

ONLINE VISIBILITY OF THE TOURISTIC SUPPLY IN SUCEAVA COUNTY

Pavel STANCIU

"Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, Romania
pavelstanciu@gmail.com

Mihai COSTEA

"Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, Romania
mihai_costeaa@yahoo.com

Abstract

Certainly, the development of the Internet has made easier the promotion, the communication and the cooperation between suppliers, business partners and consumers alike. Tourists have now a number of online resources which enable them to document in advance about the potential holiday destinations, the tourist objectives that can be visited or the services offered by the accommodation units, having in the same time, the possibility to purchase online these services. From this point of view, Bucovina is becoming an increasingly popular tourist Romanian destination in the Carpathians.

All these changes have led to the reconsideration and furthermore to the design of new marketing practices grafted onto the virtual environment that have been set up as a distinctive field of study and research - Social Media Marketing (SMM) - large, diverse and distinctively dynamic. It took place, as follows, the transferring power from the supplier towards the interest of the consumer.

Due to the fact that the Internet is now a media zone that tends to monopolize the entire tourist advertising, a careful analysis is required to determine its impact on the marketing activity of the tourist accommodation structures in Bucovina.

The major objective of the study aims to highlight the stage development of the touristic accommodation structures in Suceava County through the online visibility filter and, implicitly, their familiarisation with the specific techniques, strategies and marketing methods of the virtual environment.

Key words: *Accommodation structures in Bucovina; Website; Social Media Marketing; Facebook, SEO.*

JEL Classification: *L83*

INTRODUCTION

In tourism, as in other fields, consumer preferences change rapidly, tourists becoming increasingly demanding and less willing to compromise every day. Tourism development in the last quarter century came up while enhancing the virtual environment and diversifying the communication system such as World Wide Web.

One of the benefits of the online space, adjacent to the physical one, is the low cost distribution of the information in any form, be it text, audio or video, the interactive nature of online marketing being by far the most important quality of this environment.

Online promotion is a compulsory component of tourism activity because:

- It is a relatively accessible and inexpensive environment for promotion, getting increasingly better results;
- The Internet usage in Romania and all over the world is growing exponentially;
- The Internet offers an extremely wide geographical coverage;

- It has very good orientation on targeted user segments;
- The mere presence in the online environment(website presentation) offers credibility to the tourist reception structure;
- The permanent visibility throughout the campaign provides a plus of vitality to the traditional promotion surroundings;
- Measurable results derive, on which, statistics and comparisons between different types of tourist entities are performed;
- Before purchasing, tourists document and analyse the existing supply on the Internet.

The great advantage of such marketing actions lies in the fact that they allow the launching of media campaigns with relatively low cost. The cheapest and easiest online promotion methods are:

- E-tourism portal registration(standard or preferential positioning);
- Website presentation development and optimization for search engines(SEO);
- SMM – social media marketing on Facebook, Twitter, etc.;
- Banner or link exchange;
- Building Google Adwords campaigns;
- Creating email marketing campaigns, etc.

Internet promotion measures would be combined with well-based development strategies to transpose efficiently the business model of the company in a promotional activity that should have results and mostly, should take into account the targeted audience option.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is a global phenomenon that consistently seeks IT trends, that adopts and exploits the new technologies for itself (Stankov, Dragicevic et al, 2007, pp.149-150). But, by far, the Internet had the biggest economic and social impact on hospitality industry. The Internet is global, accessible to a broad audience through its communicative valences, interactive, flexible and full of all kinds of resources (Grossek, 2006, p.11).

The metamorphosis that the Internet imposed to the tourism had a difficult to estimate impact from the moment it began to be able to revolutionize all types of businesses, including the creating, promotion and distribution of services (Zinkhan, 2002, pp.412-423). Many customer interactions are managed online now, while tourism enterprises are interdependent and communicate in real time (Sevrani, Elmazi, 2008, p.22).

