

Chapter 15

Online Services Delivered by NTO Portals: A Cross-Country Examination

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the online services currently delivered by the official National Tourism Organizations (NTO) portals of the 25 European Union states, to assess their capability in evolving into powerful marketing communication tools. A conceptual framework that identifies 129 online service quality attributes is developed based on the 2QCV3Q model (Mich et al., 2003) and on four different perspectives: marketing, customer, technical and information for the destination (So and Morrison, 2004). The 25 portals are compared by means of content analysis. Our rankings provide a first time assessment of the NTO online offerings and indicate high variability in their performance. Surprisingly, Greece and Italy, two of the most popular tourism destinations, underperformed with respect to all four perspectives examined. We provide out-of-sample evidence that affluence levels explain the variation in the observed scores, while e-readiness, popularity of tourism destination and cultural richness are not statistically significant.

INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF NATIONAL TOURISM ORGANIZATIONS' PORTALS

Among the Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), prominent is the role of the National Tourism Organizations (NTOs¹) in marketing a destination at a national level. Prior to the Internet era the DMOs have been rather passive and

limited to the distribution of printed tourist promotional material on demand (So and Morrison, 2004; King, 2002). However, the adoption and the diffusion of e-commerce applications have provoked unprecedented changes (Wöber, 2003). All European Union (EU) members have invested in the development of websites with different levels of interactivity (Morgan et al., 2002). Essentially, these portals undertake the management of “content information” relating to a tourist destination, arriving from a wide variety of different sources

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(Turban et al., 2004: 322). By assuming the role of on line brokers of information providers, they become responsible for matching cross cultural demand of individual tourists with the destinations' tourism service supply (Scharl et al., 2004).

Different studies indicate that NTO portals should not be perceived exclusively as information seeking facilitators (Morgan et al., 2002). Instead, they should aim to evolve into powerful interactive marketing communication tools (Sainaghi, 2006; Griff and Palmer, 1999²; Cano and Prentice, 1998) that have the potential to enhance the overall attractiveness of a travel destination and to evoke an optimal experience for their on line users, offering superior value to different customer groups (Nysveen et al., 2003). However, while the trend of internet being the first point of embarkation for prospect tourists is gaining *momentum* (Buhalis and Licata, 2002) and the presence of NTOs through internet is becoming better established (Feng et al., 2002), there is still a *paucity* of empirical research regarding the online offerings and the internet marketing strategies undertaken from them.

Under the recognition that it is important to examine NTOs in an *exploratory way*, where the dimensions of online quality from a customer perspective will serve as a framework, this study compares the official European NTO portals online offerings. The aim is to examine *what* information and services of value added each of the 25 EU portals is offering and *why* their offerings differ. To this end, as first objective, there were identified the online services that may facilitate the tourist search, evaluation of information and purchase of services via the NTO sites, based on a deep inspection of the e-Service Quality (e-SQ) and the DMO empirical literature. Secondly, these portals were compared by means of content analysis in order to study the service quality attributes provided and to investigate the extent to which four country context variables explain differences in the NTOs' performance.

E-SERVICE QUALITY AND DMO OFFERINGS

The way e-SQ is conceptualized is still at an exploratory stage. Researchers not only have tried to combine known dimensions that influence product quality and Service Quality (SQ), but also to discover some unique factors, relevant to the virtual operations only. The e-SQ attributes seem to depend on the level of web-based technology readiness of the different users (Zhu et al., 2002) and do not to demonstrate a linear relationship, since "more" of an attribute is not necessarily perceived as better (O'Neill et al., 2001).

In order to define e-SQ, some authors take into account both the *pre* and *post* web sites services aspects (Santos, 2003; Liu and Arnett, 2000), while others consider only the interaction with the site itself (Zeithaml et al., 2002). Additionally, in contrast to the traditional service offerings, online users tend to regard e-SQ more as a universal concept, deriving from their overall online experience, rather than from sub-processes (Van Riel et al., 2001).³ The *focus* of each individual research (e.g., consumer buying procedure), as well as the *types of web sites* used (e.g., portals, retailing sites, etc.) determine how the definition of e-SQ may be conceptualised (Kim et al., 2006). Given that the NTO portals' core activity is to help customers at different stages in the information search process, the definition of website quality used in this study is based on the concept of value added services as provided by Nysveen (2003) and Lexhagen (2004): "Services giving access to various forms of information about the tourism products offered on a website", disregarding approaches tailored for e-commerce shopping (Zeithaml et al., 2002), or based on an *ex-ante* definition of e-services (Santos, 2003: 235).

Not only defining, but also measuring the multidimensional construct of e-SQ continues to generate increased academic debate. Many different scales have been proposed during the last eight years based on different classifications of

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