

The Use of Information and Communication Technology in Travel Agencies: A Research on Agencies That Are Members of IATA in Istanbul

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Abstract

The rapid development in the technology of internet and information have affected tourism sector which is so dynamic. So many tourism companies have designed their own websites and put into the use for their consumers so as to supply the info share, market the services and products and reach more people.

This study aims to evaluate the websites that are owned by the travel agencies in Istanbul city on the basis of "Web Sites Evaluation Criteria". The sample in the research is: Travel agencies in the category of group A that are members of IATA. According to the data of TURSAB in 2014, the number of the travel agencies in group A Istanbul is 2480 and the number of these agencies that are members of IATA is 246. In the study, 178 of travel agencies which are the member of IATA and own these web sites have been evaluated. As a result of the research, it has been understood that many of agencies do not comply with the criteria concerning online reservation and the facility of web sites usage.

Keywords: Travel Agency, Internet, Web site, TURSAB, Istanbul.

Seyahat Acentalarında Bilgi İletişim Teknolojisi Kullanımı: İstanbul'da Yer Alan IATA Üyesi Acentalar Üzerine Bir Araştırma

Özet

İnternetin ve bilgi teknolojilerinin hızlı gelişimi dinamik ve değişken bir özelliğe sahip olan turizm sektörünü de yakından etkilemiştir. Birçok turizm işletmesi bilgi paylaşımını sağlamak, ürün ve hizmetlerini pazarlayabilmek ve daha geniş kitlelere ulaşabilmek amacıyla kendi web sitelerini tasarlamışlardır ve ziyaretçilerinin kullanımına sunmuşlardır.

Araştırmanın amacı; İstanbul ilinde faaliyet gösteren seyahat acentalarının sahip oldukları web sitelerini "Web Sitesi Değerlendirme Ölçütleri" temelinde değerlendirmektir. Bu çerçevede araştırmanın örneklemini olarak ise; A grubu seyahat acentalarından IATA üyesi olanlar belirlenmiştir. TURSAB'ın 2014 verilerine göre İstanbul ilinde faaliyet gösteren A grubu seyahat acentalarının sayısı 2480 ve bunlardan IATA üyesi olanların sayısı 246'dır. Bu çalışmada IATA üyesi acentaların web sitesine sahip olanları (178 tane) değerlendirilmiştir. Araştırma sonucunda; bu acentaların web sitelerinin birçoğunun kullanım kolaylığı ve çevrimiçi rezervasyon kriterlerine sahip olmadığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Seyahat Acentası, İnternet, Web Sitesi, TURSAB, İstanbul.

Introduction

Travel agencies can be defined as business enterprises which provide transportation - accommodations - refreshments and other supplementary services for individuals and groups who want to participate in tourism activities; which inform them; and which contribute to the tourism economy especially to the balance of payments (Hacıoğlu, 2006: 39). Travel agencies function as a bridge between producers and consumers, the ones who travel (Zhou, 2004). On the other

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hand, the developments in computer and communication technologies ensured internet to be an indispensable part of today. The greatest advantage that the internet environment provides is that it is a matter of public record which means that there is no geographical, political, etc. boundaries (Tastan, 1998: 3). Tourism is also a business segment that has no boundaries just like internet environment.

Today some developments such as the increase in people's leisure time, paid holiday rights, technological developments, increasing income levels, urbanization and population growth, social insurance, freedom of travel and increasing education level also contributed to the development of tourism activities (Kozak et al., 2008: 27-36). It is possible to add audio visual communication tools such as television, radio and especially internet to the technological developments. Internet is a world-wide and constantly developing network that connects many computers to each other using TCP / IP (Transfer Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) (Yasar and Ozseven, 2011: 3). People's desire to see the places they see and get information about in internet environment provides a significant increase in the number of people who participate in tourism activities.

