

Chapter 18

An Assessment Methodology for Hotel Websites: Application to the Top 10 Cities Destination in the World

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ABSTRACT

It is essential for hotel companies to evaluate and improve website performance in order to keep and increase their online presence and competitiveness in the marketplace. Based on the relative literature, in this article, the authors adapt the Web Assessment Index (WAI) to evaluate the attractiveness of the hotel websites. This has been validated in other studies in the literature, and measures the quality of a Website based on 4 dimensions: visibility, speed, navigability, and content. An application compares the performance of 10 hotels from each of the 10 top cities destinations in the world. The results show that there were significant differences between cities in the overall index and also between 4-stars and 5-stars hotels. The authors' study also found a significant correlation between the WAI and the room price, so the more expensive hotels also show the best sites according with our index. The results could be useful for hoteliers to conduct a benchmarking analysis of the best sites, and propose improvements.

1. INTRODUCTION

While the continuous rapid changes in the new information technologies are providing ever greater potential to inform and communicate

with potential audiences, they also involve the need for continual adaptation. The development of websites has changed considerably in recent years. They have become far more functional and have increased in complexity with the growing

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experience of different organizations with this tool. The World Wide Web plays an important role mediating between customers and hotel companies as a place for information acquisition and business transactions (Liang & Law, 2003).

During the tourism consumer decision-making process, prospective consumers can access Internet as a platform for booking, and for information and recommendation seeking. The amount of tourism related purchases online are numerous and continuously growing. As a first step, it might be sufficient to have an attractively designed website to promote a hotel. This would not necessarily entail any major financial investment or complex management of the site. But developments in recent years have changed the way in which Web presence is managed, including instruments that require greater investment and commitment, such as those that allow user interaction or direct online purchase. Adaptation to this new environment has become a major challenge for those responsible for a hotel website.

The usage of a website in the tourism industry goes simply beyond promoting and selling products. However, online customers can be easily frustrated and disconcerted when the website which they endeavor to enter is difficult to access or navigation in within that website is not easy (Tanrisevdi & Duran, 2011). In this sense, it has been shown that the content of a hotel's website and the user's satisfaction with its navigation structure influences the perceived image of that hotel by creating a virtual experience for the consumer. This is why the evaluation of the characteristics that define the quality of a website acquires substantial importance in the tourism sector, as it can provide decision makers with information that is useful to maximize the results of their marketing policies as well as information on the behaviour of users visiting the site, analyzing their reactions to the content and the services offered through it.

The aim of the present study was to conduct a benchmarking analysis of the websites of dif-

ferent hotels worldwide. To this end, we adapted the Website Assessment Index (Buenadicha, et al., 2001) to apply it to 100 hotels in the top 10 cities destination in the world.

There have been some earlier studies evaluating the websites of tourism organizations. Hashim et al. (2007) examined articles published from 1990 to 2006, and identified five dimensions of website quality, including information and process, value-added, relationships, trust, and design and usability. More recently, Law et al. (2010) and Ip et al. (2011) review website evaluation studies in the tourism and hospitality fields published between 1996 and 2009 (Ip, et al., 2011). These kinds of studies provide an overview of the evolution of website evaluation methods in the tourism literature.

The present work represents the first time that a method based on objective attributes such as the WAI has been applied to hotel websites, since previous hotel websites studies have focused on analyzing the content without considering other variables relevant or have simply resorted to subjective judgements about the attractiveness and aesthetics of the sites analyzed. The use of a methodological approach such as WAI, that has been so extensively validated in other sectors, endows many conclusions that may be drawn from the analysis with greater rigour.

The main contribution of this study therefore is that the managers responsible for hotel websites will have better information available to them about the characteristics of the websites of other countries in their context with whom they compete. In this way, they will be able to redesign their sites so as to both increase the number of tourists accessing them and improve the service they offer to potential customers.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. First, we review the main website evaluation tools in the literature. We then proceed to construct a measurement instrument based on the WAI that is applicable to 10 hotel websites of each of the 10

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