 2004. After the first wave a second one followed to ensure maximum response from the travel agents. Finally 117 questionnaires were collected. Although the response rate is low it should be considered satisfactory because it exceeds the common response rates that GTP gets form other contacts with its members and also the sample size is about the same to sample sizes reported by relative studies considering the study of travel agents' perceptions and policies (Yung 1998; Ozturan & Roney, 2004). The questionnaire included five sections. The first section was used for reporting the business profile. The second section reported the computerisation status of the companies. The third section reported the Internet practices of travel agencies, the forth section reported marketing issues, and the last section considered advantages and disadvantages of e-business and Internet use. Questions were adopted from previews researches Yung (1998); Ozturan & Roney (2004); Buhalis & Licata (2002); Brandon et al. (2003). Complementary to the on-line survey an extended web search was conducted. Internet search for the identification and study of online practices is heavily found in the literature (Sigala, 2003a). Hellenic Association of Travel & Tourist Agencies (HATTA) web directory (http://www.hatta.gr) and GTP web directory (http://www.gtp.gr) provided the links to agencies' web sites. Finally 274 web sites were visited and the information features offered through them were recorded. Recorded information features rendered on the web sites demonstrate the volume of information offered to potential customers.

4   FINDINGS

4.1   The attributes of travel agencies

N=117		Percentages
Region	Athens (capital city)	29.9
	Thessaloniki (2nd largest city-north)	21.4
	Mainland	26.5
	Islands	18.8
	Not recorded	3.4
Gender	Male	55.6
	Female	44.4
Age	<30	30.8
	30-49	52.1
	>50	17.1
Education	Elementary graduate	.9
	High school graduate	47.0
	University graduate	46.2
	Master/Doctorate degree	6.0
	Mean	SD
Number of branch offices	1.4	1.6
Number of employees	6.0	9.4
Number of seasonal employees	4.3	9.3

Table 1.   Sample description

Table 1 presents the sample breakdown by region, gender, age and education of respondent, number of employees and number of branch offices of the company. Regarding region the data come from tourist agents all over Greece. Athens and Thessaloniki, the two largest cities that jointly account for six tenths of the country's population, provide more than half of the sample questionnaires. There is also a sufficient number of questionnaires completed by agents in the rest of the mainland, and the islands, while 3.4% of the questionnaires do not report their region of origin. The sample is almost equally consisted of male and female respondents, while half of the respondents are between 30 to 49 years and most of the respondents are less than 50. The overwhelming majority of the respondents are high school or university graduates. Regarding the managerial characteristics of the agencies, the mean Greek agency than responded has more than one branch office, about six employees and more than four seasonal employees (Table 1).

4.2 Internet adoption

Regarding the measures of Internet adoption, the majority of the agencies have partially or completely adopted new technologies and computerisation. Many agencies in the sample have already a website (67.5%). It should be noted however that this is probably a sample of the most interested and active travel agents regarding Internet, since the actual data from the HATTA web directory suggest that the agents that have a web site are a minority, although nearly all of the agencies use email.

Regarding number of visits monthly, Table 2 shows that half of the agencies in the sample receive 51-250 visits and most of the agencies receive up to 450. Most agencies report they get many emails. The number overcomes 350 per month. As far as the on line transactions are considered, half of the agencies that participated report that they accomplish less than 50 transactions, while one third of the agencies accomplish 51 to 150 transactions.

Standard of computerization	Percentages %	Number of calls (visits) monthly	Percentages %
Completely	45.6	Less than 50	13.6
Partially	43.9	51-250	47.9
Not yet started	10.5	251-450	15.1
Company have a web site	67.5	451-650	4.2
		651 up	19.2
Number of e-mails received monthly	Percentages %	On line purchase transactions	Percentages %
Less than 50	14.2	Less than 50	53.0
51-150	23.9	51-150	33.3
151-250	9.7	Not reported	13.7
251-350	12.4		
351 up	39.8		

Table 2.   Measures of Internet adoption

4.3 Perceptions about Internet marketing

Creation of brand name, facilitation of global marketing and completion of online services are the three most important reasons for using Internet practices according to tourism agents (Table 3). On the other hand the least important reason is the Standardization of travel products along with standardization of processes and service delivery and the free marketing of travel products. Tourism agents are primarily interested in using Internet practices for expanding business and building good CRM and secondarily they are interested in maintaining good quality standards. Cronbach's alpha equals 0.79 producing in this way a high reliability index.

