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E-LEARNING ON TOURISM DESTINATIONS. THE CASE OF *TICINO SWITZERLAND TRAVEL SPECIALIST* COURSE

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ABSTRACT

While Information and Communication Technologies have offered Destination Management Organizations the possibility of reaching tourists and prospects in a direct way, dis-intermediating such communication, they can also provide a suitable platform for involving travel agents and better preparing them to sell a specific destination through *ad-hoc* designed e-learning courses. This paper presents one such online course – Ticino Switzerland Travel Specialist (TSTS) – published by the tourism office of Ticino, a Swiss canton, in order to train travel agents on the destination itself. While the goals and structure of the course are briefly outlined, the evaluation process is described in detail, especially when it comes to the experiences and perspectives of participants. Results show that e-learning courses play an important role in the different strategies used by professionals in order to obtain knowledge about a destination and that those who finish the course and get the TSTS certificate are more likely to study in the office, also investing working hours. As a consequence of doing the course, more than half the participants visited the destination's official website, discussed the destination itself with their colleagues, and suggested the course to colleagues.

KEYWORDS

Tourism destinations, e-learning, DMOs, Human Resource Management

INTRODUCTION. DMO E-LEARNING COURSES

The tourism sector has been deeply affected by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in all its core activities and various tourism experiences. Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) around the globe have been using ICTs for several purposes: for online promotion and marketing, distribution of tourism products, coordination of main stakeholders involved in the creation and delivery of the tourism products/services. Moreover, in the last decade, DMOs have started to use ICTs for education and training activities for their external business partners (Cantoni et al., 2009).

An interesting example of the use of technologies for educational purposes by DMOs is provided by online training (or e-learning) courses, which have been used by several destinations around the globe to educate travel trade partners: travel agents, travel consultants, and tour operators. These online training activities are designed in order to provide travel agents with the knowledge and skills they need in order to better sell travel destinations and their attractions (UNWTO, 2008). Online training courses are provided by the destinations at national, regional, or local level. There are currently 75 online training activities courses offered by DMOs at the national level. Examples of such courses include Botswana Tourism Training Course, Switzerland Travel Academy, and the Aussie Specialist Program (Kalbaska, 2012, for a complete list, see www.elearning4tourism.com).

THE CASE OF THE *TICINO SWITZERLAND TRAVEL SPECIALIST* COURSE

The "Ticino Switzerland Travel Specialist" (TSTS) e-learning course project started in

November 2010 based on collaboration between Ticino Turismo, a Swiss regional DMO based in Bellinzona, and webatelier.net, the research and development lab of the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI Lugano, Switzerland).

The main educational goal of TSTS e-learning course is to train travel professionals, travel agents and tour operators, to sell Ticino as a destination and to provide them with the TSTS certificate. The online training consists of five training modules: "Discover Ticino", "Selling tips and testimonials", "Culture and events", "Excursions and nature", and "Rivers and lakes". In order to obtain the certificate, participants need to go through all training materials (read slides, watch videos, and play interactive animations), and pass the final exam. All course materials have been developed in English and the time needed to complete all studying and testing activities is estimated to be about 90 minutes (Kalbaska et al., 2012).

The ADDIE model has been chosen as the framework for the course development (Morrison, 2010), with each letter representing a certain phase in the project's implementation:

❯ **Analyze**. Six interviews with Ticino Turismo DMO representatives helped to define educational and business goals of the e-learning range. Instructional and content analysis through a benchmark of similar courses provided by different DMOs worldwide (37) was used to inform the instructional design of the course.

❯ **Design**. In this phase, structure, content materials, instructive templates, interaction elements, and the course functionalities were defined. *Information architecture* allowed the formation of the specific steps of the successful training narrative for the course, as well as helping to allocate possible interaction and activities within the platform. *Instructional design* clarified the structure of the modules, their functionalities, and the

possible interaction of the user within each module.

