

THE UTILITY OF ECOTOURISM SPECIALIZED DISCUSSION FORUMS

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Abstract

The forum is a site on which one can find answers to some questions that concern him/her. It is a means of promotion of a product/service/company, it can be a site where experience is exchanged, where one can meet other people, a free school in which one can be a teacher and a student at the same time, or even a community. Briefly, the forum can be a way of life on the Internet.

Keywords: forum, internet, promotion, ecotourism

Introduction

The word forum was first used in ancient Rome and it represented a public square where citizens used to meet and discuss various matters.

The Romanian dictionary explains the word forum as a highly important meeting.

From a technical point of view, a discussion forum is an application that facilitates the discussions between its members, and in the web dictionary the forum is a meeting where topics of common interest are debated.

As functionality, a discussion forum resembles a chat, with rooms grouped according to the topics of discussion, the difference being that the participants can be online simultaneously. Thus, the forum can form a community of people who gather to discuss various matters, to socialize etc. In order to form a community, the most important part is played by the topics and threads, which should be interesting and as useful as possible.

In this way, offering valuable information frequently, along with the proposal of interesting new thread subjects draws the user to access the forum and even to register as a member.

The topics of interest and the nature of the discussions held on the forums are also at the basis of member selection, and valuable members and their morality will give the forum its image.

To be able to take part in the discussions on a certain forum one must become a forum member. In order to become a forum member, one must fill in a simple and concise form in

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which each individual chooses a nickname that can be any combination of letters or figures, as well as a password that the member will have to remember. Also, the e-mail address of the member is necessary in order to receive the registration confirmation, as well as in order to establish contacts.

The next step after the registration is the activation, which needs to be done so that one should be able to participate in the discussions, to help others or be helped. All these are possible based on very simple rules. The common sense of the user is requested, as obscene or licentious words directed at another member are not allowed, and the frame of the thread subject should be respected.

Those who have total control of the forum are the administrators. They handle the technical part of the forum. They can delete or edit an answer to a thread subject, they can deny a user the right to post messages – which is technically known as banning. Any banning of a user can be announced and accompanied by warnings. If the user does not conform, then (s)he will be banned. Banning can be partial (over a limited period of time) or total, in which case the user will be able neither to post any thread subject, nor to participate in the forum activity.

The role of an administrator of a forum is very complex. The administrator must always be attentive so that the user should be as well informed as possible about the changes that happen on a forum. The main objective of a forum administrator is to try and offer the user a discussion environment that is as pleasant as possible. Administrators should not be regarded as a forum police. They are the ones who try their best to do everything for the good of the community that they belong to.

Forum moderators are users who have vast knowledge on a topic that is discussed on the forum. They are selected from the forum users by the administrators. Moderators are the administrators' right hand. Any user can become a moderator, just as any moderator can lose his/her right to moderate a section.

Besides the fact that a moderator has vast knowledge on a topic, (s)he must be in the first place a good psychologist. (S)he must be able to mediate conflicts that may arise between various forum users. (S)he must have a good Internet culture and a lot of online hours. In other words, moderators are section administrators. They should always be available to help the users with the topic that they are moderating. They should intercede whenever the discussion takes a wrong turn, and, most of all, they should animate that forum topic. A very good moderator can become a website partner.

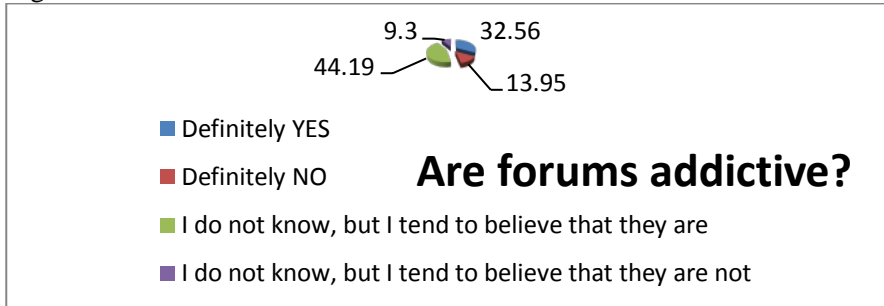
Thus, to a certain extent, a lot of forum users become addicted to this type of socialization and means of information, to a lot of them it is the first thing that they do when they turn their computer on.

