The Role of the Internet as a Tool to Search for Tourist Information

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ABSTRACT

The internet has become the main tool to search for information. This is particularly the case for the tourism industry, where online searches are becoming increasingly popular. The ongoing growth of e-commerce has ruptured the existing relationship with the old management information systems and products. Given the vast range of available information, search and meta-search engines have become key elements in gaining a competitive advantage and establishing differentiation strategies within the sector. This paper aims to compare tourism e-commerce search engines and meta-search engines based on website structure and content. It analyses the main attributes and categories found to create clusters and a ranking from which to compare the position of search and meta-search engines from the perspective of the supplier, as opposed to that of the traditional consumer market preference. This paper will contribute to the industry by providing valuable information for best management practices about the tourism website’s structure and offering, and determining factor in implementing successful strategies.

KEYWORDS

Business-to-Customer E-Commerce (B2C), Meta-Search Engine, Search Engine, Tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

According to eMarket (2014), global business-to-customer e-commerce (B2C) sales reached $ 1.471 trillion in 2014, an increase of nearly 20% over 2013. This included all products and services ordered or booked via the Internet on any device. As internet use matures worldwide, e-commerce growth is likely to slow down over time and settle at around 10% by the end of our forecast period, and is expected to reach $2,356 trillion in 2018. Focusing on the tourism sector in 2013, it can be seen that e-commerce represented more than US $590 million worldwide. This was principally due to its growth in the Asia Pacific region, as well as to the growing use of mobile devices, estimated to cover 35% of all online bookings in 2018 (World Travel Market, 2014). Moreover, according to the United Nations (2015), travel-related items (such as tours, hotel reservations and airline tickets) are currently in the top five of the list of consumer online purchase intention across all regions, i.e., Asia and Oceania, Europe, Africa and the Middle East, Latin America and North America.

Drawing on data from Nielsen’s report on e-commerce (2014), which concentrated on the intention of users with internet access across 60 different countries to purchase online during the following six months, 42% of the respondents were likely to conduct research on tours and hotels reservations and
44% of them would make purchases. In the case of airline tickets and reservations, the latter figure rose to 48%. This trend also held true for airline tickets, where there was a greater tendency to purchase than to search, i.e., 59% to 43%. Analysed globally, tours and hotel reservations have substantially increased from 2013 to 2014, rising from a 27% global average of online purchase intent over the following 6 months to 44%. Similarly, airline tickets and reservations rose from 33% to 48%. A report published by PhoCusWright’s (2012) showed that the role of intermediaries is becoming increasingly important within this context. This has generated a new role for search and meta-search engines in online travel distribution. This paper focuses on the most important, recently created components of internet marketing, search and meta-search engines (Fresenmaier et al., 2011). As the volume of information on the internet has become increasingly vast, search and meta-search engines (Google, Yahoo, etc.) to help users visualise their interests have experienced a parallel growth, which makes them especially useful (Xiang et al., 2008). Most travellers use these tools to plan their holidays (TIA, 2009); so general search engines have created new specific tourism websites, along with the numerous ones that have emerged in this sector (Trivago, Tripadvisor, Booking, etc.). Search and meta-search engines are the most popular online planning sources for travellers; 57% of leisure travellers and 64% of business travellers start their travel reservations/plans/booking and shopping/purchasing process via search or meta-search engines (Google Travel Study and Ipsos Media CT, 2014).

In view of the above, this paper aims to comparatively analyse B2C e-commerce search and meta-search tourism engines in order to be able to answer which one has more advantages for the tourism industry. It does so from the supply perspective, taking into account the structure and content of what is on offer to identify success and positioning determinants from a consumer preference perspective. The objective is to determine the different types of behaviour of search and meta-search engines in terms of website structure and offering (content) in groups of clusters, and ultimately to establish a ranking. This will allow for a comparison to be made of the results and the use and presence of search and meta-search engines on the market and therefore, determine which of the two is preferable to use.

The choice of search or meta-search tourism engines is one of the greatest decisions faced by the tourism market to seek, compare and manage tourism products and services. Consequently, a short- and medium-term marketing strategy rests on this decision. A key strategy for search and meta-search engines is therefore generating added value for users through the structure and offering (content) of their websites, in order to provide them with a competitive advantage driven by the rising use of the internet, mobile devices and the continued growth of e-commerce. The paper shows the results of the structure and offering analysis provide a step further in this area of research, in order to compare the behaviour of search and meta-search engines. However, although the structure and offering of websites is important to the user, it is not decisive, as those selected tend to be the most widely known and well publicised, which do not have the best structure and offering. This implies that organisations, both through search and meta-search engines, should make a greater effort in marketing, mainly through social media, loyalty programmes and interactivity, which facilitate and improve the relationship with the consumer.

2. SEARCH AND META-SEARCH ENGINES: A WEBSITE’S STRUCTURE AND OFFERING

Until the 1970s, the structure of the tourism distribution sector was fairly rigid and stable, as a result of all the barriers that prevented access to it (Granados et al., 2008). However, this sector has developed rapidly with the advent of computers, internet and the progressive introduction of new technologies. With the increasing use of tools such as social networks and user-generated content (UGC), this sector has grown to provide consumers with a wide range of internet sources from which to shop (Ghose et al., 2012). This explains the impact of trends and technologies on tourism distribution and reservations.

In the 1970s Computer Reservation Systems (CRSs) and online databases for flight reservations (Duliba et al., 2001) were at their peak. A decade later, these databases evolved to include other
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