HOTEL WEBSITE EVALUATION:
THE CASE OF ROMANIAN DESTINATIONS

Remus Christian MORARU

Doctoral School of Business Administration,Bucharest University of Economic Studies, e-mail moraru_remus@yahoo.com

Abstract   *The premises of this study starts from the fact that in today's highly digitized environment, the Romanian hotels need to keep up the pace and address the rising challenges of the travel industry. The study narrows its focus on the Romanian hotels websites by analyzing and assessing key elements of these. Results show that although website usage is widespread among Romanian hotels and that there are homogeneous features of the websites present among all analyzed hotels. However there are critical elements, such as a booking engine, missing by design from the hotels website highlighting that these are not yet handled as a standard key element of the Romanian hotel websites.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The fast paced evolution of digital technologies and growing popularity of online services in the hotel industry keeps the industry under pressure. As such one of the most challenged sectors within the travel industry, the hotel industry will face further technological and social challenges in the upcoming years. "Digital tourism means the use of an infocommunication tool, an IT solution that can help to meet the needs of tourists and improves the competitiveness of organizations and businesses in tourism." (Happ and Ivancsó-Horváth, 2018).

According to Buyers (2017) challenges such as finding and keeping valued customers or finding

more efficient ways of operations are risks that can hinder the positive outlooks of the hotel industry despite the projected growth of 5 to 6 percent throughout 2018. (Langford and Weissenberg, 2018) New technologies are also starting to shape the future of travel, yesterday's buzzwords such as artificial intelligence, internet of things, voice technology and automation, today are being heavily implemented and tested in the travel and hotel industry. (Moraru, 2018) Traditional hotel services are also being digitized by technologies such as automated check-in and check-out facilities, smart room-service ordering systems and Chabot services. (Beatson et al., 2007; Oh et al., 2013) Although experts agree that the hotel industry at a global level is facing a set of clearly defined

challenges, the current paper wishes to understand and evaluate the technological challenges more so the digital challenges of the hotel industry on a national level within the borders of Romania. It is clear that the importance of digitization within the hotel industry becomes a must and that hotels without a digital strategy will not survive in the upcoming years. The paper tries to evaluate the current state of the Romanian hotels website, their strength and their weaknesses and tries to come with potential suggestions.

2. THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF THE HOTELS WEBSITES

As a cornerstone of the hotels digital environment (Moraru, 2018) the hotels website serves as multipurpose platform where customers can obtain a set of information about the hotel and its surrounding. More importantly the hotels website serves as a two way communication platform where customers can also interact with the hotel and can undertake actions such as booking a room or a service provided by the hotel or other third parties. Many industry experts from digital marketing companies like hotellinksolutions.com or hoteliyo.com agree that a hotel website needs to respect a set of industry standard elements in order to bring the minimum customer satisfaction. In accordance with the specialized literature and industry standards this paper identifies a set of key features of a hotel website: mobile optimized, booking engine; payment gateway; hotel and facility information; communication; Surrounding Area Information; social proof and security.

To get an overview and give a firm understanding to the reader of each key element of the hotels website, the above mentioned features will be elaborated and further discussed:

a) Hotel and facility information provides information on a range of services and features a hotel can provide to its customer. Information such as:

- Room Information – sharing the number one asset what the hotel can offer it's guest is critical. The better and more elaborate the room information is the more it helps potential guest in their booking decision making.

- Facilities Information – It's crucial for hotels to understand the needs of their guest and to develop facilities accordingly, nevertheless it is just as crucial to communicate these facilities to the hotels clientele. Pointing out on the hotels website services such as Wi-Fi, restaurant, pool, gym, airport pick-up or room service further helps in the decision making process of the customer.

- Location Map – putting the hotel on the map is another small but yet important element of the digital strategy of the hotel, incorporating this map on the hotels website make it more easier for the guest to understand the exact location of the hotel, thus finding it easier when traveling or to make travel arrangement according to the hotels location.

- Pictures/Videos – are the first key element in the hotels website that invoke emotions in the hotels potential customer. According to Brian

Payea head of industry relations at TripAdvisor "Travelers are 150% more engaged on listings with 20+ photos, than those with only a few photos." (Payea, 2011). A good selection of photos showing the different room types and hotel grounds, facilities, lobby area and hotels near vicinity etc can be the difference between a converting and a non-converting hotel website.

b) Communication and more so fast communication is key in today's fast paced digital environment. Customers are accustomed that they receive information fast and that's no exception in the case of the hotels.