All these changes have led to the reconsideration of some marketing approaches and their adaptation to the new conditions or, furthermore, to the design of new practices. Consequently, new concepts and notions occurred, and business was added a prefix becoming e-business, commerce translated to e-commerce, and the Internet has quickly become the scene to conduct electronic marketing: e-marketing (Grossek, 2006, p.47).

Online advertising is a concept developed in close touch with the Internet marketing. Iulian Vegheş Ruff and Bogdan Grigore (2003, p.90) define this concept as "the advertising displayed on the Internet similar to the traditional advertising, but having ways and methods of expression, communication and interaction with the targeted audience specific to the virtual environment. This specific occurs mainly through direct interaction, communication, feed-back in real time and targeting restricted to the level of individual."

The innovation of the Internet consisted in the emergence of the concept of WEB 2.0, the information is not transmitted from "one-to-many" but from "many-to-many", more specifically, the content is directly generated by users (O'Reilly, 2005). WEB 2.0 is the popularly term used for advanced technologies and applications related to the Internet, including blogs, podcasts, social networks, etc. (Lai, Turban, 2008, pp.387-402; Scholz, 2008).

Currently, we are witnessing an exponential increase in instant chat services – Messenger, Skype, e-mail – Gmail, Yahoo Mail and social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace. If email services and electronic messaging became in a relatively short time essential for tourism activities, social platforms appeared initially to have no relevance for tourism organizations. The information contained by these sites was perceived as unstructured, inconsistent in terms of content and irrelevant for the tourism sector.

Nowadays more and more travel agencies, accommodation structures, various travel service providers and consumers use social networks - Facebook, Twitter – to promote themselves. Inevitably a new concept arose - Social Media Marketing, a marketing process on the Internet, relied mainly on society virtual community.

Travel sites such as www.tripadvisor.com or www.travelpod.com enable users to share information, opinions, make recommendations on destinations, products and tourist services, and even allow users to draw travel diaries with rating for hotels and other tourism products coming into contact with tourists. These virtual communities started in the late '90, and some studies investigated their role and impact as providers of useful information for tourists (Schwabe, Prestipino, 2006; Wang, Yu et al 2002; Pan, MacLaurin et al 2007; Mack, Blose et al 2008).

In this regard, some hotel companies have encouraged visitors to post comments on their website, blog or Facebook page, offering discount vouchers instead (Price, Starkov, 2006). Inevitably, there is some concern about credibility. Are these blogs/messages on Facebook written by consumers or real tourists? Mack, Blose et al (2008, p.141) argues that nothing can defeat word-of-mouth credibility, and blogs/ Facebook pages, be it personal or corporate, are perceived to be less believable. Practice sometimes contradicts this statement.

Blogs and Facebook accounts, both belonging to the companies, but especially the personal ones become more and more credible informative sources for users looking for a tourist destination to spend their holiday, a hotel, etc. Tour operators realised that blogging can be a more accessible way for promotion, in terms of cost and more effective than traditional advertising (Waldhoř 2007; Choi, Lehto et al 2007).

ONLINE VISIBILITY ANALYSIS OF ACCOMMODATION UNITS

The research methodology

To analyse the tourist destination supply in Bucovina in general, and to determine the development level of tourist structures in terms of their visibility on the Internet, we conducted a market research from July to August 2012, analysing 518 accommodation units from Suceava County (Table 1).

Table 1 – Types of accommodation units from Suceava County – subjects of present research

Category	No. of analysed structures	Classification			
		*	**	***	****
Hotel	46	1	8	26	11
Pension	417	7	138	219	53
Chalet	34	1	20	13	0
Hostel	1	0	0	1	0
Motel	4	0	1	3	0
Villa	1	0	0	1	0
Inn	1	0	0	1	0
Tourist Complex	4	0	0	3	1
Holiday house	9	0	3	6	0
Camping	1	1	0	0	0
Total	518	10	170	273	65

This study sought to highlight the impact of the Internet marketing in accommodation unit policy and to emphasize the familiarity level of tourism operators from hospitality industry with the latest techniques and methods of online promotion.