1. Forum addiction

A survey asked users if forums are addictive, and 186 users of such forums replied. The results are foregrounded in figure no. 1 below; we may draw the conclusion that the forum is indeed addictive to some extent, as 32.56% of the interviewees are absolutely certain of that,

and 44.19% are inclined to believe it, but would refrain from using the word addiction. Those that do not believe that forums are addictive are a minority in this statistics. Due to the fact that the group on which the statistics has been performed is small, we cannot clearly conclude that forums create addiction.

Figure no. 1: Are forums addictive?



Source: figure made based on the data provided by the SOFPEDIA forum, <http://forum.softpedia.com/index.php?showtopic=589896&st=18>

In Romania, the list of ecotourism forums is extremely short; the biggest tourism forum is Softpedia, which has a lot of topics of discussion, among which tourism as well; other forums are specialized only on tourism or ecotourism, such as: <http://salvati-natura.webs.com>, <http://www.ecozimut.ro>, <http://ecosapiens.ro/forum/>, <http://www.eco-style.ro>, <http://forum.san.ro>, <http://www.opaitulrodnei.ro/forum/>.

The above-mentioned forums are specialized on Romanian ecotourism; we may notice that they are not many, and that their activity is extremely reduced. Only one conclusion can be drawn, which is that ecotourism is not a popular thread subject with the Romanians.

2. Softpedia

Softpedia was set up in 2001 by two Romanian students, Cătălin Gârmacea and Bogdan Gheorghe.

It is a website that indexes information and offers downloads for a lot of games, driver programs, mobile phones and software for various operating systems, such as Windows, Macintosh and Linux.

This website also classifies important news from computers, as well as technology, science, health and leisure, from both other sources and its own.

The threads in the Software topic are arranged hierarchically and modeled according to the directory structure used in the Microsoft operating systems. The richer threads are listed on multiple pages. Users may select what they want according to various criteria, the date of the latest download, the number of downloads or rating.

The website hosts a forum as well. The Softpedia.com forum hosts the greatest Romanian community, approaching various thread subjects in an organized way: IT,

telecommunications, multimedia, auto, social topics, health, real estate, tourism and other thread subjects of wide interest.

Globally, Softpedia.com is in the top of download portals, and competition comes mainly from the United States of America.

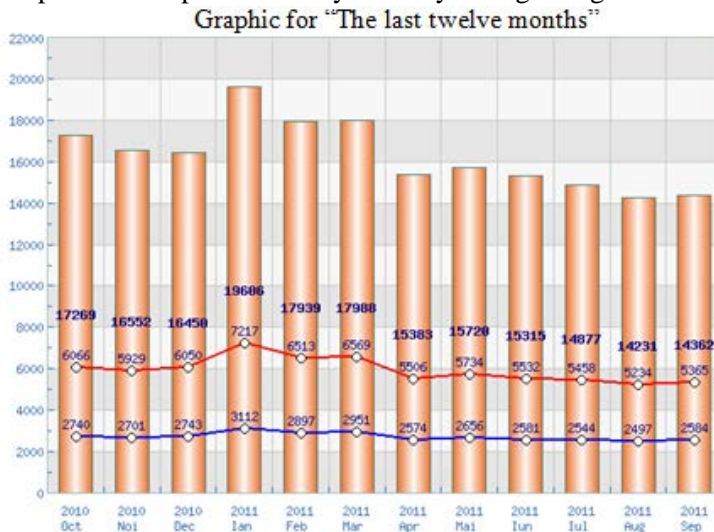
Table 1: Traffic on the Softpedia forum

Period	Visits	Views	Unique Clients
2011 September	5,364,989	14,362,178	2,584,168
2011 August	5,234,423	14,230,796	2,497,083
2011 July	5,458,308	14,877,204	2,544,112
2011 June	5,532,076	15,314,863	2,580,553
2011 May	5,733,879	15,720,045	2,656,226
2011 April	5,506,327	15,382,770	2,573,798
2011 March	6,569,205	17,988,418	2,951,422
2011 February	6,512,682	17,938,933	2,896,980
2011 January	7,216,786	19,605,742	3,111,959
2010 December	6,049,709	16,450,398	2,742,632
2010 November	5,928,972	16,551,875	2,700,815
2010 October	6,066,424	17,268,528	2,740,267