From Table 4 we can observe that security issues and issues of interpersonal communication such as Lack of face-to-face up-sell/cross-sell opportunities, Lack of human contact during the transaction, Lack of required trust to transact online, and Danger of standard rather than tailor made products are considered the most important disadvantages of Internet distribution for travel agencies. On the other hand issues such as customer readiness to accept e-business procedures or difficulties of the companies to start and maintain such a technological enterprise are considered less important disadvantages. Cronbach's alpha equals 0.81 producing in this way a high reliability index. All the proposed reasons for investing in e-business in Table 5 are ranked high since no issue presents a mean score less than the midpoint (3) of the five points scale. Moreover the development of new markets, better communication with the customers and suppliers are main issues for the agents for investing in e-business. Cronbach's alpha equals 0.70 producing in this way a high reliability index.

It is interesting to notice in Table 6 that no mean value in any service mentioned is greater that 3.5 which is very close to the midpoint value of the five points scale. As an exception e-mail is ranked far more than the midpoint (4.14). It seems that email is considered as the synonymous to web presence by tourism agents and the most important feature that should be offered through a commercial website. Cronbach's alpha equals 0.94 producing in this way a high reliability index. The second conclusion of Table 6 is drawn when linking the agents' views about web presence with the actual web presence, which is the occurrence percentages of specific information services, offered through the agencies web sites. Using Hellenic Association of Travel & Tourist Agencies (HATTA) web directory of travel agencies and GTP, 274 agencies web sites were visited. Next the occurrences of the specific online information services were recorded. The last column of Table 6 demonstrates the occurrence percentages of every information service. An interesting finding is drawn when correlating agents' views and actual occurrence percentages. The correlation coefficient is 0.772 ($p<0.01$). Greek tourism agents in the sample are aware of the level of web presence by means of information service offered in agencies web sites.

	Completely disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Completely agree	Mean
Create brand name of products and build up the publicity of company	4.4	6.1	7.0	54.4	28.1	3.96
Facilitate global marketing	3.5	6.2	8.0	55.8	26.5	3.96
Fulfill transition through on line services	4.4	10.6	10.6	48.7	25.7	3.81
Obtain personal data from individual consumers and build up direct marketing	4.4	15.9	10.6	45.1	23.9	3.68
Lower cost due to labor-saving	3.5	19.1	8.7	46.1	22.6	3.65
Offering multiple choices in travel services	2.8	8.3	24.8	52.3	11.9	3.63
Market travel products freely	11.6	8.9	8.0	54.5	17.0	3.56
Standardize the sale processes and service delivery	5.4	16.2	9.0	57.7	11.7	3.54
Standardize the travel products	8.8	30.1	15.0	37.2	8.8	3.07

Table 3.   Perceptions of effectiveness of Internet marketing

	Completely disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Completely agree	Mean
Security issues	.9	11.6	3.6	50.0	33.9	4.04
Lack of face-to-face up-sell/cross-sell opportunities	1.8	13.6	2.7	46.4	35.5	4.00
Lack of human contact during the transaction	3.5	10.6	3.5	50.4	31.9	3.96
Lack of required trust to transact online	1.8	8.2	10.0	54.5	25.5	3.94
Danger of standard rather than tailor made products	2.8	12.8	2.8	54.1	27.5	3.91
Consumers are not ready for e-Business	1.8	12.6	10.8	55.0	19.8	3.78
Lack of advice on e-Business strategies	3.6	9.1	20.0	46.4	20.9	3.72
Volatile customer base		16.4	20.0	52.7	10.9	3.58
Difficult to market effectively	3.6	18.9	12.6	54.1	10.8	3.50
High initial development costs	2.7	22.7	11.8	48.2	14.5	3.49
Suppliers are not ready for e-business	2.8	23.9	12.8	42.2	18.3	3.49
Alienation of potential customers	.9	21.1	22.9	40.4	14.7	3.47
Insufficient return on investment	3.6	25.2	15.3	48.6	7.2	3.30
Difficulty of keeping records up-to-date	6.5	33.6	13.1	39.3	7.5	3.08
Lack of in-house technological expertise	6.5	45.4	5.6	38.9	3.7	2.88