❯ **Develop.** The open source software Moodle 2.0 has been chosen as the Learning Management System. Moodle 2.0 layout has been aligned with corporate design of Ticino Turismo by using CSS and PHP customization. The first outcome of the Development phase was the technical implementation of an alpha version of the e-learning platform, launched in May 2011. It was exposed to a focus group and a group of volunteers who participated in usability tests. The results of the usability tests (presented in the Evaluation section) made an important contribution to the improvements of the alpha version, and, by September 2011, after the upgrades, the beta version of the e-learning course was set up and released at the following URL: www.ticino.ch/e-learning.

❯ **Implement.** After the release of the "beta version" of the course, an extensive online promotion was carried out through professional social networks, direct mail, and back-link campaigns. The 10-week promotional campaign resulted in a total of 199 travel professionals creating an account on the platform, 77 of them becoming TSTS Specialists.

❯ **Evaluate.** Three different phases of course evaluation were carried out and will be presented in the following sections.

EVALUATION *PHASES OF THE TICINO SWITZERLAND TRAVEL SPECIALIST (TSTS)* COURSE

The following section discusses three different evaluation activities undertaken on the TSTS course: (1) pre-launch "beta version" usability testing ; (2) evaluation survey with travel agents who have attended the course, run after approximately one year of course operation; (3) follow-up evaluation survey with course attendees two years after the course has been

released. Every phase had different objectives, but always contributed to one goal: a better understanding of the learners' experience in order to improve and enhance the course to meet learners' needs and the DMO's mission.

1ST PHASE

Firstly, a user test was carried out with travel agents who had completed the full online training course (alpha version) to evaluate their experience, asking them to speak aloud their thoughts/feelings (Nielsen & Mack, 1994). Interviews were conducted before and after the usability test and the actual testing activities were video recorded. Content, navigation, and interaction quality, as well as overall usability and satisfaction with the e-learning platform, were measured.

Usability analysis was conducted with eight users from Switzerland (German-speaking part), Egypt, Poland, Belarus, Serbia (2), Armenia, and Montenegro. The participants were between 25-35 years old; 3 male and 5 female. Four out of the eight users had not previously been to the Ticino region. Each usability session lasted between one and two hours, during which participants needed to go through the whole training platform, study the course materials and pass the final exam.

The overall participant satisfaction with the platform was encouraging. Users described their overall study experience as exciting, interesting, and not boring. Interviews with participants revealed their positive attitude to using such an e-learning platform. As a negative side, some of the participants noted that some parts of the course lasted too long in comparison to others. In addition, the educational value of certain parts of the course, such as the "Intermediate test" or some of the videos, was not clear to the participants. As a main shortcoming of the

course, participants pointed out that there was no information available about actual prices of tourism packages. The results of the usability tests made an important contribution to the improvement of the alpha version, and, by September 2011, after the upgrades, the beta version of the e-learning course was set up and released.

2ND PHASE

The second evaluation step was a survey of the travel agents who had attended the course within approximately one year of it going online. It consisted of two different questionnaires – one for those who passed the final exam and successfully acquired the TSTS certificate, and one for those who subscribed, did some activities and maybe also participated in the final exam, but never obtained the certificate. This survey aimed to discover the attitudes and satisfaction of the travel professionals with the Ticino e-learning course. The main objective of the survey for the second group of participants was to reveal why they did not pass the final exam. The survey was constructed according to Kirkpatrick's (1994) evaluation model of a learning activity, measuring reaction, knowledge, transfer and impact. 72 travel agents out of 298 that had subscribed to the course answered the survey. 39 out of 72 were travel agents who had started the course and finished it successfully, while 33 were travel agents who did not obtain the certificate.

Travel agents who had followed and successfully finished the course, evaluated the online training highly and were convinced that the course had significantly increased their knowledge about the Ticino destination. In addition, results demonstrated that the knowledge and skills gained were of high relevance for them, and had been applied to their professional environment. Looking at

travel agents who had started the course but had not completed (yet) it, two main reasons were identified: namely lack of time, and course length. Nevertheless, many travel agents stated that the course was of great importance to their professional occupation, and that they intended to complete the training in future.

3RD PHASE

One year after the last evaluation and two years after the course went online, a follow-up evaluation has been carried out intended to analyze the perspectives of learners who had attended the course. Both groups were surveyed again: those who had obtained the final certificate upon completion of the course, as well as those who had accessed online training without taking/passing the final test. By March 2013, a total of 493 travel professionals (214 certified) had subscribed to the platform.

