

Comparing Web sites: An Experiment in Online Tourism Marketing

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Abstract

Issues of importance to the tourism and marketing fields are investigated in this study. Of specific significance is the issue of credibility to both message strength and acceptance, which has been shown to lead to higher beliefs, attitude toward the destination and then to purchase intent. Credibility is critical due to the intangible nature of the tourism product and the risk associated with destination selection. The purpose of this research is to examine the persuasive effects of Web sites on the effectiveness of marketing a tourist destination. Specifically this research attempts to test whether there is a difference between the persuasiveness of various tourism sites. Dependent variables include perceived credibility, message strength, and purchase intent. Results support the importance of message credibility to message strength, but not to a change in purchase intent. Implications for marketers are suggested.

Keywords: websites, marketing, tourism, credibility, message strength, persuasion

Introduction

Tourism, the world's largest industry, is progressively more dependent on the Internet to disseminate and market travel destinations. Research on tourist information sources suggests that the credibility of information is significantly related to purchase intent (Loda, Norman et al. 2007). Prior knowledge is suspected to affect the ability to process information, and to discriminate relevant from irrelevant information during a Web information search (Cho, 2001). Research into Web site credibility suggests that trust in a site is enhanced by observable signals, such as the production elements included in the design (Schlosser, White et al. 2006). Tourism marketers need to understand how to maximize the persuasiveness of their Web sites.

The Internet as a Marketing Tool

While the Internet entered the public domain in the early 1970s, it was not until the mid 1990s that advertisers and researchers started focusing on the new medium. This was due in large part to the introduction of the Web browser which made the Internet much more user friendly. In fact, the first Internet-related research paper appeared in 1996, in the *Journal of Advertising Research*. Subsequent scholarly work settled into six primary themes: (1) interactivity, (2) effectiveness of Internet advertising, (3) electronic commerce, (4) attitude toward the ad (site) or brand, (5) advertising processes and (6) comparisons to traditional media (Kim and McMillan, 2008). In the decade of research that followed, articles comparing the Internet to traditional advertising cluster early in the period. The two most frequently cited works are by Bezjian-Avery, Alexa, Calder, and Iacobucci (1998) and Gallagher, Foster, and Parsons (2001). Bezjian-Avery et. al. compare the effectiveness of advertising on the Internet with what they called traditional linear advertising.

To get a clean comparison of advertising on the Internet and traditional print advertising, they broke the print ad into components and presented them as static visuals on a computer. "Our consumers experienced the traditional advertising much like low preproduction value TV advertising using slides," (p. 26). After exposure to the two presentations, semantic differential scales measured participants' purchase intent. Time spent with each presentation was also captured. Results show that those who viewed the Internet presentation spent less time viewing the advertisements and were less likely to purchase the advertised products than those who viewed the "ad in slides." The researchers theorized that, "apparently when a customer uses an interactive system, the link between retrieval and yielding to the persuasion may be broken," (p. 29). They urged marketers to proceed with caution when using this new medium for advertising. In contrast to the seminal work by Bezjian-Avery, et. al. (1998), other researchers argued that principles traditionally associated with mass media advertising did not apply to the Web.

Hoffman and Novak (1996) called for new communication models to better depict active rather than passive participants in the marketing process. Ghose and Dou (1998) suggest that marketers take better advantage of interactivity to increase the Internet's effectiveness. Leong, Huang and Stanners (1998) concluded that advertisers should not use traditional type advertising on the Internet.

In the more recent and second most cited research comparing the Internet to traditional advertising, the authors conclude that "given equal opportunity for exposure to the target audience, the same advertisements were equally effective in print and on the Web," (Gallagher, et. al, 2001, p. 57). The researchers came to this conclusion after examining the impact on message effectiveness when marketers did not take full advantage of the interactive and enhanced capabilities of the Internet. Their premise was that consumers expect messages on the Web to be enhanced with the media's capabilities; when they are not so enhanced, the messages are less effective. As to why this hypothesis was not supported, the authors explained that "people are expert ad processors, regardless of the medium," (p. 68). In other words, the authors surmised, people respond to advertisements in a skeptical manner, regardless of the medium that carries the message.

