

Functioning of the Local Production Systems in Central and Eastern European Countries and Siberia

Case Studies and Comparative Studies

Edited by
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 WYDAWNICTWO
UNIWERSYTETU
ŁÓDZKIEGO

ŁÓDŹ 2015

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AGENT PR

COVER DESIGN

Stämpfli Polska Sp. z o.o.

Cover photo: © Shutterstock.com

Monograph financed under a contract of execution of the international scientific project within 7th Framework Programme of the European Union, co-financed by Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (title: “Functioning of the Local Production Systems in the Conditions of Economic Crisis (Comparative Analysis and Benchmarking for the EU and Beyond”))

Monografia sfinansowana w oparciu o umowę o wykonanie projektu międzynarodowego w ramach 7. Programu Ramowego UE, współfinansowanego ze środków Ministerstwa Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego (tytuł projektu: „Funkcjonowanie lokalnych systemów produkcyjnych w warunkach kryzysu gospodarczego (analiza porównawcza i benchmarking w wybranych krajach UE oraz krajach trzecich”))

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Published by Łódź University Press

First Edition. W.06764.14.0.K

Ark. wyd.10,7; ark. druk. 14,375

ISBN 978-83-7969-491-4 (p)

ISBN 978-83-7969-492-1 (online)

Łódź University Press

90-131 Łódź, 8 Lindleya St.

www.wydawnictwo.uni.lodz.pl

e-mail: ksiegarnia@uni.lodz.pl

tel. (42) 665 58 63, faks (42) 665 58 62

Print and setting: Quick Druk

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*Beata Gontar**

EMAIL INQUIRIES IN HOTELS. COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ŁÓDŹ AND NOVOSIBIRSK

1. Introduction

In the time of technological changes, customers are used to electronic contacts and most often choose their convenience using internet and email addresses.¹ Thus, it is necessary for companies to effectively use electronic methods of communication, such as e-mail, which is a very efficient mean, able to conduct a low-cost marketing, and is inseparably connected with the development of the company and its profits. This is especially true for the tourism industry, where travelers visiting tourism websites (like hotels') can choose convenient format of e-mail, specially if they do not speak fluently a foreign language or they are in different time zones. E-mail guarantees no language barrier in personal contact.²

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¹ P. Shields, *Customer Correspondence: Corporate Responses and Customer Reactions*, "The Marketing Management Journal" 2006, T. 16, Vol. 2, p. 155–170.

² J. Kuzma, *E-mail Responses of Tourism Agencies in Developing Countries*, British Academy of Management 2011, Conference, University of Aston, 2011.

Mobile marketing is currently the most important trend in online marketing for hotels. Mobile devices, which are wildly used, can play some roles: assist in booking rooms, improve contact with the object, and thanks to them, the hotel can offer the possibility of effective upselling. Although reservations made through mobile devices are a small percentage of the whole number, their meaning is constantly growing (it is estimated that each year by about 131%).³ This channel of room distribution will soon be the most popular source of “last minute” sales. And without a reason, applications like “Hotel Tonight” are becoming increasingly popular. It is important to take care of the website and rank the hotel for several reasons: up to 60–70% of tourists looking for accommodation is using search engines. Hotels should strive to increase the role of hotel website as a source of booking, because it is simply the most cost-effective. The focus on external distribution channel can be difficult because the hotel has limited control over how the hotel is presented and what reactions its offer meets.

Google is still the most important source of booking, contrary to appearances, the cost positioning is relatively lower – especially compared with the cost of other external booking sources. According to the report “Top 12 Hotel Internet Marketing Questions Answered”, search engines are still the number one in making reservations. Hotels should focus on increasing the effectiveness of marketing campaigns in internet. Potential guests almost always evaluate the object visiting its website – its errors and not attractive layout can result in the opinion of the entire hotel. With an extremely fast-changing standards and developing technology, optimal website life is evaluated for average three years.