An online survey was designed in order to reach the following goals:

❯ To understand the channels and strategies through which travel agents acquire skills and competences about tourism destinations they sell;
❯ To identify perceptions about certain aspects of the learning experience when it comes to the TSTS course: location, timing, provider, and certification;
❯ To understand whether the TSTS e-learning experience triggered further informal learning actions.

The survey consisted of three types of questions: (i) demographics; (ii) understanding of the importance of destination's knowledge for travel consultants' professional activities, and the different channels they use to obtain such information; (iii) evaluation of their learning experience about Ticino (Switzerland) through the TSTS e-learning course.
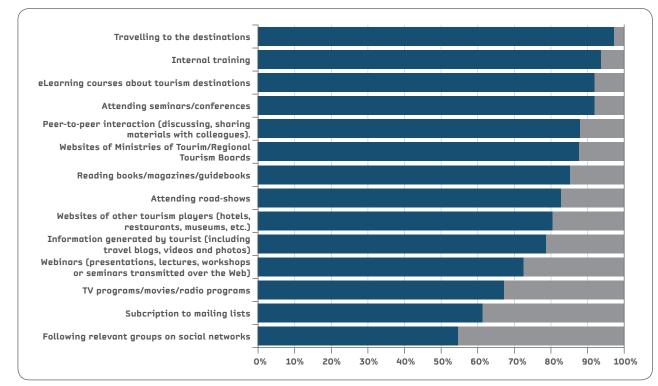
Figure 1. Channels used by travel agents to obtain information about tourism destinations

A total of 493 personalized emails have been sent, contacting e-learning course attendees and asking them to fill in the survey. 214 contacts were certified users, and 279 had not (at the time) obtained the certificate. After one reminder, in July 2013, a total of 99 valid responses were collected, corresponding to a response rate of 20%. Of all the respondents, 58 were certified users (27% response rate in their group), and 41 uncertified ones (15% response rate in their group).

Travel consultants from thirty two countries replied to the survey, with the biggest share of respondents (44%) coming from India. 52% were male, and 48% female, 65% falling in the 20-40 age range. 74% of the respondents had university degree and an average of ten years of work experience in the tourism sector. 66% of the respondents were representing individual businesses (i.e. working for independent travel agencies), while 28% were working for chains, or franchise

travel agencies, or tour operators. The remaining respondents were from destination management organizations, and destination event management companies.

Overall, 99% of the respondents believe that it is very important or important: (i) to have a deep knowledge of a destination, and (ii) to constantly update and upgrade knowledge about a destination in order to sell it. Respondents suggest that they dedicate the following time to studying tourism destinations every week: 20% - less than 1 hour; 38% - 1-2 h; 41% - more than 2 h.

Figure 1 illustrates the importance of different channels travel agents use in order to obtain information about destinations they sell. 97% of the respondents said that it is important to travel to the destination itself. Secondly, internal training was evaluated as important, followed by e-learning courses. The least relevant channels appeared to be TV programs,

movies, radio programs, subscription to mailing lists and relevant groups on social networks.

Learners' perceptions about TSTS course
In 93% of cases, the TSTS e-learning course was followed as a consequence of a personal decision. Half the respondents planned to do the course, while the other half found the course accidently and did it spontaneously.

The respondents were asked to provide their degree of agreement using a four-level ordinal scale (strongly agree – agree – disagree – strongly agree – not applicable) in order to evaluate various statements describing their learning experience of the Ticino e-learning course.

Location
The course attendees were asked to indicate where they did the course. Figure 2 shows that

those who completed the course and received final certificate mainly did the course at work. Meanwhile, those who had not finished the course were doing it at home, or both at home and in the office.

Timing
Travel agents were mainly doing the course during their free time (Figure 3). The group of participants who completed a whole course were also devoting a substantial amount of working hours to it.

Overall, 91% of all respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the course provided a great deal of flexibility in terms of where and when the work could be done.