In more recent years, research in advertising and marketing journals comparing the Internet with traditional media focuses on the comparison with television, or print and television. Eveland and Dunwoody (2002) compared the Web and print ads, demonstrating that the Internet elicits more elaboration than does print. They surmise, that because the Internet makes connections among related bits of information, the structure of the Internet is similar to the human thought process. Chang and Thorson (2004) found that using the Web in combination with television leads to significantly higher attention and message credibility than did repeated exposure to television alone. In comparing multimedia campaigns (television, print and Internet) with single media efforts, Dijkstra, Buijtelts and van Raaij (2005) assert that television campaigns are superior to multimedia campaigns in evoking cognitive responses, and that print-only campaigns are as effective as multimedia efforts. However, they found a complementary effect for multimedia campaigns compared to Internet-only marketing approaches. In 2007, Havlena, Cardarelli and Montigny (2007) found media synergies among magazine, online and television advertising for heavy media users. They recommend using print and television to build awareness and shift perceptions; the addition of the Internet is specifically recommended to target low television users.

The Importance of Credibility

Credibility is a key component of persuasive communication in general. O'Keefe (1990) defines credibility as "judgments made by a perceiver (e.g., a message recipient) concerning the believability of a communicator" (p. 130). Theorists generally have agreed that two dimensions are key to source credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). One dimension is referred to as "competence" (i.e., qualification, expertness, intelligence, authoritativeness), and the other as "trustworthiness" (i.e., character, sagacity, safety, honesty). When compared to other media, Flanagin and Metzger (2000) report that, overall, respondents considered Internet information to be as credible as that obtained from other mass media except newspapers. However, credibility varied among the types of information sought such as reference, news, entertainment and commercial information.

In tourism, credibility is especially important. Research has shown that intangible, expensive service purchases such as travel involve both financial and emotional risk (Fisk, Grove, & John, 2000). Generally, consumers appear to acquire information as a risk reduction strategy. The more reliable or credible the information, the lower the perceived risk (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

A tourism study by Chen (2006) offers information consistent with findings from the overall marketplace. Chen concludes that overall trust in a travel Web site can be significantly influenced by design (physical appearance, color, layout, graphics), functionality, usability, efficiency, reliability and likeability.

Credibility is a frequent subject in studies concerning image creation and effective communication. Gunn (1972) was one of the first to relate credibility with the different ways that cognitive images are formed. He argued images are formed through induced and organic agents. Induced images are a function of marketing efforts and destination promoters. Organic images emerge from unbiased sources, and are not directly associated with a destination. The key difference between organic and induced image formation agents, Gunn argued, was the control the destination area has over what is presented. Whether Internet sites are perceived as induced or organic sources is undetermined. The role of credibility of information sources in tourists' information search behavior, along with the role of prior knowledge and need for information, was examined by Cho (2001).

Respondents rated ten information sources, ranging from their own experience to magazines, newspapers and the Internet, on a scale of 1 (“not at all credible”) to 7 (“very credible”). Results reveal that “the credibility of sources was found to have the most crucial influence on the selection and use of the source, compared with the effects of prior knowledge and need for information,” (p. v). While one’s own experience and information from friends and family were rated as most credible respectively, the Internet was the most credible external information source used. Yoo,

Lee and Gretzel (2007) looked for the role of source characteristics in e-word-of-mouth. Their experimental study turned out that authority cues increased credibility perceptions and local residents’ recommendations. Information/cues regarding source characteristics were also important to the information seekers.

Kim and Fesenmaier (2007) tested the influence of six factors on the first impression (in terms of favorableness) of fifty official state tourism Web sites in the United States. Only inspiration, usability, and credibility perceptions showed significant evidence to impact on the persuasiveness of Web sites of destination marketing organizations (DMOs).

Loda, Norman and Backman (2007) compared the effect of advertising and publicity on destination selection. They found publicity to be more credible than advertising, and to have a more positive impact on message strength and purchase intent.