Table 4.   Disadvantages of Internet distribution for travel companies

	Completely disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Completely agree	Mean
Develop new markets	1.9	5.6	6.5	63.9	22.2	3.99
Communications links to customers	1.9	10.4	.7	67.9	15.1	3.84
Communication links to suppliers	1.8	13.8	8.3	61.5	14.7	3.74
Keep up with/ahead of competitors	2.8	14.7	11.9	55.0	15.6	3.66
More effective promotion of the business		21.1	6.4	62.4	10.1	3.62
Procurement of supplies	.9	17.3	14.5	57.3	10.0	3.58
Increased internal cost efficiencies	.9	24.1	26.9	32.4	15.7	3.38

Table 5.   Reasons for investment in e-business

Online services offered though agencies' web sites	Completely disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Completely agree	Mean	Actual Web Occurrence
Own URL	4.1	29.6	42.9	17.3	6.1	2.92	13.1
E-mail		7.0	17.4	30.4	45.2	4.14	90.1
On-line purchase	6.1	38.6	29.8	18.4	7.0	2.81	45.6
Tour package information	3.5	16.7	35.1	23.7	21.1	3.43	39.8
Personal data secured	16.8	35.4	28.3	12.4	7.1	2.58	4.7
After sale services	15.9	41.6	24.8	10.6	7.1	2.51	.0
What's new	7.4	31.5	27.8	24.1	9.3	2.97	28.5
List of brand office	3.8	19.8	39.6	23.6	13.2	3.23	71.5
Group promotion	5.4	28.8	29.7	18.9	17.1	3.13	17.5
Special Offer	2.6	19.1	30.4	23.5	24.3	3.48	46.4
Incentives travel promotion	8.9	25.9	33.0	14.3	17.9	3.06	7.3
Tickets reservation	6.2	21.2	23.9	29.2	19.5	3.35	23.0
Services in passport and visa	11.4	32.5	27.2	13.2	15.8	2.90	8.4
On-line forum	22.2	37.0	30.6	9.3	.9	2.30	7.7
FAQ	24.2	36.4	30.3	7.1	2.0	2.26	7.7
E-mail newsletters	4.5	40.5	26.1	18.9	9.9	2.89	15.3
Direct e-mail	6.3	24.3	22.5	25.2	21.6	3.31	78.1
Links to other industry	7.1	28.6	21.4	27.7	15.2	3.15	29.9
Links to other agents	12.4	31.9	17.7	23.0	15.0	2.96	9.5
Booking functions	2.7	24.1	27.7	26.8	18.8	3.35	45.6
Gift certificates	36.8	34.9	16.0	9.4	2.8	2.06	1.5
Choices of payment	8.4	36.4	32.7	11.2	11.2	2.80	8.4
Frequent-visitor program	18.0	31.5	26.1	18.9	5.4	2.62	.7
Family/kids promotion	15.5	32.7	28.2	14.5	9.1	2.69	17.2
Admission tickets for resort	39.1	34.5	13.6	8.2	4.5	2.04	1.5

Table 6.   *Measuring Internet Marketing website constructing: tourism agents' views on the degree that online services are offered though agents web sites.*

4.4 The impact of business profile and standard of computerization

Table 7 presents Spearman correlation coefficients calculated to measure the association between the research variable and the business profile and the standard of computerization of the agencies. Business profile embraces number of branch offices and number of employees of the companies while the standard of computerization has values (Not at all/a little/completely). Since all the variables are ordinal Spearman nonparametric correlation coefficients is suitable to demonstrate significant association among the variables. Table 7 presents only variables for which significant coefficients occur. Significant correlation coefficients are quite sparse in Table 7. An interpretation for this could be that the attitudes of tourist agents are rather uniform and while they share common opinions regardless their company status, there occur some discrepancies concerning few specific items:

Number of branch offices: the more branch offices an agency has the more positive the attitude that Internet could help to facilitate global marketing, the more the disagreement that lack of in-house technological expertise could constitute a disadvantage of internet distribution, the more positive the view that to keep up with competitors is a reason for investment in e-business, and the more positive the view of agents that web sites offer a list of brand office. Big companies have a positive view of the use of Internet for making business. Big agency companies need Internet to expand marketing, enhance they competitiveness, while they seem not to be remote from new technological knowledge and adoption.