Provider
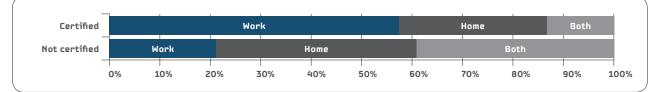The learners' view of the provider revealed that 59% of those who completed the course

Figure 2. Location for doing course work
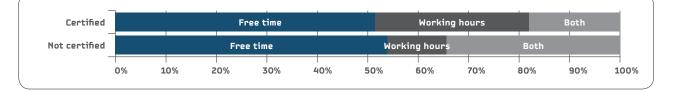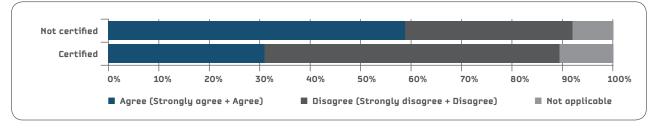

Figure 3. Timing of course work

Figure 4. Perceptions on the course provider. Answers to the question "This type of course should be designed by an educational institution and not by a Destination Management Organization"
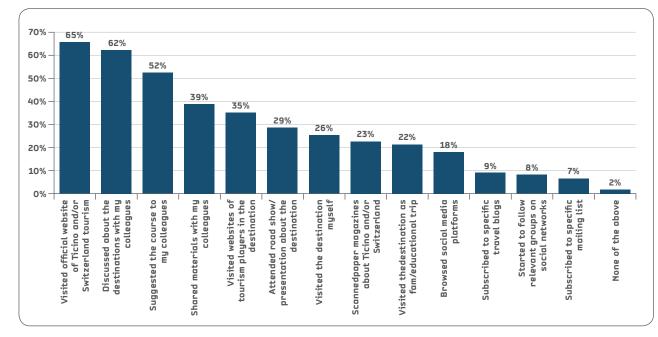
Figure 5. Actions triggered as a consequence of course attendance

disagreed with the following statement: "This type of course should be designed by an educational institution and not by a Destination Management Organization". On the other hand, 59% of those who did not complete the course seemed to prefer that this type of courses should be provided by an educational institution.

Certification

Because the TSTS e-learning course provides a possibility of obtaining a certificate, proving that the course has been completed and the evaluation tests passed, it was interesting to understand participants' perceptions on the issue of getting such a certificate or not getting one. In fact, 89% of both groups (certified and uncertified) would have recommended a colleague to sign up for the course even without having time to pass the final test. Even though the course was designed with the final goal of certification, the cases of spontaneous and incidental course studying cannot be neglected. A spontaneous instance of finding the course while browsing online means an attempt to complete the course might be led purely by curiosity. A user might not access the course to

receive the certificate but just to meet her or his information needs, studying only up to the point covering the desired piece of knowledge.

Outcomes and triggers

65% of respondents declared that as a result of taking the TSTS e-learning course they were able to sell more trips to the Ticino destination. Finally, whether following the course had triggered any further related action was investigated (Figure 5).

The main actions triggered by the TSTS experience were the following: travel agents visited official website of the Ticino and/or Switzerland tourism destinations (65%), they discussed the Ticino destination with colleagues (62%), and they suggested the course to colleagues (52%).

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

In summary, course participants confirmed that this type of learning provides a great deal of

flexibility in terms of where and when to attend. However, certified users tended to complete the course more during the working hours and they also agreed with the fact that this type of courses could be designed not only by an educational institution. In addition, although for 69% of respondents the course seemed to be more a destination marketing tool than a training course, 89% of them would recommend signing up for the course even if the person they were talking to would not have time to pass the final test.

The findings of the study contribute to a better understanding of a learning experience on an e-learning platform concerning a specific tourism destination and how travel agents construct knowledge about a tourism destination for professionals. The study also provides insights into the design of more suitable learning activities, with the ultimate goal of supporting the professionals concerned in order to deal with challenging work situations in a timely and effective manner. One possible solution could be integrating more informal learning – for example, cooperative tasks with colleagues – based on the fact that more than half the participants have discussed/suggested/shared materials with their colleagues.

The study presents only one specific course, results cannot therefore be generalized. Future research could explore further similar courses and could also study travel agents' motivations in accepting such e-learning offers.

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