When setting the target group were considered absolute date taken from Suceava County Tourist Breviary on 2011 and travel portal www.salutBucovina.ro and also information obtained empirically, from site analysis, Facebook accounts and Twitter of accommodation units within Suceava area.

This approach relied on the following objectives and research hypotheses:

Objective 1: Determining the online visibility of tourist accommodation structures from Suceava County/Bucovina, including their presence in social networks;

Hypothesis 1: Less than half of all tourist accommodation structures in Bucovina have their own presentation site. The presence of these structures on social platforms (websites) is rather timid, tour operators are not acquainted with Facebook or Twitter.

Objective 2: Highlighting the online visibility of tourist accommodation structures in Bucovina, in terms of origin environment;

Hypothesis 2: Generally, tourist reception structures in urban areas consider the online promotion to be more useful, while the rural ones tend to neglect this aspect.

Objective 3: Critical analysis of the content, design and functionality of the investigated sites;

Hypothesis 3: Most presentation sites, owned and operated by tourist reception structures in Bucovina suffer in terms of look and update of their information.

Objective 4: Estimating the importance that the accommodation structures in Bucovina give to the integration on their own site of Social Media elements, of virtual tours, of online booking forms and asking price;

Hypothesis 4: Implementing Social Media elements or virtual tours on their own sites is not considered a priority for most tourist reception structures from Suceava County. We appreciate that things are slightly better when it comes the user's possibility of visualize the asking price and make online reservations.

Objective 5: Determining the way in which the information is presented on the website;

Hypothesis 5: Nearly 2/3 of people interviewed present information only in Romanian on their own website, leading to communication barriers between service providers and potential tourists from abroad.

Objective 6: Checking Page-Rank for the analysed websites;

Hypothesis 6: Taking into account that most websites of the tourist reception structures are probably deficient in terms of SEO, none of them has a Page Rank higher than 4.

Presentation of research results

"From a marketing perspective, a website represents the most important instrument whereby an organization can take advantage of the existent opportunities in the virtual environment" (Orzan, 2004). However, the visitors' interest is focused on quantity, on quality and on the easiness of finding the information that they expect to obtain on the websites.

According to the study, less than half of all the accommodation units from Suceava County (45.95%) have their own presentation website, while 54.05% don't realize, in a practical way, the utility of such a promotion instrument.

Of all accommodation units from Suceava County without website, 84.64% (Figure 1) are touristic pensions and rural touristic pensions. Therefore, tourists might get truncated information regarding these accommodation structures from other sources – friends, tourism agencies, tourism profile web portals, etc. – rather than from the hotel-type accommodation units.

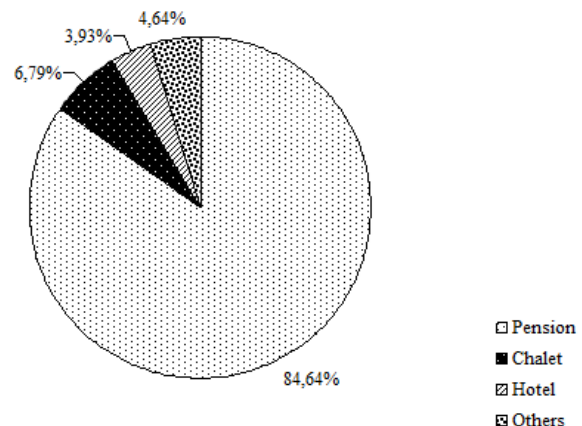


Figure 1 – Accommodation structures without a website

Of touristic pensions without website, 58.21% are situated in rural area, most of them being known and appreciated at the national level, such as the Humor Monastery (11.78%) and the Voroneț Monastery (7.85%). On the other hand, Vatra Dornei holds 22.5% of the total urban pensions without website, while the town of Gura Humorului accounts nearly 9%.