Reasoned Action and Elaboration

Considerable study exists concerning how consumers process information. Researchers examining information processing often use the expectancy-value (EV) theory of Ajzen and Fishbein (1980). This is a model of reasoned behavior or central route processing (as described in the Elaboration Likelihood Model) wherein consumers carefully consider or elaborate on message content (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). In these cases, the success of persuasive communications depends on the degree to which consumers accept message claims (Smith and Vogt 1995). Factors that influence message acceptance include perceived credibility and message strength (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980).

Hypotheses

Issues of importance to both the tourism and marketing fields are investigated in this study. Of specific significance is the issue of credibility to both message strength and acceptance, which has been shown to lead to higher beliefs, attitude toward the destination and then to purchase intent. Credibility is critical due to the intangible nature of the tourism product and the risk associated with destination selection. This study suggests that for a message to have enough strength to influence purchase intent, it must first have credibility before it will even be accepted by the consumer. Message acceptance then leads to forming an attitude toward the destination and ultimately to purchase intent.

Hence, the purpose of this research is to examine the persuasive effects of Web sites on the effectiveness of marketing a tourist destination. Specifically this research attempts to test whether there is a difference between the persuasiveness of various tourism sites and whether that difference stems from more believability. Dependent variables include perceived credibility, message strength, and purchase intent (change of propensity to visit). Four hypotheses are examined:

- H1: Tourism Web sites will vary in their levels of message credibility.
- H2: Web sites will deliver different levels of message strength.
- H3: Web sites will differ in the influence they have on purchase intent.
- H4: Web site credibility will correlate in a greater change in propensity to visit.

Methodology

This research was conducted as an experiment across continents. It involved a convenience sample of 219 American college students and 175 travel interested people from Europe who viewed one of ten randomly assigned Web sites of city tourism organizations/destination marketing organizations (CTO/DMOs). Web sites representing major city tourism destinations in Europe and the USA (Travel and Leisure, 2006) were selected out of the 60 CTO/DMOs screened. Primarily well-known destinations were selected to add a degree of veracity to the experimental setting.

Scale Development and Study Variables

Ten CTO/ Web sites comprise the stimulus and independent variable of this study. The three major dependent variables are message strength, perceived credibility, and purchase intent. The variables are summarized in Table 1.

Perceived credibility was measured with three Likert-type scales asking how truthful, accurate and credible the stimulus was to the respondent. These measures, developed by Darley and Smith (1993) and Smith and Hunt (1978) use a seven-point scale, and the responses were combined and averaged to generate the perceived credibility statistic.

Message strength was measured with a three-item scale developed by Miniard, Bhatla, and Rose (1990) and Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983). This Likert-type scale asked respondents to rate message claims from weak (-3) to strong (+3).

Purchase intent was measured with a seven-point Likert-type scale. The question asked if the information and presentation encountered changed the likelihood to visit the destination. Responses range from “no change” (1) to “changed a lot” (7).

Insert Table (1) about here

Data Collection

Three hundred ninety four subjects (219 American college students and 175 travel interested people from Europe) were randomly assigned to the ten treatment groups. In keeping with the procedures of Smith and Vogt (1995) and Loda, Norman, et al. (2007), subjects were asked to read instructions carefully, view the stimulus Web site, and then proceed through the questionnaire. To create reasonably high processing involvement, subjects were asked to “consider yourself a person who has saved their funds, and now has the time and money to take a vacation this summer.” They were instructed to visit the site, told to form an evaluation of the destination, and informed they would be asked some questions about the destination later. Each participant signed onto a Web site containing these instructions, a direct link to the stimulus site, and survey questions to be completed following exposure to the stimulus. Subjects were asked if they have ever visited the travel destination used for this experiment. Those with prior experience were eliminated from the analysis. Subjects were instructed to spend as much time as they needed at the CTO/DMO site. Next, the dependent measures were collected (subjects were not allowed to go back to the stimulus materials).

Analysis and Results

Content analysis was used to determine the 20 most commonly used Web site elements. One independent and three dependent variables were analyzed. Data were collected from 394 respondents, and entered in SPSS 15. A MANOVA was first performed to assess variables simultaneously; a series of one-way ANOVAs then looked at areas of significance. Discriminant analysis was used to assess Web site elements. Significance was measured at .05.