Some features of tourism products and services such as the necessity to consume where they are produced, intangibility, heterogeneity, flexible demand, less brand loyalty, more subjective assessments and important enterprise image make the marketing process of touristic goods and services more important. (Kozak, 2008: 130-134). The use of internet in tourism enterprises increases too just like in all business areas especially since the 2000s. Tourism enterprises include internet both in their distribution channels and marketing efforts. In particular, travel agencies need more marketing in internet environment since they sell and mediate more complex products such as package tours. While a hotel only tries to market its rooms, a travel agency provides and tries to sell both some basic services such as transport – accommodation - refreshments and some complementary services such as guidance – transfer - renting motor – non-motorized vehicle. Internet acts as a mediator for a travel agency in the process of marketing (Kozak, 2008: 172).

Because people who participate in travel have no chance to see or try the touristic product and services before they purchase as well as the fact that pay in advance, they want to have some information in advance about the product (Sarı and Kozak, 2004: 170). Although the agencies are a source of information for the consumers, they want to learn what they are curious about or what they want at any time without leaving their homes or offices. The websites of travel agencies are mediating all these demands and expectations of consumers (Hancer and Ataman, 2006: 194-195; Birkan, 1998: 30).

1. Literature Review

Travel agencies are defined as business enterprises that meet all the requirements of those participated in the travel from the beginning to the end (Ahipasaoglu and Arıkan, 2003: 199). The word "travel" means "tourism" and "relocation". Travel phenomenon is a phenomenon as old as human history. People in ancient times changed their location for only physical needs and the people in

the Middle Ages traveled mostly because of religion – health - sports and education. At the beginning of 1800s, an entrepreneur named Thomas Cook in England arranged the first organized travel activity. In later periods, the industrial revolution, emergence of communication tools such as radio and television and civil aviation sector, development in transport vehicles contributed to the development of travel activities (Hacioglu, 2008: 3-6).

A network called ARPANET was created in 1960 to connect computers to each other so that it would meet the communication needs of U.S. army. Internet which was used for the military purposes until 1980 began to be used in every needed area of life (Bal, 2008: 351). The fact that the use of the internet became widespread in daily life influenced the formation of the pages and sites in virtual environment in a positive way and websites that are one of the most important aspects of internet emerged. According to Inan (1999), website is defined as a tool that combines many internet services and as a multiple hypermedia system (informing; Yücel, 2007: 18). Lots of information, pictures, maps, audio, visual or written information about the products, product / lots of data such as service prices can be brought into use of many people simultaneously. Paying attention to detail and ensuring the integrity is extremely important in the process of preparation and design of the websites providing such significant advantages. Those who build websites must put themselves the shoes of their customer who would benefit from these sites. They must play it by ear of customer's viewpoint (Duran, 2008: 1-2).

The points that are mistaken and missed out while designing websites can be listed as follows: the lack of the section briefly describing the content of the website or what the company does,

- ✓ Neglecting a variable design in which the visitors can arrange the size of home page,
- ✓ The use of different colors that indicate the links that are visited or not visited,
- ✓ The use of graphics used for decoration instead of those that show the real content and
- ✓ Active link pointer directing from home page to home page (Nielsen, 2004: 46).

E-commerce website system has emerged as a new model with the banking and cargo services that are integrated with electronic promotional websites which began to be established in 1990s. Companies sell their products and services as wholesale and retail through these sites. These sites in which the products and services are promoted in detail and shopping is available made a rapid progress (Uzun et al., 2008: 142).

Different methods and criteria are used in the evaluation of websites. Marciso and Levialdi (2003) uses feedback surveys, automatic assessment tools and behavioral observation tools; Taylor (1986) uses ease of use, price reduction, compliance and quality of information; Small (1997) uses user's common surface area, variety of information and online reservation criteria in evaluation (Wan, 2002: 156).

Marcio and Levialdi (2003) adopted planning of the information and designing the appearance; Law and Wong (2003) adopted that the site is

informative, interactive and attractive; Chung and Law (2003) adopted information on facilities, customer contact information, environmental attractiveness, booking information and website management criteria as the evaluation criteria in designing a website (Hancer and Ataman, 2006: 197-198).

