Chapter 15
Digital Marketing Strategies of Destination Management Organizations: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT
The main objective of this chapter is to understand if Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are effectively exploiting the potential of the digital world and are considering online information in the management model of tourism destinations. To this end, an exploratory study was carried out, focusing on a regional DMO in Portugal: Tourism of Alentejo/Ribatejo. The methodology used in this study unfolds in three phases: (1) a content analysis of strategic and operational plans and/or activities of the DMO under study; (2) analysis of its online presence, namely its website, social networks, and positioning in the Google search engine; and, finally, (3) a semi-structured interview with the president of the DMO. The results indicate that DMOs start to wage digital communication, opting to be on the Internet through their own website and with a profile created in some social networks. However, their activity in social networks is not regular. On the other hand, DMOs are still in a very incipient phase in the use of web and social networks data to support the organization’s decision making.

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INTRODUCTION

In face of the growing worldwide interest in the tourism activity, the economic conjuncture and the changes that have taken place in society, particularly the development of information technologies and the increase of destinations’ competitiveness internationally, there has been an increased awareness on tourism destination management. The main goal of the destination management is to manage and sustain the integration of various resources, activities and stakeholders through appropriate policies and actions (Manente & Minghetti, 2006).

Tourism destinations should have an organization, whose nature and designation would depend on the level of performance and type of destination, which ensures the leadership and coordination necessary for the destination’s operation (Morella, 2006; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) have traditionally operated as marketing entities, acting as agencies responsible for carrying out defined destination strategies (UNWTO, 1998). Today, however, these organizations take on other roles and act as information brokers, thus helping consumers to select smart information.

The Internet has become one of the main sources of tourism information, as such, it is fundamental that the DMOs have an online communication strategy and accompany the consumer during all stages of the travel cycle. Currently, DMOs’ online advertising costs represent more than 50% of the organizations’ total advertising budget (Expedia, 2010), and Portugal’s communication strategy developed by the National Tourism Authority – Turismo de Portugal, IP – is totally online since 2013 (Turismo de Portugal, 2014).

The main objective of this chapter is to understand if DMOs are effectively exploiting the potential of the digital world and are considering online information in the management model of tourism destinations. To this end, an exploratory study was carried out, focusing on a regional DMO in Portugal – Tourism of Alentejo / Ribatejo. The methodology used in this study unfolds in three phases: (i) a content analysis of the DMO’s strategic and operational plans and / or activities; (ii) an analysis of its online presence, namely its website, social networks and positioning in the Google search engine; and, finally, (iii) a semi-structured interview with the president of the DMO. The chapter is structured into three main sections: (i) the literature review, which focuses on DMOs and their roles, as well as the growing importance of Internet and digital marketing; (ii) the methodology used in the study; and (iii) the presentation and discussion of the results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance and Role of Destination Management Organizations

The concept of tourism destination has been addressed by several authors (Cooper et al., 2005; Inskeep, 1991; Leiper, 2004; Valls, 2004), and, although the different perspectives have singularities, there are two variables that are determinant in the analysis of tourism destinations: space and product (Mira, Breda, Moura & Cabral, 2017). This perspective suggests that there are several stakeholders and factors of attraction that act in the tourism destination. In addition, the competitive and ever-changing scenario that has