Profile of Respondents

Respondents were between 16 and 65 years with an average age of 26. 75% were younger than 27 years. 52% were female. 81% indicated a Caucasian ethnic origin, 9% an African American, 1% a Hispanic or Latin American and 2% an Asian or Pacific Island one. On average, these respondents reported 3.7 trips a year.;10% reported no travel. Respondents with prior visits to a destination were excluded. Due to the random assignment of destinations each of the 10 places had an equal frequency of about 40. After eliminating the personal experience effect, the frequency for the destinations were skewed: New York (17), London (19), Chicago (35), Budapest (40), and Madrid (41).

Testing of Hypothesis 1 Perceived Credibility

Hypothesis 1 states Web sites will differ in their levels of message credibility. Descriptive statistics for treatment groups averaged $M=4.98$, $SD 1.02$, and ranged from a low for Los Angeles ($M=4.49$, $SD.838$) to a high for Rome ($M=5.42$, $SD .721$).

A one-way ANOVA statistical test was performed to compare these means and test statistical differences. Results of the ANOVA are shown below in Table 2.

Insert Table (2) about here

Post hoc tests produced the following results. Three of the between group comparisons revealed significant differences, as depicted in Table 3. These differences were between Los Angeles and Rome, Los Angeles and Chicago and Los Angeles and London.

Insert Table (3) about here

Based on this evidence, Hypothesis 1 was supported. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that Web sites differ in their levels of message credibility. In this experiment, Rome, Chicago and London generated significantly higher levels of message credibility than did Los Angeles.

Message Strength

Hypothesis 2 states CTO/DMOs will differ in the levels of message strength generated by their Web site. Descriptive statistics for treatment groups averaged $M=5.22$, $SD 1.36$, and ranged from a low for Budapest ($M=4.56$, $SD 1.79$) to a high for Chicago ($M=5.81$, $SD.823$). Results of the ANOVA are shown below in Table 4.

Insert Table (4) about here

In post hoc tests, five of the between group comparisons revealed significant differences, as depicted in Table 5. These differences were between Madrid and three other DMOs: London, Rome and Chicago; and between Chicago and Budapest and Chicago and Los Angeles.

Insert Table (5) about here

Based on this evidence, Hypothesis 2 was supported. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that Web sites differ in the levels of message strength they generate. In this experiment, Rome, Chicago and London generated significantly higher levels of message strength than did Los Angeles, Budapest or Madrid.

Purchase Intent (Change of Propensity to Visit)

Hypothesis 3 states that change in propensity to visit will vary by Web site exposure. A seven-item scale asked about change in propensity to visit following exposure to the Web site. Descriptive statistics for treatment groups averaged $M=2.67$, $SD 1.70$, and ranged from a low for Las Vegas ($M=2.03$, $SD 1.31$) to a high for Chicago ($M=3.10$, $SD.176$). They ANOVA produced results as shown in Table 6.

Insert Table (6) about here

The analysis of variance was not significant. Based on these findings, Hypothesis 3 was not supported. There is insufficient evidence to conclude that Web sites differ in generating a change in the propensity to visit a destination following exposure to that destination's Web site.

Hypothesis 4 was not supported based on the evidence presented above. Web sites with high levels of message credibility did not result in a greater change in propensity to visit a destination. No Web site generated a significant change in purchase intent.

Discussion and Conclusion

Previous research suggests that for a message to lead to purchase intent, it must have credibility to generate message strength, or be accepted by the consumer. Message acceptance is then purported to lead to a supportive attitude toward the destination, and ultimately to purchase intent (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Smith & Vogt 1995; Loda, Norman, et al., 2007). The lack of significance in change of propensity to visit is inconsistent with expected findings (note that although the ANOVA for change in propensity to visit was not significant, the paired comparisons of Chicago, Aruba and Budapest were significantly higher than Las Vegas.).

To further mine the data for a potential explanation, another variable, prior knowledge, was explored. This variable assessed respondents' knowledge about the assigned destination prior to exposure to a destination's Web site. The survey used a seven point scale ranging from "don't know anything" to "know quite a lot."