Internet has also begun to contribute to the development of travel agencies since 2000s. The increase in production in modern societies is shown on the basis of the increase of communication technologies. Production brought consumption along. Increase in consumption requires different marketing efforts. In addition to traditional marketing approach, new approaches in which communication technologies also included have emerged. The information and communication technology used in the most effective way is internet and websites. Services such as product offers, sales brochures, visual and written information about the products, reservations, selling and paying are available in websites. The major reasons of why webpages are preferred can be listed as; they are environmentalist; reduce consumption of stationary; be able to reach a wide range of people and low cost (Simsek, 2005: 5).

Travel agency is just one of the enterprises which market their products and services through web pages. According to a study in the United States, tourism and travel products are on the third rank in the order of products sold via internet. It is an unavoidable fact that more and more users participate in travel activities via internet (Heung, 2003: 111).

Travel agencies benefit from central reservation systems (CRSs) and global distribution systems (GDSs) as well as product/service promotion using internet (Cevik, 2009: 50-54).

2. Methodology

In this study, the evaluation of the websites of group A, IATA member travel agencies which operate in Istanbul based on certain criteria is intended. In this context, it was benefitted from the "Website Rating Scale" in the study of Hancer and Ataman (2006) named "The Use of Communication Technologies in Travel Agencies and Evaluation of Websites: Sample of Aegean region" in order to obtain quantitative data.

The rating scale used in the study consists of four chapters and a total of 23 statements. The first chapter of the scale consists of three statements and intended to identify "ease of use" of websites. The second chapter is about the "information that should be presented" regarding travel agencies in websites. It is divided into four parts in itself. There are four criteria in the first part and they are about enterprise information. The four criteria in the second part is about lot. The two criteria in the third part are intended to determine the information about the services and products. The fourth part is intended to determine the consumer's contact information and consists of three criteria. The third chapter in the scale is about "the links of related enterprises" and consists of four criteria. The last chapter of the scale is intended to measure "online reservation" information and consists of three criteria.

These statements intended to determine the levels of competence of websites of travel agencies are prepared considering dual measurement technique and 1 is defined as (yes) - 2 is defined as (no).

Group A travel agencies that operate in Istanbul were determined as the universe of the study and the number of these agencies is 2480 as from 2014. In the research process, IATA member, group A travel agencies that operate in Istanbul were evaluated as sample and the number of these agencies are 246. "Website Evaluation Criteria" prepared in the process of data collection were applied to websites of all the agencies included in the sample. The evaluation part of the research was completed between the dates November 2014 and December 2014. But, 68 of IATA member Group A travel agencies that operate in Istanbul don't have a website available for their visitors. These agencies were excluded from this evaluation and websites of 178 agencies were included in the analysis.

The Alpha Cronbach value demonstrating the reliability level of the scale was found to be 0.6423. This reliability level obtained is the proof of the scale and the accuracy of the measuring process.

3. Findings

The evaluation criteria created for the websites consist of four main groups. The analyses were performed in these four groups too. In the group "**Ease of Use**" which is the first of these four groups, it is analyzed whether there are options such as language selection, site plan and a search engine within the site. As a result of the analysis, it is concluded that 72 of the travel agencies with a proportion of 40.4% have language selection option and 106 of them with a proportion of 59.6% don't.

The majority of the agencies still market their services in different language options. It can be seen that 25 of the agencies with a proportion of 14.0% have site plan and 153 of them with a proportion of 86.0% don't. Additionally, it can be seen that while 20 of the agencies with a proportion of 11.2% have a search engine within the site, 158 of them with a proportion of 88.8% don't. Almost all the websites of the agencies are inadequate in terms of ease of use.

Table 1: Evaluation Criteria for Websites (Ease of Use).

<i>Ease of Use</i>		Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Language Option	Yes	72	40.4
	No	106	59.6
Site Plan	Yes	25	14.0
	No	153	86.0
Search Engine within the Site	Yes	20	11.2
	No	158	88.8
Total		178	100

Criteria in the group "**Website Offerings**" is divided into four groups within itself. Criteria of enterprise information are in the first group. As a result of the analysis, it was concluded that while 177 of the agencies with a proportion of 99.4% have title information, 1 agency with a proportion of 0.6% doesn't. It was concluded that while 175 of the agencies with a proportion of 98.3% include their address information in their website, 3 agencies with a proportion of 1.7% don't. While phone information of 176 agencies with a proportion of 98.9% are available for visitors in their website, phone information of 2 agencies with a proportion of 1.1% are not. While 173 of the agencies with a proportion of 97.2% share information about the activities they had done in their websites, 5 of them with a proportion of 2.8% don't. The majority of the agencies offer business information on their websites to their visitors.

