PROMOTING SERBIAN SPAS USING WEBSITES OF TOURISM ORGANIZATIONS AND SPECIALIZED HOSPITALS

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Abstract: *Following the changes in information technology at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s and their use for promotional purposes, it may be necessary for the creators of marketing activities in Serbian spas to change their approach to communication with potential customers of their services, irrespective of whether their customers are tourism organizations or specialized hospitals. The aim of this paper is to analyze the origins and ways of managing websites of tourism organizations and specialized hospitals in Serbian spas. The survey into the use of websites as a means of promoting tourism organizations and specialized hospitals in Serbian spas was conducted in the period from 17 September 2015 until 07 November 2015. The results of this survey clearly indicate an insufficient utilization and inadequate updating of website content.*

Keywords: *website promotion, Serbian spas, survey, tourism organizations, specialized hospitals.*

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, spas and spa health resorts have experienced a renaissance, becoming a meeting place of people with a different approach to their body, health and leisure. Seeking to regain the balance of mind and body that was disrupted by the pace of modern life, the modern sophisticated tourist sees spa destinations as places where the provided professional service enables a holistic approach to health and nutrition, as well as the establishment of spiritual satisfaction. While spas in the world and Europe are registering an increasing number of visitors and an ever more diverse offer, spas in Serbia are still offering medical tourism which mainly takes place in specialized hospitals for treatment and rehabilitation. Over the years, some spas have attempted to enrich their spa tourism offer with products of rural and cultural tourism. However, everything remained at the level of attempt, due to the lack of clear and precisely defined strategy and implementation in the process of shaping complex tourism products. In Serbian spas the issues were identified at the level of all instruments of the marketing mix (product,

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price, place, promotion, process, people, physical environment). However, we believe that the issues are most noticeable at the level of promotional mix. The lack of plan of promotional activities and the lack of coordinated promotion via the Internet has resulted in spa destinations being known only locally, without a clear strategy for accessing foreign markets.

Despite the long tradition of spa tourism in Serbia, very little has been done to popularize it and further its development. A large percentage of tourists who visit Serbian spas remain older people in need of medical assistance and treatment. If they seek to attract visitors who are members of the younger generation, the destination management must first create a tourism product that will offer wellness, spa and entertainment services on large water areas, as well as enrich this product with cultural goods and rural tourism. The spa tourism product created in this manner must be advertised using both traditional and digital means of communication (websites, social networks, etc.). The aim of this paper is to analyze the origins and ways of managing websites of tourism organizations and specialized hospitals in Serbian spas. In order to establish the level of promotion of spa destinations by way of keeping and updating data on the websites of listed organizations that represent the cornerstones of promotional activities in Serbian spas, a primary research was conducted on the beginnings of promotion, manner of presentation of spa products and website update frequency.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF PROMOTION THROUGH WEBSITE

Modern trends in the tourism market point to the necessity of applying modern information technologies to the tourism industry. The advantages conferred by these technologies to creators and vendors of tourism services have heralded changes in the way enterprises conduct business and helped facilitate cooperation with other entities in the tourism industry. Key changes with regards to distribution in the tourism market are a result of increasing use of e-business technologies (Pavlović & Spasić, 2008, 149).

Information technologies constitute a part of the tourism industry, which is a result of a number of competitive incentives (Zečević, 2007, 172):

- Globalization and concentration of tourism offer
- Strong global competition
- Communicative and operational efficiency
- Development of yield management systems

- Revolutionizing of distribution channels and cost control
- Competitive advantage through cost reduction and boosting differentiation
- Flexible and customized tourism products
- Development and provision of innovative products and services
- Creating seamless travel experiences
- Close interaction with consumers
- Development of relationships and one-to-one marketing.

Internet access has become essential for the normal operation virtually every company. According to the analysts, even during 2006, over 90% of all respondents rated the Internet as a medium to very important source of information (Trajković et al., 2015, 91). Tourists usually start their trip by searching for information on the Internet. This is because travel products are intangible and cannot be evaluated in advance (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). The availability, interactivity, timeliness, and accuracy of information have allowed the Internet to become the most widely used medium for the promotion of tourist destinations. When considering the innovations in communication via the Internet, the following aspects may be identified: First, the Internet has proven to be efficient in reaching individual users and getting feedback from those same users, so that ads can be more specifically targeted to those users. Second, the Internet has made it possible to develop highly efficient intermediation markets for advertising; this is clearly shown in the keyword bidding system that is transforming advertising. Lastly, the Internet has enabled specialization as traditional publishers have been able to merge content provision with selling advertising space to advertisers (Aramendia-Muneta, 2012).

Web marketing and tourism forged a strong and unbreakable bond. Tourism marketing was one of the first Web users, subsequently paving the way for major changes in the tourism industry. Web technology is ideally structured for the promotion, distribution and sale of tourism products and services offered by tourism enterprises and organizations. Moreover, tourist destinations obtained an excellent means for their own promotion that was more egalitarian, through the provision of quality information in a variety of audio-visual forms (Stankov et al., 2012).