The ANOVA for prior knowledge showed significant differences. Descriptive statistics for treatment groups averaged $M=3.64$, $SD 1.50$, and ranged from a low for Budapest ($M=2.48$, $SD1.35$) to a high for Rome ($M=4.45$, $SD 1.34$). Results of the ANOVA are shown in Table 7.

Insert Table (7) about here

The ANOVA revealed several areas of significance. As would be expected, Budapest and Aruba had significantly lower mean scores on prior knowledge in comparison to Las Vegas, Rome, New York, Paris, London and Los Angeles.

In summary, the results of this study support the importance of message credibility to message strength, but not to a change in purchase intent. However, it is important to realize that only Budapest and Aruba had significantly lower scores on prior knowledge, and their paired comparisons showed a significantly lower change in propensity to visit. Hence, this study may indicate that a one-time Web site exposure will not overcome perhaps years of accumulated prior knowledge, nor induce any significant change in propensity to visit for well-known destinations.

Applications

Based on these findings, there are various marketing implications. One overriding application – the importance of prior knowledge - may help increase tourism marketers’ effectiveness as they attempt to fulfill their primary mission of increasing the number of visitors by affecting intent to visit. Potential visitors’ prior knowledge is formed from years of exposure to various sources, ranging from friends and family to news. Friends can share positive or negative experiences. News can be positive or negative, a one-time story or reoccurring (hurricane Katrina, violence in Northern Ireland, gambling in Las Vegas). This prior knowledge may lead to an entrenched impression of a potential destination, especially of well known destinations such as London, Paris and most of the destinations included in this study. Because of this accumulation of knowledge, people likely have firm grasp of a well known destination, and whether or not they would like to visit.

Therefore, for lesser known destinations such as Budapest and Aruba, image marketing seems to work. However for well-known destinations, image marketing may not be the best strategy. Efforts to create a desired image may not be effective because images of well known destinations are already entrenched. Instead, marketers of well-known destinations may consider alternatives to image marketing, including three suggested here. Marketers could (1) give potential tourists a specific reason to visit and (2) disseminate unexpected information and (3) take maximum advantage of organic messages.

Create reasons for tourists to visit. As this study points out, due to prior knowledge, potential visitors may have entrenched impressions. They likely know whether or not they want to visit a well-known destination. If they do want to visit, perhaps giving them a specific reason to *visit now* would have a greater impact on change of propensity to visit than will general image marketing. Marketers can create this reason to visit in several ways, including special events and price promotions. The potential draw of special events is well documented in the tourism industry. Events can be held annually, such as Mardi Gras or the Cannes Film Festival. Multiple venue events create an opportunity to share production and promotional expenses. A good example comes from the cultural exhibit, Tutankhamen and the Golden Age of Pharaohs. During its run in the United States, the blockbuster art exhibition toured seven cities in three years, drawing more than eight million people, or 50,000 visitors a week.

Price promotions are most often used by hotels and attractions. Some cities have coordinated ticket programs such as the Go Miami card which offers unlimited admission to many area attractions for one price. Less common, however, are private/public partnerships such as these two hypothetical examples: “two-for-one airfare if you spend 14 days in France,” or “stay five nights in New York and the next two nights are free.” Of course, historical visitor spending data should drive feasibility, and procedures must be thoroughly tested. However, such price promotions could be both profitable for the CTO/DMO and give potential visitors a specific reason to *visit now*.

Share unexpected information. As discussed, prior knowledge comes from many sources and not all of those sources may be positive or accurate. Regular attitude surveys of potential visitors could show whether entrenched images hold any inaccuracies. If so, image marketing to correct the inaccuracy could be beneficial. Not only would the resulting image marketing help to correct misinformation, it could also add a new image dimension to a wider populace. The state of Texas advertising program is a good example. “Texas, It’s Like a Whole Other Country” gives information about areas of sophistication and high culture not normally associated with Texas and “cowboys.”