Table 2: Evaluation Criteria for Websites (Provided Information - Business Information).

<i>Business Information</i>		Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Title Information	Yes	177	99.4
	No	1	0.6
Address Information	Yes	175	98.3
	No	3	1.7
Phone Information	Yes	176	98.9
	No	2	1.1
Activity Information	Yes	173	97.2
	No	5	2.8
Total		178	100

In the second group, there are criteria of giving information about attractive places. As a result of the analysis, while 174 of the agencies with a proportion of 97.8% have some written information about their attractive places in their websites, 4 of them with a proportion of 2.2% don't.

While 5 agencies with a proportion of 2.8% have their video images of their attractive places in their website, 173 agencies with a proportion of 97.2% don't. And 148 agencies with a proportion of 83.1% have photos of third attractive places in websites and 30 agencies with a proportion of 16.9 don't have. 9 agencies with a proportion of 5.1% provide map information and pictures of their attractive places in their websites, 169 agencies with a proportion of 94.9% don't.

Table 3: Evaluation Criteria for Websites (Offerings - Information of Attractive Places).

<i>Information of Attractive Places</i>		Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Written information	Yes	174	97.8
	No	4	2.2
Visual information (Video)	Yes	5	2.8
	No	173	97.2
Visual information (Photograph)	Yes	148	83.1
	No	30	16.9
Visual information (Map)	Yes	9	5.1
	No	169	94.9
Total		178	100

While almost all of the websites of agencies provide written information and photos about their attractive places, the majority is inadequate about providing visuals such as video and map information.

In the third group, there are information criteria about the products and services of the agencies. While 162 agencies with a proportion of 91.0% have information about their products and services in their website, 16 agencies with a proportion of 9.0% don't. In addition, while 92 agencies with a proportion of 51.7% give information about the price of products and services, 86 agencies with a proportion of 48.3 don't. While the agencies sharing information about the products and services, most of them fail to give information about sharing price information.

Table 4: Evaluation Criteria for Websites (Offered Information – Product Information).

<i>Product Information</i>		Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Product Information	Yes	162	91.0
	No	16	9.0
Price of the Product	Yes	92	51.7
	No	86	48.3
Total		178	100

In the fourth group, there is information to contact with the visitors. While 10 agencies with a proportion of 5.6% have free customer phone, 168 agencies with a proportion of 94.4% don't. While 174 agencies with a proportion of 97.8% have contact with their visitors via e-mail, four agencies with a proportion of 2.2% have contact with the visitors via e-mail. While 40 agencies with a proportion of 22.5% have contact with their visitors in social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), 138 agencies with a proportion of 77.5% still don't use this method. Almost all agencies chose to have contact with their visitors via e-mail. Free counselling and sharing in social networks are not preferred by the majority.

Table 5: Evaluation Criteria for Websites (Offered Information – Contact Information).

<i>Contact Information</i>		Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Free Phone	Yes	10	5.6
	No	168	94.4
E-Posta	Yes	174	97.8
	No	4	2.2
Social Networks	Yes	40	22.5
	No	138	77.5
<i>Total</i>		<i>178</i>	<i>100</i>

There are four criteria in the group of "**Related Links**". Accordingly, while 4 agencies with a proportion of 2.2% share links to websites of airlines, 174 agencies with a proportion of 97.8 don't. While 59 agencies with a proportion of 33.1% give links to hotel enterprises in their websites, 119 agencies with a proportion of 66.9% don't. While 29 agencies with a proportion of 16.3% provide the links to all rental touristic vehicles actively, 149 agencies with a proportion of 83.7% don't. In addition, while 12 agencies with a proportion of 6.7% share links of road transport companies in their websites, 166 agencies with a proportion of 93.3% don't. The majority of the agencies share links to their suppliers, partners or other touristic enterprises in their websites.