From the technological point of view, there are some latest trends in hotels website design: flash technology is losing popularity. Large, attractive photos become now a standard as well as the use of HTML5 (the latest standard for HTML) and CSS3 technology, which give the ability to use advanced graphic solutions. In addition, modern websites are able to adapt to different resolutions and devices. The current fashion is to use

³ *Report Top 12 Hotel Internet Marketing Questions Answered*, Agencja Vizergy, 2012, www.vizergy.com/whitepapers.htm (accessed 22.04.2014).

in the website content: short forms, witty slogans, icons, pictograms – because contemporary design is simple and intuitive. It is clear for hotels that to run a business effectively selling the service – booking a room – is the most important.⁴

Answering e-mail inquiries belongs to relatively well researched areas of ICT application in tourism, especially in hospitality sector. The objective of the research presented in the paper was to examine internet as a good and fast mean of communication. Response quality for e-mails sent is connected with time of response and their content. Conducting the prepared survey, the mystery shopping methodology was used. Thanks to it, the author could collect the data and analyze them. With this method, all hotels in Łódź and Novosibirsk were surveyed. Both cities are the third biggest cities in Poland and Russia. The author would like to compare the results, clients and hotels behavior. E-mail addresses were found on the information portals for tourists and then verified with contact data on each hotel website. The messages were sent in August, using two user accounts created intentionally for this purpose. E-mails were sent in national languages (to hotels in Łódź – in Polish, and to hotels in Novosibirsk – in Russian) at the same, ordinary day in the morning.

2. Related works

Numerous studies were undertaken from early 2000 and they provide different approaches to the problem. One of the first, who surveyed the quality of using mails in tourism was K. Matzler in 2002. The objectives of the survey presented in his study were to test empirically response behavior to Internet enquiries and to analyze the role of size, classification and location of the hotels in Austria. It was also found that hotels response behavior was different off-season than during high season.⁵ Researches

⁴ *Raport Top 12 Hotel Internet Marketing Questions Answered*, Agencja Vizergy, 2012, www.vizergy.com/whitepapers.htm (accessed 22.04.2014).

⁵ K. Matzler, H. Pechlaner, D. Abfalter, M. Wolf, *Determinants of response to customer e-mail enquiries to hotels: evidence from Austria*, “Tourism Management” 2005, T. 26, p. 249–259.

made by group from University of Bern⁶ explore the response behavior to internet enquiries in alpine tourism destinations. The request for a room with some additional questions were sent to sample of several tourism offices. General conclusion was that the quality of e-mail customer services were unsatisfactory. Researches done by Law and Kua⁷ were dedicated to international hotels of very high standard. The conclusion was that there is a problem because there is no e-mail customer service. Hotels in Poland were surveyed by Pawicz and Mroczkowska.⁸ Their paper presents the results of surveys conducted in Poland in selected 200 hotels of different categories and in various regions. The hotels were situated in all voivode-ships of Poland, in the cities and in rural areas as well. The other group investigated using this methodology were tourism agencies. At the beginning of XXI century there was study analyzing travel agencies in Singapore to determine the level and quality of internet responses. The very low rate of responses were received (around 3%) and only 25% of emails were answered.⁹ An online travel service was studied in Thailand. Although the country developed a mature tourism industry, the quality of e-mail service was poor.¹⁰ The results of survey run in tourism agencies in eight developing countries were presented by Kuzma in 2009. A poor level of response to e-mail inquires from potential customers, with an average of only 30% response rate and their inadequate level were pointed out. The paper offers an in-depth picture of online services offered by online tourism agencies. It can lead to lost opportunities and revenue.

⁶ M. Fux, M. Noti, T. Myrach, *Quality of feedback to email requests – an explorative study in alpine tourism destinations*, [in:] M. Hitz, M. Sigala & J. Murphy (eds.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2006. Proceedings of ENTER 2006*, Springer-Verlag, Lausanne 2006, p. 370–382.

⁷ R. Law, T. Kua, *Analyzing the quality of e-mail responses of leading hotels of the world to customer inquiries*, “Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality and Tourism” 2009, T. 10, Vol. 3, p. 175–193.

⁸ A. Pawicz, M. Mroczkowska, *Liczba pokoi obiektu hotelarskiego jako determinanta jakości obsługi klienta*, „Raport z rynku hotelarskiego w Polsce” 2011, p. 32–34.

⁹ J. Murphy, I. Tan, *Journey to nowhere? E-mail customer service by travel agents in Singapore*, “Tourism Management” 2003, T. 24, p. 543–550.