Take maximum advantage of organic messages. Source credibility is a recurring theme in studies concerning effective marketing. Gunn's (1972) and Gartner's (1992) typology of induced and organic agents is applicable here. Induced images are a function of marketing efforts and destination promoters, and have lower credibility. Organic images are formed from sources not directly associated with a destination area, such as news reports, feature articles, documentaries, and have higher message credibility. Although specific Web site elements that were more organic were not ranked higher in this study, it is important to remember that the Internet itself is currently seen as a highly credible medium. There is further evidence for the organic approach. Loda and Coleman (2005) emphasize the role of integrated marketing communications, with publicity being key to the marketing mix. A related study showed that publicity is more effective than advertising at influencing destination selection, and that the most effective media strategy for tourism promotion is publicity followed by advertising. "Clearly, tourism marketers who do not have resources devoted to a publicity effort should consider doing so," (Loda, Norman et al., 2007, p. 263).

Limitations

This research is subject to at least three major limitations. It was conducted in an experimental setting with a largely student population who were randomly assigned to view a well-known destination Web site and assume the role of potential tourist. Actual potential tourists who choose to visit a Web site could generate different responses. This study is limited in its focus, looking at only three main dependent variables. Destination selection, a high risk decision, likely involves an unknown quantity of factors. Lastly, this study does not measure real behavior, but instead assesses "change in propensity to visit." From a research standpoint, "purchase intent" scales have been more widely used and reported.

Suggestions for Further Research.

Some of the literature on Web site credibility concludes that design can affect a Web site's trustworthiness. Questions related to design were not a part of this study and could be an important part of future research. In addition, although the ANOVA for change of propensity to visit was not significant, the sites of Budapest, Aruba and Chicago often surfaced in the analysis. Although the first two sites likely surfaced due to lack of knowledge about the destinations, Chicago is a well-known major metropolitan city. Perhaps a qualitative analysis of the Chicago site via focus groups or content analysis would uncover areas of distinction that impact purchase intent for well-known destinations. Lastly, the Internet site is not a part of Gartner's credibility typology. Research is warranted to see if tourists rate Web sites as induced or organic message agents.

Tourism is a unique and high risk service industry. Due to this uniqueness, it is crucial that CTO/DMOs make effective and efficient marketing investments. In the marketplace, consumers can be persuaded toward potential tourism destinations through many avenues, from conversations with friends and family to Internet Web site exposure. According to this study, one-time exposure to a CTO/DMO Web site is not sufficient to affect a change in propensity to visit, likely because of prior knowledge. It is hoped that this study contributes to the tourism literature by emphasizing how entrenched the images are of well-known destinations. It is also anticipated that marketers of well-known tourist destinations, rather than generating image oriented advertising, will find benefit in providing potential visitors with *reasons to visit*, and by paying more attention to the positive effects of less commercialized, anonymous messages such as publicity.

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Table 1. Independent and Treatment Variables

IV: DMO Web Sites	Dependent Variables
<i>Ten Levels</i>	<i>Message Acceptance</i>
London	Perceived credibility
Paris	Message strength
Budapest	
Rome	<i>Message Response</i>
Madrid	Purchase intent
New York	
Los Angeles	
Las Vegas	
Chicago	
Aruba	

Table 2. Analysis of Variance for Perceived Credibility

	<u>df</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
Between Groups	9	2.46	.010
Within Groups	300		

Table 3. Result of Treatment Groups with Significance on Perceived Credibility

Treatment	Treatment Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	<u>p</u>
Los Angeles	Rome	-.930	.215	.003
	Chicago	-.779	.213	.022
	London	.795	.195	.007

Table 4. Analysis of Variance for Message Strength

	<u>df</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
Between Groups	9	4.77	<.01
Within Groups	300		

Table 5. Result of Treatment Groups with Significance on Message Strength

Treatment	Treatment Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	<u>p</u>
Madrid	London	-.998	.292	.048
	Rome	-.995	.290	.048
	Chicago	-.925	.264	.001
Chicago	Budapest	1.27	.306	.005
	Los Angeles	1.13	.277	.008

Table 6. Analysis of Variance for Change in Propensity to Visit

	<u>df</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
Between Groups	9	1.28	.247
Within Groups	300		

Table 7. Analysis of Variance for Prior Knowledge

	<u>df</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
Between Groups	9	10.04	<.01
Within Groups	300		