Table 6: Evaluation Criteria for Websites (Related Links).

<i>Related Links</i>		Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Links to Airlines	Yes	4	2.2
	No	174	97.8
Links to Accommodation	Yes	59	33.1
	No	119	66.9
Links to Rental	Yes	29	16.3
	No	149	83.7
Road Links	Yes	12	6.7
	No	166	93.3
<i>Total</i>		<i>178</i>	<i>100</i>

There are three criteria in the group of "Online Reservation". While 69 agencies with a proportion of 38.8% make reservation in their websites, 109 agencies with a proportion of 61.2% don't. The agencies that make reservation in their websites also share their reservation forms. In addition, while 6 agencies that are subjected to assessment, with a proportion of 3.4% provide secure payment option in their websites, 172 agencies with a proportion of 96.6% don't.

Table 7: Evaluation Criteria for Websites (Online Reservation).

<u>Online Reservation</u>		Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Making Reservation	Yes	69	38.8
	No	109	61.2
Reservation form	Yes	69	38.8
	No	109	61.2
Secure payment	Yes	6	3.4
	No	172	96.6
Total		178	100

It can be said that the IATA member Group A travel agencies that operate in Istanbul use their websites to promote their products and services instead of selling and reservation.

When we look at the type of agencies that are included in the evaluation it has been concluded that 33 agencies with a proportion of 18.5% deal with hajj and umrah organizations, 124 agencies with a proportion of 69.7% organize trips aimed at holiday and recreation and 21 agencies with a proportion of 11.8% deal with both hajj & umrah and holiday & recreation organizations.

Table 8: Evaluation Criteria for Websites (Type of the Agency).

<u>Type of the Agency</u>	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Hajj Organization	33	18.5
Holiday Organisation	124	69.7
Hajj and Holiday Organizations	21	11.8
Total	178	100

While language option criteria is available in 15.2% of websites of the agencies dealing directly with hajj organizations, it is available in 53.2% of websites of the agencies dealing with holiday and recreation organizations. Only 4.7% of the websites of travel agencies dealing with both holiday and hajj organizations have the language option criteria. While price information criteria is available in 81.8% of websites of the agencies dealing directly with hajj organizations, it is available in 36.2% of websites of the agencies dealing with holiday and recreation organizations. Only 95.3% of the websites of the travel agencies dealing with both hajj and recreation organizations have price information. While reservation and reservation form criteria is available in 27.2% of the websites of the agencies dealing directly with hajj organizations, it is available in 41.9% of websites of the agencies dealing with holiday and recreation organizations. Only 33.3% of the websites of travel agencies dealing with both holiday and hajj organizations have the reservation and reservation form criteria.

Table 9: The Type of the Agency and Crosstabs Analysis of Some Criteria.

<i>Criteria</i>		Hjj - Umrah	Holiday- recreation	Hajj- Holiday
Language Option	Yes	5 (%15.2)	66 (%53.2)	1 (%4.7)
	No	28 (%84.8)	58 (%46.8)	20(%95.3)
Price Information	Yes	27 (%81.8)	45 (%36.2)	20(%95.3)
	No	6 (%18.2)	79 (%63.8)	1(%4.7)
Reservation	Yes	9 (%27.2)	52 (%41.9)	7(%33.3)
	No	24 (%72.8)	72 (%58.1)	14(%66.7)
Reservation Form	Yes	9 (%27.2)	52 (%41.9)	7(%33.3)
	No	24 (%72.8)	72 (%58.1)	14(66.7)

Conclusion

In this study, it is intended to determine the current situation and examine the websites of travel agencies according to certain criteria. Within the scope of this purpose, IATA member travel agencies in the category of group A travel agencies that operate in Istanbul have been evaluated. The following statement can be presented as the important findings of this study and it is the fact that 68 of 246 travel agencies which are the member of IATA and operate in Istanbul city have no website.