Of the total tourist accommodation structures that benefit from marketing contribution made by their own presentation website, 76.05% are touristic pensions; 12.18% being rated by the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism from 2 daisies/stars, 45.37% from 3 daisies/stars, and 18.48% from 4 daisies/stars. Regarding the hotels category, 14.71% of all accommodation structures have their website. Thus, 0.42% of all hotels are rated from 1 star, 1.68% are rated from 2 stars, the 3 star hotels represent 8.40%, while the 4 star hotels comprise 4.20%.

A little over 65 % of all tourist reception structures from Suceava County have their asking price updated on the website. The difference of 34.87% at 15 august 2012 did not have the online information updated for the current year.

In Bucovina, tour operators are more interested in attracting native tourists and, in a lesser extent, to optimize their website for international languages. So that only 34.03% of all analysed websites present information about accommodation unit, Bucovina sights or local traditions and customs, in English or, in exceptional cases, in German and French. Optimizing websites for Arabic, Chinese, Japanese or Spanish is almost inexistent. The foreign tourism component is more emphasized – German, Austrian, Italian, Polish or Chinese tourists – might increase the tourist regional attractiveness and also determine the accommodation units to focus on quality of provided services. Only a few hotels (Best Western – Gura Humorului, Conacul Domnesc and Sonnenhof in Suceava and Gerald's in Rădăuți) and some accommodation structures from Sucevița, Putna and Voroneț have a marketing policy oriented enough towards foreign tourists.

According to the conducted study, little more than half (51.68%) of all websites owned and operated by tourist reception structures from Suceava County allow users to make online reservations, by means of a web form.

Although it is recognized as one of the most effective online marketing tools, the 360 degree virtual tour still seems to be unknown to most accommodation units from Bucovina. Thus, according to the study, 89.92% of the tourist structures have not implemented such a system on

their own website. Usually, the 4 star/daisy structures develop that kind of building techniques.

Things are not significantly different either in terms of integrating on website of Social Media elements (Facebook Like Box, Social Media Tabs with different Share buttons, etc.). Only 14.29% of all supervised tourist reception structures understood how these elements work and how they contribute to improving the unit business.

The website of a company is the axle business in the online space. An agreeable design means that the page is efficiently structured, the information is accessible, the graphics is attractive and the web page contains a few large files that run fast, and are easy to access. There must be a balance between creative work and marketing.

In terms of design, functionality, quality and information completeness, I followed the classification of all 238 identified websites of accommodation structures from Bucovina, on a Linkert scale from 1 to 5, measuring the degree of online satisfaction (1 is the minimal appreciation and 5 is the maximum that can be awarded).

Thus, following the comparative research, it resulted that 28.15% of all websites are unsatisfactory in terms of design and functionality, being rated 1; 21.01% have a satisfactory design – they were rated 2; 18.49% have an agreeable aspect, but also some deficiencies related to the systematization of the information and loading problems; while 21.01% of websites have a pleasant aspect and have been rated 4 (Figure 2).

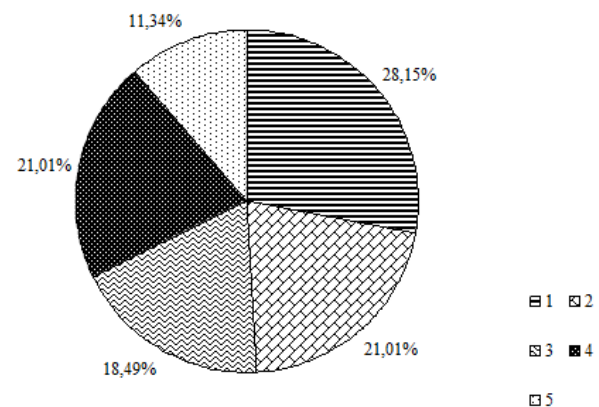


Figure 2 – Awarded marks for accommodation units in terms of design and functionality of their own website

It is interesting that only 11.34% of all analysed websites were rated 5 – which shows there is a lot to do on this aspect in order to reach a competitive level, in terms of communication instruments and online promotion (Table 2).