¹⁰ K. Cosh, I. Assenov, *Reviewing the Use of Online Services by the Tourism Industry in an Emerging Market: The Case of Thailand*, Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2007, Ljubljana 2007, p. 493–502.

3. Short characteristics of territorial subjects of the study

Łódź is a third biggest city in Poland concerning population (719 900) and the fourth concerning the surface (293,25 km²), situated in the center of the country.¹¹ Since 2002, the number of citizens is decreasing each year (e. g. in 2007 – 758.343 inhabitants lived there). Łódź has got a long history, but its real development occurred in XIX century, when a textile industry center was developed. In today's landscape of the city, there are a lot of reminders of these times, like residences, palaces, factories and churches, the total of almost 2000 monuments. Concerning the map of the most attractive places for tourist in Poland, Łódź is not a tourist center, but there are several museums and places to visit with some tourist routs, also equipped with ICT facilities. The city's road infrastructure is currently being reconstructed due to its inability to cope with the growing traffic load. The main developed branches are: chemical, pharmaceutical industry, building, energy production. Among most recognizable regional products one can mention: ceramic wall tiles (around 70% of country production), electrical energy (20%), lignite (60%), and building materials, like glass construction. Except lignite, there is a lack of mineral resources in the region. In 1997 the Łódź Special Economic Zone was created. Now there are 173 enterprises situated (or belong) there. The people who live in Łódź, are employed mainly in production sector (up to 40%), and around 22% in services. Łódź has got almost 30 hotels, and there are still new ones with Double Tree Hilton, finished last year. The Russian city of Novosibirsk was founded in 1893 and has been built to be used as an important railroad junction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Today it is the third largest city in Russia, and the biggest city is Siberia. It is also the youngest city to exceed the population of a million citizens. Here are some statistics related to the city: population (in April, 2013)¹²: 1,523,801 people; size: 500 km². It is placed in the second hundred according to living standards

¹¹ Urząd statystyczny w Łodzi, <http://lodz.stat.gov.pl/dane-o-województwie/stolica-województwa-1323/ludnosc---dane-o-lodzi-2012-987/> (accessed 14.04.2014).

¹² Novosibirsk, www.novosibirsk2013.ru/ (accessed 12.04.2014).

by Mercer Human Resource Consulting and 2nd place among Russian cities. Today Novosibirsk is the business-center of Siberia. It is a major transportation junction. It is important scientific center with Akademgorodok, Novosibirsk State University and dozens of scientific laboratories and institutes. There are several smaller but effective scientific and technological clusters, like – Koltsovo and Vashnil. It is also a center of industry. There were launched many factories in the Novosibirsk region despite the lack of precious mineral resources. Novosibirsk can be also called the cultural center of Siberia. Today more attention is paid for business, science and transports. Most of the roads are reconstructed, new highways in Novosibirsk region were built.

4. Structure of the study

Although websites are created in the network and are commonly used as a channel providing tourist information, e-mail inquiries are still one of the main ways of contact between service seller and potential customers. E-mail communication in tourism is very important in the context of competitive advantage and changing consumption patterns.¹³ E-mail offers companies many advantages over traditional communication channels such as telephone, including: 1) it does not require scheduling of contacts between two parties, 2) it is cheaper than a phone, especially in the case of international contacts and 3) it can easily overcome geographical distance and time changes.¹⁴ Additionally it is easier to communicate for people who does not use foreign language fluently and let to hesitate before deciding. The advantage for the company and the customer is that e-mail communication can be effective and simple and allows for quick commu-

¹³ A. Zehrer, H. Pechlaner, *Response Quality of E-Mail Inquiries – A Driver for Knowledge Management in the Tourism Organization?*, “Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism” 2006, T. 7, p. 53–73.

¹⁴ J. Kuzma (2011), *E-mail Responses of Tourism Agencies in Developing Countries*, British Academy of Management 2011, Proceedings of the Conference, 13–15 September 2011, University of Aston, p. 22–34.

nication and response.¹⁵ One of the crucial factors which help to determine customer satisfaction are response time and its accuracy,¹⁶ so the survey covers both aspects.