source: sati_forum.softpedia.com

In 2011, traffic on the Softpedia.com portal was almost 5.5 million visitors, 14.4 million views and over 2.5 million unique clients per month, the majority of which from abroad. We may notice that the number of users is extremely high, taking into account that it is only a forum. The number of visits, views and unique clients varies from one month to another, but not significantly; a decrease of the traffic took place during holidays, when the clients did not spend as much time on the social websites.

Graphic 2: Comparative study over a year regarding all the views, visits and unique clients



source: Study for the internet audience and traffic

http://www.sati.ro/index.php?page=filter_all&site_id=175&tip_gr=toate&filter_on_period=1

In graphic two we have a comparative study over a period of twelve months (October 2010 – September 2011), in which we compare the data regarding the number of views, visits and unique clients that took part in the discussions or only visited one or the other of the numerous topics that the forum contains.

We notice that the number of visits, views and, respectively, of unique clients is relatively constant from one month to another, the variations being insignificant; this means only one thing – that users are disappointed neither with the thread subjects nor with the quality of the information provided either by all the other participants in the discussions or by themselves.

Figure no. 3: Menu FORUM SOFTPEDIA website - section Tourism

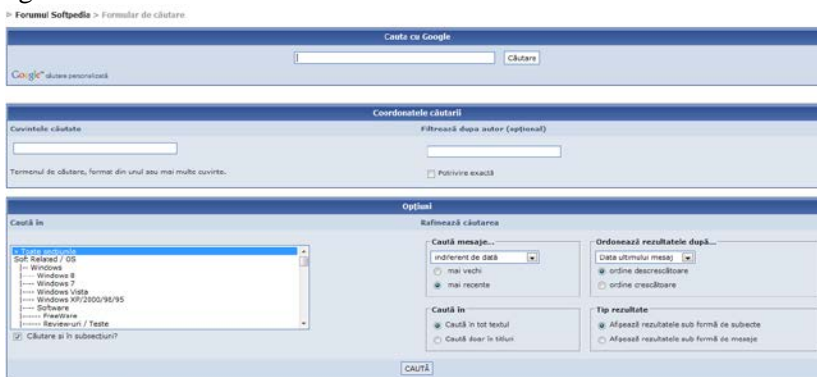


source:<http://forum.softpedia.com/turism/>

The forum menu is divided into topics: auto stock exchange, real estate, announcements, services, jobs, sales, blogs, games, tests, answers, inquiries, and tourism.

The presentation of the menu is very easy to use and attractive graphically. For those who do not want to navigate through more pages before they find the desired thread, they can resort to the advanced search form in order to find the subject more easily.

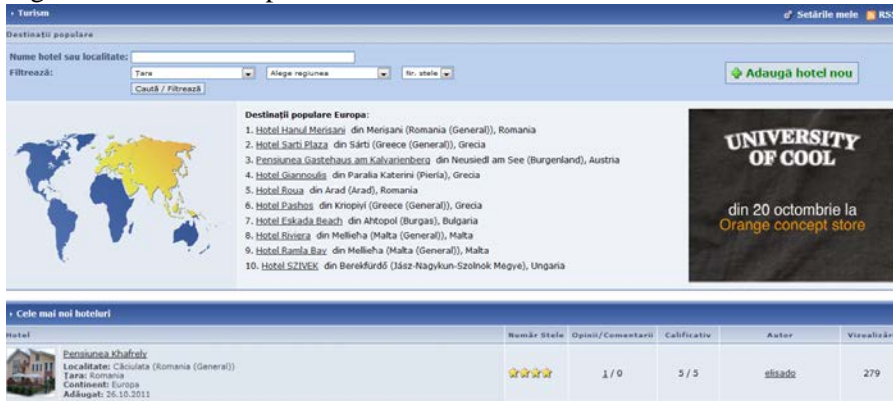
Figure no. 4: Search form



source: www.softpedia.com

This search is made simply, with the help of the Google search engine and through certain keywords introduced by the user, as well as according to the date, the databases in which the search is made, and the recentness of the threads.