Table 2 - Top 5 websites of Bucovina accommodation units, in terms of design and functionality

No.	Name of tourist reception structure	Classification	Town	Web address:
1.	Dorna Hotel	4 stars	Vatra Dornei	www.hoteldorna.ro
2.	Casa Doamnei Pension	3 daisies	Voroneț	www.casadoamnei.ro
3.	Grotta Azzura Pension	3 daisies	Câmpulung Moldovenesc	www.grottaazzurra.ro
4.	Sonnenhof Hotel	4 stars	Suceava	www.hotelsonnenhof.ro
5.	La Filuță Pension	4 daisies	Mălini	www.pensiunealafiluta.ro

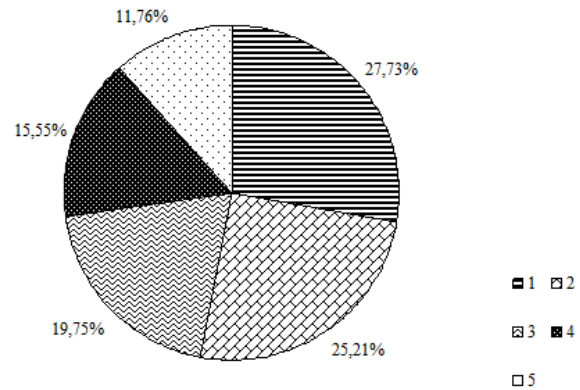
The results have led us to deepen this problem by extending the research, adding new criteria, and appealing to a 5 student team from Commerce Economy, Tourism and Services specialization, second year, skilled and experienced in tourism web-design.

The new criteria for the assessment of the analysed sites were the following:

- The design and functionality of the site;
- The presence on the site of the updated price list;
- The availability of the site in a foreign language;
- The users' ability to make online reservations;
- Integrating Social Media elements on site;
- The users' ability to make a virtual tour of tourist reception structure;
- The quality of photos/photo gallery;
- The presence of updated information on the site.

A special attention was paid to identifying broken hyperlinks, where photos could not be accessed and to the page load time, problems that frustrate visitors and give the impression that the site administrator is unreliable.

In terms of final marks awarded for the analysed sites, the situation is as follows: 27.73% of all the analysed sites were rated 1 - inadequate, and 25.21% were rated 2 - satisfactory. Of all the analysed sites 11.76% were rated 5 (Figure 3). Interestingly, the top 5 includes 2 touristic pensions, one being rated 2 daisies.

**Figure 3 – Evaluation based on multiple criteria of the websites owned by accommodation structures in Bucovina**

According to calculations, the average score given to the accommodation units was 2.58, a valuable that reflects well enough the online supply situation in Bucovina.

It is interesting that the total number of the sites owned and operated by the accommodation structures from Suceava County, 10.5% use free subdomains like *denumire.uv.ro*, *denumire.3x.ro*, *denumire.go.ro*, etc., which shows a lack of professionalism, issues related to access the site, and that, practically, do not inspire credibility in dealing with customers, potential clients, and partners.

For tourist reception structures, the choice of a proper domain *.ro* or *.com* relates to the credibility, reliability and the entrepreneurship of the owner of the accommodation unit.

Table 3 – 5 completest websites of accommodation units in Bucovina

Nr.	Name of touristic reception structure	Classification	Town	Web address:
1.	Dorna Hotel	4 stars	Vatra Dornei	www.hoteldorna.ro
2.	Continental ¹ Hotel	3 stars	Suceava	www.continentalhotels.ro
3.	Villa Alice Pension	4 daisies	Suceava	www.villaalice.ro
4.	Sonnenhof Hotel	4 stars	Suceava	www.hotelsonnenhof.ro
5.	Casa Bucovineană Pension	2 daisies	Vatra Dornei	www.casa-bucovineana.ro/v2/

¹ – It was analysed the site of Continental Group because Continental Hotel from Suceava Municipality has not a website

PageRank (PR) is an algorithm created by Google that represents the importance or the "popularity" of a web page by giving marks from 0 to 10. So "a link named backlink or hyperlink originated from an A page to a B page corresponds to a vote of confidence given by an A page to a B page" (www.roblogger.ro). The more links to a page and PR pages become numerous, the higher the mark of that page where the link is found becomes.