The majority of the travel agencies that have been evaluated don't have language option, don't have site plan and don't have search engine within the site. It can be said that the current websites of travel agencies are inadequate in terms of easiness of use. Language option, site plan and search engine within the site need to be widespread. A standardized location of these three parts in the website designs is quite important. For example, as many website designers do, that the part of language option is shown on the right upper corner of the web page with country flag or an abbreviation of the name of the country would be a great convenience for the visitors of website.

Travel agencies commonly share the information of their enterprises in their websites (Title information 99.4%, address information 98.3%, phone information 98.9% and activity information 97.2%). The sharing of these information clearly may increase confidence of the visitors in the agency. Confidence is of great importance for both the agencies as the seller and the visitors as the buyer. Mutual trust triggers the start of a long - term relationship. This increases determination, the lifetime of the agency extends and customer loyalty can be ensured (Aksoy, 2006: 82).

The travel agents share written and visual information about their products and services in their websites. While 97.8% of the agencies share written information, only photos have a high average among visuals (83.1%). Video sharing and map sharing are limited at the rate of 2.8% and 5.1% respectively. In general, sharing written information is at a good level. However, visuality is very important in tourism enterprises and especially in travel agencies. The fact that the services provided are abstract and they have no chance to be used or tried before purchasing give visuality prominence and make it almost mandatory.

The level of information availability about products and services in websites is 91.0%. However, the level of sharing the price of products and services is 51.7%. In other words, almost half of the agencies that have a websites don't share the price of their products and services with their visitors. But price is very important in terms of organizing the economic system, quality perception - making comparison and execution of marketing activities (Zengin and Sen, 2009: 76). Because of these reasons, the travel agencies need to share the price information of their products and servies in their websites.

Travel agents mostly prefers to communicate with their visitors and with tourists via e-mail (97.8%). only 5.6% of the agencies have a free counselling phone. The agencies haven't taken enough steps in the direction of sharing in social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Only 22.5% of the agencies provides services to the visitors in social networks. Yet, the number of registered members of social networks is about 700 million. The number of registered people in Turkey is about 30 million. Taking place in these environments in which large masses of people available is a big financial advantage for the promotions of travel agencies. Being quick, providing business prestige, reducing the cost of information transfer, delivering more attractive and rich contents to visitors are among the other advantages (Bozok, 2009: 154).

Additionally, agencies failed in their websites to share the links to other businesses that are inevitable in tourism and 2.2% of the agencies have links to airline transportation; 33.1% of the agencies have links to accommodation businesses; 16.3% of the agencies have links to businesses that provide rental vehicles and 6.7% the agencies road links transport businesses in their websites available to visitors. While logos or names of airline companies take place in almost all of the agencies, links are active at a very low rate such as 2.2%.

38% of the websites included in the analysis provide reservation opportunity for visitors. However, only 6 of 178 agencies, which is 3.4%, don't provide payment in wesites. Visitors can have information about products and services and compare the products in e-commerce sites. They can make reservation, buy or return if they are not satisfied the products and services they want. In todays marketing concept in which e-commerce has a very important place, the number of travel agencies that provide a secure shopping via websites is quite low.

Among IATA member group A agencies that operate in Istanbul, 18.5% of them organize hajj and umrah organizations; 69.7% organize holiday and recreation activities; and 11.8% of them organize both hajj and holiday activities.

Travel agencies are the basic enterprises of tourism sector in terms of their services and tasks. Some variables such as technological advances, that communication with consumer become mandatory, that rivals increase directed travel agencies in different perspectives. All these developments have made the use of internet and website significant. However, the condition to have a website is imposed for the agencies that applied for membership of the Union of International Airline transportation and the Union of Travel Agencies in Turkey. This provides flexibility for travel agencies on preparing website. So, travel agencies use website that are copies of each other and have no criteria and standard. The websites of

travel agencies were evaluated according to a certain criteria and the results were detailed in the last section.

The findings presented were discussed within the scope of certain limitations. The sampling and universe of the research were created benefiting from the website of TURSAB. The study was held based on IATA member group A agencies in the website of TURSAB between November 2014 and December 2014. Websites of travel agencies that begin to be available in the duration from the publication of the research are not included in the assessment.

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