

Chapter 3

Examining the Online Wine Tourism Experience of California Wineries

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ABSTRACT

Online wine tourism is boosting the level of competition among wineries and wine regions around the world. This paper presents and extends a proven framework for examining the strategic orientation of winery web sites. By treating winery web sites as intensive information environments this paper shows how they can have a strategic impact on perceptions. Using a modified AIPD framework and statistical analyses, the authors show how certain California wineries are able to fully project the wine tourism experience online while targeting strategic perception goals that are effective at building virtual brand equity and boosting winery visitations at the same time. The result of this research indicates that it is possible to measure and evaluate both the web experience and the strategic perception aspects of winery web sites.

INTRODUCTION

The wine industry has moved from being a cottage industry dominated by a few countries to one that is global and involves a growing numbers of countries competing for market share and brand recognition. The intensifying battle between old world and new world wines has significant economic

and social implications for the wine industry. As the wine industry has grown in its importance to economic development and growth, so too have the marketing efforts by wine growing regions around the world. They are now constantly striving to improve their competitiveness with a range of innovative strategies. (Shelton, 2005; Thach, 2007; Marzo-Navarro & Pedraja-Iglesias, 2009)

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An area of the wine industry that is becoming central to building long-term competitive advantages while increasing the world's awareness of various regions and brands is wine tourism. Part of the power of wine tourism is that it has been linked to the growing interest in the environment, eco-tourism, culinary, educational, leisure, and general tourism activities. There are many different definitions for the concept but in essence it refers to the activity of visiting wine regions, wine festivals, or wineries in order to gain greater appreciation of a winery's products and often to also explore interesting features of the winery, winery landscape, or leisure activities of the region. It is no wonder then that communities, governments and industry leaders are combining their efforts to grow the industry and attract winery visitors at the same time (Beames, 2003; Weston, 2003; Thach, 2007).

One region that stands out in this global wine producing, consumption, and winery visitation competition is California. Overall, California is the 4th largest wine producer and the 4th largest wine consumption market in the world. Ninety five percent of U.S. wine exports originate in California and the industry is estimated of having a national economic impact of around \$125 billion dollars. The industry accounts for about 309,000 full-time equivalent jobs in California and about 875,000 jobs in the U.S. In addition, it has been estimated that the number of visitors to California wineries has moved past 20 million. However, the growing world-wide phenomenon of wine tourism has the potential of significantly boosting winery visitations and overall sales to new levels (Lee, 2003; Shelton, 2005; MKF Research, 2006; Bruwer & Johnson, 2010).

Online wine tourism is another area that appears to be boosting the level of competition among wineries and wine regions. Online wine tourism refers to the activity of visiting web sites to find out information about wine related products, services, culinary or leisure activities of wine regions or wineries. For wineries, the immediate benefit of having this kind of web site include their ability

to educate potential consumers or clients, link them to informational networks, provide a reliable transaction environment, and ultimately motivate them to directly visit the wineries. Consequently, by effectively implementing internet strategies, wineries and winery regions have managed to attract the attention of potential customers and business clients from around the globe. It has become much easier now for customers or potential winery visitors to explore their options and preferences on web sites before committing significant time and resources to make a purchase or visit a winery. As competition increases in this arena, wineries are attempting to develop effective marketing strategies that can be incorporated into their web sites (Martin & Sellitto, 2004; Murphy, Ho, et al., 2005).

Although the U.S. is a major player in the global wine industry, there is a marked lack of academic research on wine tourism in general. Researchers in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Spain, and even Canada have long been investigating wine tourism dynamics and the impact on the national economy and the local winery regions. However, one important area where even these researchers have not done consistently thorough research is the increasingly competitive arena of online wine tourism (Sellitto, Wenn, et al., 2003; Martin & Williams, 2003; Abel, Fraser, et al., 2007; Fischer & Luis, 2009).

The goal of this paper is to present a proven framework for examining the strategic orientation of winery web sites. Using a modified version of Simeon's AIPD analysis framework, we were able to combine content analysis and benchmarking techniques to go beyond a simple evaluation of web organization in order to discern the effectiveness of a range of strategic goals. It is our contention that it is the wineries which are able to fully project the wine tourism experience online while targeting strategic perception goals that will be the most effective at building their virtual brand equity and boosting winery visitations or purchases at the same time (Simeon, 1999, 2001).

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