Bearing above in mind, the survey consisted of the following phases:

1. Creating a list of hotels and then hotels' addresses to survey,
2. Creating letters in national languages for e-mail inquiry,
3. Sending the inquiries and receiving the responses,
4. Perform an in-depth analysis of the collected data.

To obtain the data for analysis e-mail addresses of all hotels were used. In Łódź there are 29 hotels (table 1). Novosibirsk hotels can not be classified so easy. Most of them do not include the information about category. Analyzing many websites on Novosibirsk and hotel portals the author has got the information about 56 hotels.

In the next phase of this project, the e-mail inquiries were created, and then using a mystery shopping method, they were sent to selected hotels. A variety of papers and studies have used mystery shopping as a methodology to analyze a customer service level. The questions, included in the inquiries, were developed based on typical questions that any customer may ask in a hotel.

Identical mails have included some questions about:

1. Free room and its price in chosen period (the end of August),
2. A possibility of booking a room for nonsmoking person,
3. Information for tourists in the visited city (like maps, guides, information on museums, etc.),
4. Access to restaurant for vegetarians, and also
5. An access to wi-fi in a hotel room.

The aim of the survey was to find the answer for such questions:

- Has hotel a valid e-mail address (contact data) on its website? (Can a client use e-mails as a way of communication with a hotel?)
- Does the hotel answer for e-mails? (Is it the right way to book a room?)
- Is the answer time short? (up to 3 hours) (Is the response time fast?)

¹⁵ P. Shields, *Customer Correspondence: Corporate Responses and Customer Reactions*, "The Marketing Management Journal" 2006, T. 16, Vol. 2, p. 155–170.

¹⁶ A. Zehrer, H. Pechlaner, *Response Quality of E-Mail Inquiries...*

- Does the hotel answer for inquiries in details?
- What is the overall customer service response level (quality) among the hotels?

5. Results of the study

The data was analyzed concerning the research questions:

- Has the hotel got a valid e-mail address (contact data) on its website? (do the client can use e-mails as a way of communication with a hotel?)

Table 1 presents obtained results. Concerning Novosibirsk not all contact data on the websites were trustful. There were also undeliverable e-mail addresses (more then 7%) and not all e-mails were answered (almost 20%). Websites of hotels in Łódź have contact information, where tourist can find proper e-mail address. 27,5% of emails were not answered.

Table 1. Number of surveyed hotels

	Novosibirsk		Łódź	
	numbers	rates (%)	numbers	rates (%)
Number of hotels	56	100	29	100
Wrong addresses	4	7,1	0	0
Not answered	11	19,6	8	27,5

Source: own study.

- Does the hotel answer for e-mails? (Is it the right way to book a room?)

Visiting the website of each hotel, two possibilities to contact with surveyed hotels were recognized. First one, to use enclosed on the website e-mail address (or fax/phone number) and write an e-mail from user account. The other one – to use form-based inquiry page/box where customer can type in questions or query, and then send it after submitting it by pressing the button. The rate of answered emails in both cases (cities) is comparable.

Table 2. The statistical sample

	Novosibirsk		Łódź	
	numbers	rates (%)	numbers	rates (%)
Number of hotels	56	100	29	100
Number of answers	41	73,2	21	72,4

Source: own study.

Around 72% of hotels in Łódź and Novosibirsk were interested in booking a room for a client. The rate of answers were very similar in both cities. According to the competition between hotels, the rates were not very high.

• Does the hotel answer for inquiries in details (for asked questions)?

Sent e-mails were very similar and consist of five questions concerning the possibility of (1) booking a room in chosen period, (2) availability of a room for nonsmoking person, (3) receiving of information for tourists in the visited city, (4) access to restaurant for vegetarian and also (5) an access to wi-fi in a room.

Table 3. Quality analysis of received answers

	Novosibirsk		Łódź	
	numbers	rates (%)	numbers	rates (%)
Received answers (statistical sample)	41	100	21	100
Answered questions:				
– one question	7	17,07	0	0
– two questions	0	0	0	0
– three questions	3	7,32	0	0
– four questions	10	24,39	2	9,52
– five questions	17	41,46	17	80,95
Answer – (no free rooms)	3	7,32	2	9,52
Ask for call	1	2,44	0	0

Source: own study.

