Chapter XIII

Feeling Welcome: Internet Tourism Marketing Across Cultures

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Abstract

If used in a proper way, the Internet can be a powerful cross-cultural incoming tourism communication tool. This chapter examines to what extent the opportunities are utilized which are offered in the virtual sphere to extend across physical and cultural distances a welcoming hand to potential visitors from far-away source markets. The discussion is based on the results of a study about the non-german language Web sites of Central European DMOs, conducted in 2002 and updated in 2006, and the results of a study of German-language Web sites of non-European NTOs and DMOs, conducted in 2005. It can be shown that an increase in multilingual Web sites within the period under review can be recognized, but that an increase in cross-cultural awareness of the providers of such Web sites is still lacking.
“Tourism destinations are probably one of the most difficult “products” to market, involving large numbers of stakeholders and a brand image over which a destination marketing manager typically has very little control.” (Palmer, 2004, p. 128) In the 21st century, both the expectations as well as the actual experiences are informed by all kind of communication received via media beforehand and by interpretation through different kinds of “cultural mediators” (Ooi, 2002), which influence and shape the “tourists gaze” (Urry, 2002), especially in international tourism. These complex processes are only accessible for the tourism industry in a very limited way, as images are not simply the result of promotions put forward by companies or destinations (Goodall & Ashworth, 1988). The brand image for example of Arab countries for European tourists can be traced back to the Orientalism (Said, 1978) fortified by Flaubert and French painters like Delacroix, Decamps, and Fromentin (Lemaire, 2000). The way these countries are portrayed in the news in a situation of increased fears of terrorism also will influence the image. Peer-group information and the travellers own experiences play an often even more important role here, forming the image according to the descriptions by friends and colleagues who have actually been there and on the background of own former visits to foreign countries. Nevertheless, some degree of influence of the brand building based on “image” by the responsible destination marketing organization is possible and in fact an important part of the marketing strategy for a given destination (Chon, 1991). This influence is growing with the “otherness” of the destination (Bieger, 2002). The degree of otherness is perceived in the same way as distances are perceived in tourism—not in kilometres, but in accessibility, including accessibility in a cultural and lingual sense. The less well-known, the more exotic a destination is, the greater the chance to influence the image through tourism marketing activities. One important tool for such long-range marketing activities in the 21st century is undoubtedly the Internet.

If used in a proper way, the Internet can be a powerful cross-cultural incoming tourism communication tool. This chapter examines to what extent the opportunities are utilized which are offered in the virtual sphere to extend across physical and cultural distances a welcoming hand to potential visitors from far-away source markets. The discussion is based on the results of a study about the non-german language Web sites of Central European destination marketing organizations (DMOs), conducted in 2002 and updated in 2006, and the results of a study of German-language Web sites of non-European national tourism organizations (NTOs) and DMOs, conducted in 2005. It will be found that an increase in multilingual Web sites within the period under review can be recognized, but that an increase in cross-cultural awareness of the providers of such Web sites is still lacking.

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