Figure no. 5: The Softpedia forum, the Tourism section



source: <http://forum.softpedia.com/turism/>

If the advanced search module is not resorted to from the main menu on the start page, and the selection method is applied in order to find the respective topic, such as tourism, for instance, a new window appears, which has in its turn a search module that filters the data according to the name of the hotel, the region, the number of stars, or the search is performed with the help of an interactive map.

Figure no. 6: The list with destinations sought according to certain selection criteria

Hotel	Nume hotel sau localitate:	Număr Stele	Opinii/Comentarii	Calificativ	Autor	Vizualizări
Hotel Pușta Mare Localitate: Poiana Brașov (Brașov) Țară: România Continente: Europa Adăugat: 09.08.2010		★★★★★	1 / 0	5 / 5	ferrelioo	70
Hotel Albin Localitate: Poiana Brașov (Brașov) Țară: România Continente: Europa Adăugat: 15.10.2010		★★★★★	1 / 0	3 / 5	Courage	110
Hotel Paradisul Acvatic Localitate: Brașov (Brașov) Țară: România Continente: Europa Adăugat: 12.07.2011		★★★★★	1 / 0	5 / 5	ParadisulAcvatic	2 519
Hotel Acasa la Dracula Localitate: Poiana Brașov (Brașov) Țară: România Continente: Europa Adăugat: 15.10.2010		★★★★★	1 / 0	3 / 5	Courage	143
Hotel Belvedere Localitate: Brașov (Brașov) Țară: România Continente: Europa Adăugat: 09.08.2010		★★★★★	0 / 0	N/A	ferrelioo	48

source: <http://forum.softpedia.com/turism/>

In figure six there is the list with hotels found as a result of a selection by the user based on certain search criteria. The list is automatically shortened according to the date on which these were posted on the forum by the other users. At any time the search criteria may be changed, until the desired information is obtained. There is a possibility that no results may appear after the search, which means that there is no record of the desired hotel.

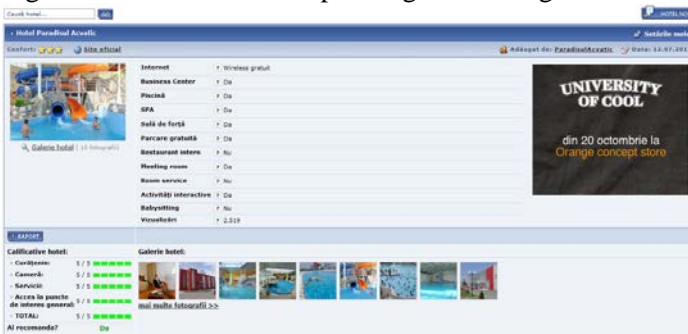
Figure no. 7: Search module of a hotel or region according to certain criteria



source: <http://forum.softpedia.com/turism/>

For each hotel there is a specified number of stars, opinions and comments made by the other users, the ranking it has received, who the author of the post of the hotel is and the corresponding comments, as well as the number of its views.

Figure no. 8: Details corresponding to the sought location



source: <http://forum.softpedia.com/turism/>

If a hotel is selected, a new page opens, with its specifications by categories (if it has a swimming pool, gym, parking space, restaurant, conference room, room service etc.), the hotel rankings for cleanliness, rooms, services, a photo gallery, and information whether the hotel is recommended to other people.

Conclusions

Forums are nothing but open discussions linked with any topics, in which people give their input freely, where experience is exchanged with individuals or organized groups, and where the users help each other and even make friends.

A successful forum is the one that manages to attract a lot of members, be they active or not, where the debates are over novelty subjects, and the comments and advice given by the members are valuable and formulated appropriately.

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<http://forum.san.ro>

<http://www.opaitulrodnei.ro/forum/>