	No of branch offices	No of employees	Standard of computerization (Not at all/a little/completely)
Perceptions of effectiveness of Internet Marketing			
Offering multiple choices in travel services	.238	.130	.202(*)
Facilitate global marketing	.256(*)	.186	.174
Fulfill transition through on line services	.054	.239(*)	.185
Disadvantages of internet distribution for travel companies			
Difficulty of keeping records up-to-date	-.159	-.178	-.223(*)
Lack of in-house technological expertise	-.323(**)	-.152	-.284(**)
High initial development costs	-.201	-.210(*)	-.110
Reasons for investment in e-business			
Keep up with/ahead of competitors	.271(*)	.079	.149
Communications links to customers	.191	-.021	.210(*)
Measuring Internet Marketing website Constructing			
Own url	.067	-.268(**)	-.085
List of brand office	.304(*)	.088	.049
Links to other industry	.123	.141	.204(*)
Links to other agents	.124	.094	.201(*)

(*: p< 0.05, **: p< 0.01)

Table 7.   The impact of business profile and standard of computerization

Number of employees: agents of big firms are positive to the perception that Internet could help to fulfil transition through on line services. Internet practice and new technologies could help big companies to facilitate their business more effectively. It might be because of this reason that agents of

big firms do not share the view that high initial development cost is a disadvantage of Internet distribution. Finally agents of big companies consider that few companies have their own URL.

Standard of computerization: the more computerized a company is the more positive is the view of the agent that Internet offers multiple choices in travel services. Agents of these firms do not consider that difficulty of keeping records up-to-date and lack of in-house technological expertise are disadvantages of Internet distribution, they consider communications links to customers to be a reason for investing in e-business and regard web presence of links to other industry and other agencies to be greater through agencies web sites. Overall companies with greater degree of computerization have overcome technological barriers to assimilate Internet practices and consider communication in various levels, to customers and other companies, to be important issues.

5   CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Facilitation of global marketing and completion of online services are the most important reasons for using Internet practices according to tourism agents. Travel agencies generally do not use Internet practices effectively as a relatively small number of transactions are completed on line. From the Internet practices the e-mail is used more often. It seems that for the moment the webpages are merely used as another means to exhibit their static information about the companies and the operations. Security difficulties that have been documented by other researchers and the need for social interaction are the main barriers to marketing over the Internet. Big agencies in terms of having more branch offices and employees have a more positive view of the use of Internet for making business. Greek tourism agents in the sample are aware of the level of web presence by means of information service offered in agencies web sites and are interested in making and expanding online business. However it is in doubt how many tourism agencies and how soon they will adopt Internet practices in a larger scale, since agencies that responded seem to be the most active and interested in Internet adoption.

Travel agents and collaborating private technical companies should make efforts to record, understand and enhance web practices in order to provide agents and customers with more skilfulness. In this way they could develop more up-to-date and competitive practices and attract potential customers. Before implementing the Internet technology in a travel agency, careful planning should be carried out on how the technology will be used. The use of Internet practices by themselves does not guarantee the efficient accomplishment of online transactions and e-business. Rather services should be offered in such a mode that they could satisfy two goals: a) make it easy for the customers to navigate and accomplish certain tasks, and enhance their willingness to return and visit the sites again, and b) be competitive both within the domestic and the global market. Travel agencies, policy makers, suppliers of installations and technical advise, along with the consumers constitute the more important factors, which determine the optimum use and effectiveness of travels agencies web sites. All of them need adequate knowledge in order to keep pace with the technological and economic developments that are related to the Internet. Emphasis on marketing and advertising on the Web can enhance business and create growth opportunities but at the same time the vast range of travel products and services available on the Internet could be increasingly confusing to customers. Travel agencies should display their information in a consumer-friendly way. Smaller travel agencies, which have financial constraints when using traditional advertisements, will find marketing on the Internet particularly useful. In particular, travel agents should give emphasis to the following parameters regarding the efficiency of a web site: Publicity of the web site, Efficient structure of web pages, The Suitable content, Advanced services and information offered through the web site, such as online reservations, interactive features. Next, an effort should be made so that all the stakeholders gain some training regarding Internet use. Issues such as safety, protection of personal data, and the adoption of rules of proper Internet conducts should be tough to all interested parts. Future qualitative and quantitative research regarding the study of both agents' and customers' needs could help to support such initiatives.

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