Analyzing Competition for a Web Portal

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO, 2005), organic agriculture (OA) is "a holistic production management system which promotes and enhances agro-ecosystem health, including biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity." In recent years, the rapid evolution of the Internet has given the opportunity to create a large number of Web sites, Web portals, and other information resources concerning OA (for the remainder of this article, we will refer to them as OA information resources). The ultimate goal behind these attempts has been the dissemination of information to farmers, traders, agriculturists, consumers, and even children, and the provision of specialised services on OA. This has lead to a plethora of Web-based information systems and inevitably, has created the need for a detailed analysis on the positioning of a new Web portal regarding OA before proceeding to design and implementation. Dibb et al. (Dibb, Simkin, Pride, & Ferrel, 2007) define positioning as "the process of creating an image for a product in the minds of target customers."

To identify, as realistically as possible, the structure and content of a new OA portal that will cover the needs of OA actors (as these will be described later in the article), the current situation of the existing online OA information resources (such as portals, Web sites, Internet resources, SMS, and e-services) should be examined first (Sideridis, Patrikakis, & Manouselis, 2005a). This article presents the results from the analysis of 180 OA information resources. This analysis allowed identifying the main trends in related competition and positioning a new OA portal named "Bio@gro" (Sideridis, Costopoulou, Patirkakis, Manouselis, & Stalides, 2005b) among these dimensions.

ORGANIC AGRICULTURE ACTORS AND THEIR NEEDS

In order to have a clear view of the European OA value chain, it is necessary to distinguish its actors, their roles, and needs. These are the following (Costopoulou, Karetsos, Ntaliani, Gidarakou, & Sideridis, 2004):

- Organic farmers (individuals or groups of farmers), who produce organic products and are interested in selling them and buying plant-breeding material and seeds
- Traders, who buy and distribute organic products
- Processing companies, which purchase organic products and use it as raw material for the production of secondary products
- Consumers/citizens, who want to be informed about, or buy, organic products
- National governmental organisations and agencies (e.g., Ministries of Agriculture), which are responsible for the provision of all the necessary legislation and support, and the coordination of developing initiatives
- Organizations for the certification and supervision of agricultural products, which are the pertinent bodies for the evaluation and supervision of the certification organizations, the allowance of the national certification sign for organic products and the control of their trading
- Certification and inspection organizations, which are the exclusive certification bodies for organic farmers
- Research institutions and universities, which are in charge of the research for technological improvement and development of the OA sector

- Agronomists, farm advisors, and consulting firms, who inform other OA actors, such as organic farmers
- European Union (EU) agricultural agencies, which are responsible for OA activities in Europe

In order to analyse the level of OA information that these actors have access to online, we performed a survey on the current situation of OA information resources. The goal of this survey has been to outline the current status of OA-related information in the Internet.

METHODOLOGY OF THE SURVEY

In order to identify the market trends and needs, and to help positioning the new Web portal in the vast amount of relevant competition (Tatnall, 2005), a survey based on a large sample of worldwide available OA information resources has been conducted. To identify main trends in OA information sources, a collection of information resources' attributes has been created, according to the relevant literature (e.g., Barnard, 2001; Large, Beheshti, & Cole, 2002; Morville & Rosenfeld, 2002; Preece, Rogers, & Share, 2002; Sampson & Manouselis, 2005). The list of attributes examined for OA information resources is presented in Table 1.

In order to identify OA information resources, various Internet search engines were used, with Google (http://www.google.com) and Yahoo (http://www.yahoo.com) as the main ones. After a detailed search, 180 OA information resources from different countries and in different languages have been collected. It has to be mentioned that due to linguistic obstacles (e.g., for sources in the Chinese language), our survey sample mainly consisted of European, USA, Canadian, and Australian OA links. A complete listing of the Web sites evaluated can be found in "Bio@gro market survey and positioning" (Bio@gro, 2005).

In the context of the survey, a multilingual team (consisting of Greek, German, Romanian, and Cypriot experts) took over the analysis of the collected sample, upon the aforementioned attributes for each of the 180 OA information resources. The acquired information was processed with the use of SPSS statistical package (http://www.spss.com).

SURVEY RESULTS

In the following paragraphs, the results of the survey upon each of the examined attributes are presented.

Technical Trends

Type

The collected resources have been classified in the following categories (based on the definitions of Webopedia, http://www.webopedia.com):

Table 1. Attributes used for OA information resources analysis

ATTRIBUTE NAME	DESCRIPTION	Used in Identification of		
		Technical Trends	Service Trends	Content Trends
Type	Type of OA information resources: a simple Web site, a Web portal, or another type of online information resource.	X		
Content Language	Language(s) used by OA information resources for their content.	X		
Geographic Coverage	Geographic coverage of OA information resources.	X		
Launch Date	Launch date of OA information resources.	X		
Last Update	Last update of OA information resources.	X		
Thematic Area	Thematic area(s) that OA information resources cover.			X
Mission	Mission(s) of OA information resources.		X	
Services	Service(s) that OA information resources offer.		X	
Charging Scheme	Way in which OA information resources charge their services		X	
Funding	Funding sources of OA information resources.		X	
Target Group	Target group(s) that OA information resources aim at.			X
Content Type	Content type of OA information resources, which can be static, dynamic, or mixed.			X
Technology	Technology that OA information resources use.	X		