During its development, the Web has undergone several stages, from Web 1.0 (Individual Intelligence), through Web 2.0 (Collective Intelligence), to Web 3.0 (Knowledge Internet). It should be noted that the majority of companies in the tourism sector are now in the early stages of implementation of Web 2.0 technologies. In Serbia, it is still possible to

talk about the Web 1.0 stage, i.e. the setting up of static websites with sporadic use of social networking (Web 2.0) to promote spa resorts.

Table 1.: Development of Web technologies

Web 1.0	Web 2.0	Web 3.0
Static information	Social media	Knowledge Internet
<i>Individual Intelligence</i> E-mail, Web html	<i>Collective Intelligence</i> Blogs, wikis, social networks	<i>Artificial Intelligence</i> Structured and open data
Until 1999	2000-2009	From 2010

Source of data: Aramendia-Muneta, M. E., (2012), Strategic Marketing in Tourism Services, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, p. 289-299.

Our country was connected to the Internet in 1996 and since then, an increasing number of companies in the tourism industry, as well as some destinations, have developed their Internet websites (Milićević et al., 2013). The first websites related to tourism subjects appeared in Serbia in 1998. Until 2001, constant growth of new tourism websites was observed. In 2004, growth continued (36 new websites appeared). Then there was slower growth in the next two years, but the expansion started in 2007, and compared to 2006 (32 new websites), the number of new websites was doubled (Stankov et al., 2010). The uptrend in the number of websites that promote the Serbian tourism offer is satisfactory because business entities recognized the importance of promotion using websites with the intention of attracting demand and bringing supply and demand closer together. Serbia's offer on the Internet can be followed through direct efforts of tourism and hospitality entities to have Web presence through various Web promotions, advertising or – certainly the most preferable option – developing business activities via the Internet. Another form of Serbian tourism presence on the Internet is the inclusion of the tourism and hospitality offer in the offering of booking systems and services provided by numerous Web companies (Ćurčić, 2006).

METHODOLOGY, SURVEY STRUCTURE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The survey into the use of websites as a means of promoting tourism organizations and specialized hospitals in Serbian spas was conducted in the period from 17 September 2015 until 07 November 2015. Data were collected by sending questionnaires by e-mail to 40 specialized hospitals and 40 local tourism organizations that offer spa products. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. In the first section,

respondents were asked to state whether they were filling in the questionnaire on behalf of a tourism organization or a specialized hospital. In the next section, respondents were asked to list the media that were used by the management of Serbian spas in order to promote their products (TV commercials, radio commercials, social media, fairs, VIPs, organization of special events, organization of prizes or discounts). The third section was dedicated to researching promotion by means of websites, their development and update frequency. Of the total number of sent questionnaires, 43,8% of specialized hospitals responded to questionnaires, while the number of questionnaires completed by tourism organizations was somewhat higher and amounted to 56,3%. The marketing department of one specialized hospital sent an e-mail stating that they did not wish to participate in the survey. The collected data were analyzed using the software package IBM SPSS, version 20, which is suitable for the analysis of statistical data in the social sciences. The initial hypothesis of the performed study is as follows:

H0: Tourism organizations and specialized hospitals in Serbian spas have understood the importance of promotion by means of websites.

On the basis of analyzed data decisions accepting or rejecting specific hypotheses will be made, and testing of the aforementioned assumptions will determine the decision accepting or rejecting the main hypothesis. In addition to the above questions, a comparative analysis was performed to determine what percentage of tourism organizations promoted their products via the Internet in comparison to specialized hospitals, as well as what percentage of specialized hospitals, in comparison to tourism organizations, began to use promotion via the Internet ten, five and two years ago, respectively. The comparative difference in website update frequency between specialized hospitals and tourism organizations was also determined, as was the ratio between external associates and employees in an organization for both tourism organizations and specialized hospitals.

SURVEY RESULTS

The study encompassed a sample of 38 organizations, including: 20 (52.63%) tourism organizations and 18 (47.37%) specialized hospitals. The collected data were analyzed using the SPSS software package, version 20. When asked which is the most common form of product promotion, the largest share of respondents opted for TV advertising, i.e. eleven respondents or 27.5%, followed by fairs - 20.0% of cases or eight organizations. Insufficient usage of social networks for promotional purposes was observed, which may be due to lack of awareness as to their

importance to promotion in the tourism market. The surveyed organizations stated that they use the Internet to promote their products in 100% of cases. 67.5% of surveyed organizations have been using their websites for the past 5 years. It is interesting that website creators are usually professionals who are not employed by the organization, in 57.9% of cases (22 organizations), followed by employees, in 21.05% of cases (8 organizations) and advertising agencies, in 21.05% of cases (8 organizations). In all of the surveyed organizations, websites are updated by employees. Organizations usually update their website once a week (20 organizations), once a year (10 organizations), once a month (6 organizations) and once in every few months (2 organizations). It is discouraging that the largest number of organizations (19 in total) only redesign the appearance of their website once in every few years, while four organizations stated that their website has never been changed significantly. Six organizations redesign their website on an annual basis. The main objective of the website is the sale of spa services, which means that all of the specialized hospitals, 21 in total, stated that their primary objective was to promote the destination, as did the tourism organizations (17 of those surveyed). Answers to this question are also logical due to the nature of the industry that the surveyed organizations are engaged in.