In Łódź, two hotels did not answer the question concerning the availability of rooms for non-smoking person. All other have sent detailed information and answered all questions in-depth.

Novosibirsk hotels presented less detailed information, especially concerning the question about tourist information. The reason may lay in the fact that Novosibirsk is not a touristic city, but rather business center. It is quite difficult to find any useful maps or information leaflets about the city or its monuments, museums or tourist attractions and guides. There is also lack of city tourist information, so maybe it is a reason the answer for this question is so often missing. Although people who come here in business also would like to visit the city and read about its attractions.

- Is the answer time short (up to 3 hours)?

In the paper the response time is understand as short when the answer was received within 3 hours. This allows to establish contact and exchange of emails which might result in taking decision concerning the room reservation.

In Łódź, all hotels answered for an e-mail in some hours after receiving. Most of them in next 3 hours, what allow a client for making decision and booking a room in the same day. The rage of answer time was different, from some minutes up to six hours. Concerning Novosibirsk, the range of time used for answering was longer, since some minutes (mostly they were information the hotel will answer later) to several hours (last answers were received next day – Novosibirsk about 12,5%). Table 4 shows the response rates and times for hotel websites for both cities, as well as total results.

Table 4. Analysis of response time

Average response time	In Novosibirsk		In Łódź	
	numbers	rates (%)	numbers	rates (%)
Statistical sample	41	100	21	100
Up to 3 hours	36	87,8	16	76,19
Up to 6 hours	2	4,88	4	19,05
Up to 12 hours	1	2,44	1	4,76
Up to 24 hours	1	2,44	0	0
Answers at the some day	40	97,6	21	200
Next day	1	2,44	0	0

Source: own study.

6. Conclusions

This study is concentrated on customer communication with a hotel and quality of response for e-mail inquiry in two big cities: Łódź in Poland and Novosibirsk in Russia. Some research questions were surveyed and answered after the data analysis. The rate of obtained answers were in both cases more than 70%. It proves, that internet is an important mean of communication and plays important role as a marketing tool but the rates should be higher, taking into account the meaning of internet in personal and business life nowadays and easy access to internet. Hotels should be aware that an increase of client loyalty can be a result of effective communication between customer and client. The lack of information on hotel website or not valid e-mail address can be a reason of losing clients or their interest in other hotel. As well as undeliverable hotels addresses or not satisfactory response time which cause that clients have to look for another hotel. In Polish hotels the response time was not too long, what can give a hope that the reservation can be made in the same day. In Russian hotels, the reservation time was shorter. More than 87% responses were received up to 3 hours and over 90% were received up to 6 hours. In case of Łódź this rate was lower (up to 76%), but higher concerning up to 6 hours – about 95%. The received responses were very often personalized. Some authors, like Shields, indicates that personalized e-mail responses can increase client satisfaction and can build more positive relationship between seller and customer. High quality responses to e-mails let tourism firms to acquire competitive advantages over those who do not offer better service. Following Zehrer and Pechlaner, effective e-mail responses should be: prompt, polite, addressed to customer by name and answer the question(s).

The results concerning the quality present that full 71% of e-mails were responded. Assuming them as a statistical sample over 40% of Novosibirsk hotels and 80% of Łódź hotels answered all included questions in-depth. These rates are not satisfactory and it can have consequences in a case of taking a decision which hotel chose to stay.

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Abstract

Guests and travel shoppers constantly search and book hotel rooms all over the world on various devices, shifting from one screen to another. Thanks to internet, “anytime, anywhere” access to information quite far outweighs its downsides. In the paper, the author

focuses on the efficient use of the Internet as a tool which helps to communicate with clients. The reaction to inquiries sent by email influences both booking behavior and guest satisfaction as well. The objective of the survey presented in this paper is to test empirically response behavior to Internet enquiries. In particular, response time and information quality of received answers (information depth) were also analyzed.

The research methods, which are used in the article, include the issue analysis, desk-top study (review of academic papers with related works), the survey (using mystery shopping methodology) and analysis of the obtained results.

Key words: hotel inquires, tourist traffic, Łódź, Novosibirsk.