Chapter 31
Internet Use and Destination Preferences:
Evidence from Crete and Cyprus

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to examine the destination marketing patterns via the use of e-tourism model to inbound tourists that had chosen their vacation destination via the Internet. The regions examined are the islands of Crete, in Greece, and Cyprus. Quantitative research showed that Internet provides significant tourism advantages dealing with prices and provision of information. Findings indicate that the use of Internet significantly influences the selection of transport and destination. On the other hand, the traditional marketing distributors still plays a crucial role in the promotion of the tourist product. Finally, the chapter formulates an e-tourism model that can be used for more successful marketing in island regions and suggests more efficient ways of using e-tourism in destination marketing activities.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten to fifteen years, millions of computer users worldwide have begun to explore the internet and engage in commercial online activities. Many have joined one or more of the online communities that have sprung up to serve consumer needs for communication, information, and entertainment (Wang et al., 2002). At the end of 1990's, virtual communities began to be depicted as central to models of commercial internet development as well as to the future of narrow casting and mass customization in the wider world of marketing and advertising (Werry, 1999). In the travel industry, the Web is becoming the collective "travel square" as more and more travellers are turning to online travel communities to fulfil their travel-related tasks, ranging from seeking travel information and tips, making travel transactions and finding travel companions. Travel organizations are beginning to realize the importance of utilizing the power of virtual communities in their endeavour of relationship marketing (Wang et al., 2002).

The aim of this paper is to provide information with regards to the evaluation of the important

components of island destination marketing and their influence on visitors' destination selection. Moreover, it investigates the extent of internet as a successful destination marketing tool in comparison with the traditional approaches to destination marketing promotion. It also proposes more efficient ways of using e-tourism in destination marketing activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internet, E-Tourism, and Destination Marketing

The internet has proven effective for advertising, marketing, distributing goods and providing information services (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). The information-intensive nature of the tourism industry suggests an important role for the internet and Web technology in destination promotion and marketing (Doolin et al., 2002). The Web has great potential for promoting regional tourism, and is relatively inexpensive compared with other promotion and advertising media (Standing & Vasudavan, 2000). The development of the internet as a universal and interactive means of communication, and a parallel change in consumer behaviour and attitude, have therefore, shifted the traditional way tourism and travel products are distributed (O'Connor & Frew, 2000). Increasingly, consumers can undertake their entire tourism product search and booking on-line and, therefore, the role of e-Mediaries has been changing dramatically (Buhalis & Licata, 2002).

The internet has transformed the distribution and marketing of tourism products (Buhalis & Spada, 2000), and information consumption patterns have been reshaped. Image projection on the web is receiving greater attention from researchers and destination marketing practitioners (Choi et al., 2007). The global availability of internet access and the blurring boundaries of competition have resulted in a proliferation of destination identities being communicated (Govers & Go, 2003). E-tourism offers great potential to influence consumers' perceived images, including creating virtual experiences of destinations (Gretzel et al., 2000). The 21st century market environment requires a rethinking of the traditional image formation process and a redefinition the role of information agents in shaping destination images (Choi et al., 2007). As a result, the influence of online digital information on image formation has become an important issue for tourism researchers (Govers & Go, 2004).

All the above suggest that e-tourism platforms and the Internet are the foreseeable prominent medium in tourism marketing (O'Connor & Murphy, 2004; Oh et al., 2004). They have been actively used by hotels (Baloglu & Pekcan, 2006; Fam et al., 2004), airlines (Chu, 2001), travel agencies (Ozturan & Roney, 2004), convention and visitors bureaus (Yuan et al., 2003) and other destination marketing organizations (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). Travel and tourism services appear to be especially well suited for internet marketing because of their intangibility as well as high price, risk, and involvement levels (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2006). Finally, on the demand side, an increasing number of people are using the internet for information search because the World Wide Web provides more in-depth materials and richer content compared with conventional promotional agents (Govers & Go, 2003; Heung, 2004).

The Study Areas

Crete is located in south-eastern Europe with a population of 594,368 and a per capita GDP of € 18,539. Its tourism is dominated by western Europeans, mainly Germans (N.S.S.G., 2009). The island is known as a 'sun and sea' holiday centre and is popular with families. The flow of international tourists to Crete is mainly directed by international tour operators offering "mass

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