From this point of view, the situation of the websites held by the tourist reception structures from Suceava County is as follows: 33.77% from analysed sites are PR 1, 28.51% are PR 0, and 22.81% are PR 2. Page Rank 4 are only 2.63% from the total number of sites that have been surveyed.

The websites of the hotels Best Western Bucovina, Conacul Domnesc and Sonnenhof and the websites of the touristic pensions Bucovina Lodge in Vama, respectively, Dor de Bucovina in Câmpulung

Moldovenesc are PR 4, the highest PR among the analysed web pages from Suceava County.

Currently, in Romania there are over 4.8 million Facebook accounts, a number that shows how important is for an economic entity to use social networks to make known its own brand and to promote its products (www.dailybusiness.ro).

Speaking of hospitality, the presence of an accommodation unit on Facebook is necessary first of all because "there are others, too", but mostly because Facebook can function as a virtual guest book much better than a traditional one from the reception of the accommodation unit.

According to the conducted study, only 23.17% of all touristic reception structures from Suceava County have an account or a Facebook page. Probably, many administrators ask themselves: "Why should we promote the hotel/touristic pension on Facebook?" The answer is quite simple: "Because the accommodation structure can communicate not only with already existing customers, but also with their friends and their contacts."

Of all touristic reception structures from Suceava County that hold a Facebook page, 70.83% are touristic pensions, 15% are hotels, and 7.5% are chalets.

As regards the updating of Facebook page (information, photos, offers, etc.), 47.5% of all reviewed accommodation structures periodically update their pages. In contrast, 52.5% of all accommodation units did not update their account in the last 6 months.

Also, 72.5% of the surveyed tour operators that promote themselves on their own website, have a Facebook page or account.

In terms of the number of fans (likes), the most popular Facebook pages of local tourism are those of Best Western Bucovina Hotel in Gura Humorului (7202 likes), Carol Hotel in Vatra Dornei with 2383 likes and Continental Hotel in Suceava with 1541 likes. To specify is that the Facebook page of the Continental Hotel is valid for the entire Continental network in Romania, so not only for the hotel from Suceava municipality.

Regarding the visibility of the touristic structures in Bucovina on Twitter, only 1.35% of them have such an account, in absolute terms, 4 touristic pensions and 3 hotels.

The performed analysis reveals that managers of touristic structures from Suceava County have minimal knowledge about Facebook and Twitter and their usage. Therefore, they have not a marketing strategy in these environments yeti.

Among administrators/managers in Suceava hospitality industry has the preconceived idea that Social Media Marketing is a prerogative for major hoteliers. Contrary to expectations, small entrepreneurs in tourism have most benefits from the aforementioned social networks.

CONCLUSION

It is almost unanimously accepted that information and communication technologies, namely the Internet, are in the centre of both, economic and social changes that impact profoundly the contemporary society.

Nowadays it is impossible to develop the modern tourism without an Internet connection. Thus, while the virtual marketing expanded, tour operators were subjects for great challenges, but they also were the beneficiaries of extraordinary opportunities, residing in the instant exchange of information and the global nature required by the Internet.

This, however, apparently was not fully understood by managers of touristic accommodation structures from Suceava County, most of them giving little importance to promotion via the Internet and implicitly, social networks.

We can estimate that online visibility of accommodation units in Bucovina suffers and, therefore, it is absolutely necessary to take urgent measures to substantiate and implementing coherent marketing strategies to improve all aspects related to touristic promotion in the virtual environment.

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