Table 2.: Frequencies and shares (in percent)

Variable		Frequency	Shares (in percent)	Skeweness	Kurtosis
Type of organization	Tourism organization	20	52.63%	.110	-2.102
	Specialized hospital	18	47.37%		
Type of product promotion	TV commercials	11	27.5%	.045	-1.712
	Radio commercial	2	5.0%		
	Social media	2	5.0%		
	Fairs	8	20.0%		
	Discounts	2	5.0%		
	Other	13	32.5%		
Promotion of products via the Internet	Yes	38	100%	Std.error of skeweness	Std.error of kurtosis
	No	0	0%	.383	.750
Website set-up period	Two years ago	2	5.0%	.296	.410
	5 years ago	27	67.5%		

	10 years ago	9	22.5%		
Website developer	Organization employee	8	21.05%	.000	-.540
	External associate/IT professional	22	57.9%		
	Advertising agency	8	21.05%		
The person tasked with updating the website	Organization employee	38	100%	Std.error of skeness .383	Std.error of kurtosis .750
Website update regularity	Once a week	20	50.0%	.689	-1.329
	Once a month	6	15.0%		
	Once in every few months	2	5.0%		
	Once a year	10	25.0%		
Website modification regularity	Once a year	15	37.5%	.373	-.647
	Once in every few years	19	47.5%		
	There were no significant modifications to website design	4	10.0%		
Main objective of website	Sale of spa services	21	52.5%	.221	-2.063
	Destination promotion	17	42.5%		

Source of data: Analysis of data collected by the survey

When asked who is person tasked with updating their website, the answers of all respondents indicated that the website is maintained by employees of the organization. Website updates are, in the majority of cases, administered once a year, as shown in Table 3. Roughly 50% of respondents make some changes to their web site once a week, 15% do so once a month, while 5.0% updates their website once in every few months.

When asked how often significant changes in the appearance of their website are made, most respondents stated that such redesigns are done once every few years. 37.5% of respondents make some significant changes once a year, while 47.5% of respondents made no significant changes to their website since its creation. When asked about the primary objective of their website, 52.5% of respondents replied that the objective

was selling spa products, and 42.5% that they wished to promote their spa as a tourist destination.

On the basis of the above findings, we can conclude that tourism organizations and specialized hospitals in Serbia spas have grasped the importance of promotion by means of websites and accept the main hypothesis. However, the surveyed organizations differ in terms of promotion objectives. This conclusion is also logical, because while the primary objective of promoting a special hospital is the sale of spa products, tourism organizations, in addition to selling spa products, also strive to promote the spa destination itself.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This survey presents information on the use of websites by tourism organizations and specialized hospitals for the purpose of promoting spa tourism products and spa destinations. In keeping with the tendency of potential tourists to find the first information on a destination by searching the Internet, the practical implication of this study is to attempt to draw the attention of destination management to the opportunities provided by the optimal combination of communication to formulate an adequate promotional mix that would be communicated to potential tourists, as well as to the necessity of promotion by means of websites and employing a strategic approach when organizing this method of promotion.

The biggest limitation of this study is the inability to survey a large number of specialized hospitals and tourism organizations that are willing to participate in the survey. However, the obtained data paint a realistic picture of the use of websites in the promotion of spa tourism products and destinations.

Further studies should be directed to researching the structure and technical characteristics of developed websites, their relationship with other media, digital promotion, as well as traditional means of communication. In line with the development of web technologies from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0, it is necessary to carry out research on the use of social networks, Wikis, blogs and vlogs in the promotion of Serbian spa resorts in order to establish the stage of Web technology application. This would provide an answer to the question whether the holders of advertising activities in Serbian spas organize promotional activities using a multitude of options that are available to them thanks to the use and development of the Internet (or not).

CONCLUSION

Exploring the use of means of communication by business entities on the supply side (be it tourism organizations or specialized hospitals), we came to the conclusion that they promote their products using digital means by setting up websites on the Internet. Tourism organizations grasped the strength, power and opportunities provided by the Internet to its users much sooner, which is why most of them set up websites showing products in their offer as long as ten years ago. Their websites are updated more often and undergo significant changes. Tourism organizations are also more aware than employees in specialized hospitals that a website developer should be an external associate or a person with marketing knowledge. The creators of advertising activities for spa destinations ought to devise their promotion in terms of strategy and take advantage of all the opportunities available to them thanks to Web technologies. Further progress also involves moving on to a more modern platform, by utilizing social networks, blogs, wikis in the promotion of spa destinations.

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Рад је примљен: 20.06.2016.

Рад је прихваћен за штампање: 28.06.2016.