- Contact information – getting in touch with a hotel should be easy, as such the hotels website should contain information about the contact details. Also the more ways a hotel can be contacted (Skype, Messenger, etc.) the better, this allows the customer to reach out based on his preference and not getting out of his/her comfort zone unnecessarily.

- Newsletter – mostly used for marketing purposes however it can have an added value if the content shared represents additional value to the customers and this happens on a regular basis. As such hotels can efficiently communicate with their subscribers vie well-crafted newsletters that differ from the traditional marketing newsletter as the message is rather informative and offers valuable information to its readers. i.e announcing upcoming events in the area.

- Frequently asked questions (FAQ) – a FAQ section on the website has its practicalities amongst others it may reduce unnecessary workload on the reception.

c) Surrounding area information, allows customers to further understand the hotels and its surroundings and why they should book that particular hotel. The broader perspective it can give its customers the better overview the customer gets and ultimately being in the possession of decisive information.

- Description of the surrounding environment – is vital for a hotel website, according to a study conducted by Law and Cheung (2004) there are no differences among different hotel categories providing online information about a hotel's surrounding area. This leads to the conclusion "that hotels of all star categories should be able to provide adequate information about their nearby environment as it provides additional benefits for website users." (Moraru, 2018)

- Accessibility – as afore mentioned in regards to the map it's important to highlight accessibility information so guest can plan their trip in advance to the hotel. "Listing various options to get to the hotels, such as public transportation possibilities or suggested cabs and routes can help visitors to decide which options they might prefer." (Moraru, 2018);

d)   Surrounding Photos – Just as in the case of hotel images, images capturing the surrounding area of the hotel are extremely important, as they convey the surrounding ambiance and setting.

e)   Social proof reflects that the hotel is engaged with its customers through the social media platforms. This can happen in various ways depending on the level of involvement of the hotel.

- Testimonials and guest reviews – is one of the most common forms of social proof, customers are increasingly turning to social media websites and reputation management websites such as TripAdvisorTM to share experiences and express their feedback directly with the hotel or other consumers through electronic word of mouth (Akehurst, 2009).

- Direct feedback from customers – with the continuous evolution of the social media platforms, they shifted their attention towards communication, as such more and more customers turn to social media platforms as a primary means of communication. As such companies among them hotels realized that this is a great opportunity to gather direct feedback form their customers in an easy less formal way.

Mobile friendliness can't be emphasized enough as by 2018 the majority of the travel industry have adopted a mobile first philosophy.

- Mobile friendly website – nothing shows more emphasis on the importance of mobile websites than the Google search update from April 21, 2015, when they introduced mobile-friendliness as a ranking signal in their search results,

meaning that mobile friendliness is critical not just for a better user experience on mobile devices but for user acquisition as well trough Google; search results.

g)   Booking engine – the booking engine is a web based application which helps the hotels to receive reservations through their own website. "Electronic hotel distribution can make booking a hotel's services more efficient and responsive, as compared to the former approaches using the telephone or mail." (Carrol and Siguaw, 2003, p. 38). This statement has proven itself in various examples throughout time, thus arriving to the point where hotels without an online booking engine are risking underperforming compared to their counter parts integrating a booking engine on their website.

- Live rates and instant availability – Live rates and instant availability should be an inbuilt feature of the hotels online booking engine as trough this data can the hotel assure itself that he can serve its users request instantly on the website and to carry out the booking process.

- Payment Gateway – it is crucial to provide the users at the end of the booking flow a payment gateway that allows to process and secure payment, thus securing the booked room for the guest. Several payment gateways are provided by banks or other payment gateway providers such as Paypal that can be used to process payments with debit or credit cards of the customers.

- Security – when online transaction and personal data is involved security of the website plays a critical role. Accommodation providers need to secure their entire website including the booking page to ensure their users that the information exchanged via the website is in safe hands. To identify if a website is secured, guest can simply refer to the URL (Uniform Resource Locator) of the website. "If the website is not secured the URL will appear starts with http:// (Hypertext Transfer Protocol) only. On the other hand if the website or webpage is secured the URL (Uniform Resource Locator) starts with https://. Notice the difference, the little "s" after http means that an extra layer of SSL/TLS (Secure Sockets Layer) encryption has been added to secure the communication." (Moraru, 2018).

3. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this paper is to map out the Romanian hotels website trough content analysis in order to get a better overview on the overall state of the Romanian hotels digitization. In order to map out and identify the hotels websites in Romania, based on the 2016 Tripadvisor's traveler choice awards in Romania a sample of 98 accommodations regardless of their star category is analyzed. The accommodations are picked based on the top ten destinations highlighted on Tripadvisor, namely in alphabetic order: Bucharest, Brasov, Cluj-Napoca, Iasi, Oradea, Sinaia, Sighisoara, Sibiu, Timisoara and Tirgu Mures. The accommodations were chosen trough the Tripadvisor's traveler choice awards to help uncover

those destinations that are frequented by travelers as such a higher number of online engagement with the hotels website is more likely, also it is important to mention that per destination only the top ten accommodations have been analyzed. The accommodations are analyzed in 10 batches of ten, each group of ten belonging to a particular destination. Following the literature and industry standards, the paper sets out to identify the key elements of the analyzed hotels website. These elements are as follows: mobile optimized, booking engine; payment gateway; hotel and facility information; communication; Surrounding Area Information; social proof and security.

4. RESULTS

An in-depth analysis of the selected 98 hotels has been set up to map out and evaluate the key website elements. It was identified that the analyzed hotels have a clear pattern that outlines the before mentioned key elements of a hotels website. Out of the 98 analyzed hotels, 97 have a website, which was in line with the previous expectations, whereas the remaining one was under maintenance at the time of the research. However findings show varied results regarding the key features of the hotels websites. The results show that there are homogeneous features of the websites, such as room information and photos contact and address details, which were common at each hotel, however, critical features such as booking engine, mobile enabled website, security features (SSL encryption - Secure Sockets Layer)

or information about the accommodations surroundings have shown discrepancies.

Due to Google ranking factors making it a requirement for website to be mobile enabled, hotels who are not complying with this rule "will fall back in Google search ranking and, as such, they are prone to losing valuable traffic and business opportunities." (Moraru, 2018) Despite Google requirements and the consequences of not being mobile enabled 37% of the websites owned by the hotels do not comply with this expectation.

Further analysis reveals that nearly half, 42,8%, of the analyzed accommodations do not have a booking engine on their website. The results show that on city level Targu Mures (70%) leads the way in terms of hotels not featuring a booking engine on their website followed by Sinaia (60%), Brasov and Iasi (50%).

Fig. 1.. Usage of booking engines

Source: Author's own research

Another important finding is that although, also according do Google guidelines SSL encrypted websites are favored over the ones which are not SSL encrypted and thus gaining more traffic from the search results, 87% of the analyzed hotels fail

to comply. Beside out ruling possible security risks, by implementing an SSL encryption, hotels could further improve their search ranking and protect customer data.

Findings also show that 43% of the hotels are showing some kind of information about the hotels' surroundings and/or services. However in a large proportion of the cases the information shared about the hotels' surrounding was thin content, meaning little or superficial content with no detailing and no real added value compared to other publicly available sources of information.

Another key point where results show that the hotels have plenty to improve is social proof. Only 23% of the analyzed hotels had reviews displayed on their website and part of them was heavily moderated, showing mostly positive reviews compared to user feedbacks from Tripadvisor. This in turn can be taken as a lost opportunity for many hotels on many levels, as transparency and genuine communication and information helps improve overall the service quality and helps building trust. A 2014 Brightlocal.com survey shows that 88% of the users trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations, making it extremely useful for customers in the decision making process. (Moraru, 2018)

5. CONCLUSION

One of the main challenges of this paper is that the current specialized literature contains only a handful of relevant researches regarding the evolution of the hotels websites in Romania that could serve as a foundation for this topic. This

foundation can further help in the in-depth research of this research topic to accentuate our knowledge on how the hotels websites are evolving within the Romanian borders. Instead the paper starts from nearly a blank sheet in regards of the mapping and evaluation of the hotels own website, nevertheless, the topic offers a many opportunities to shape and consolidate a solid base for further researches.

There are a number of clear practical implications that this paper sheds light on, which the Romanian hotels can eventually benefit from, if the findings will be implemented into general practice. It is clear that although a heavy digitization is surrounding us there is a lot to do for hotels to keep up the pace and to overcome some of the major obstacles.

Finding also has shed light that future research in this domain is inevitable in order to gain more knowledge about the online environment of the Romanian hotel industry.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Akehust, G., (2009). User generated content: the use of blogs for tourism organizations and tourism consumers. *Service Business* 3(1), 51–61.

Beatson, A, Lee, N. and Coote, L. V., (2007). Self-Service Technology and the Service Encounter, *The Service Industries Journal*, 27 (1), 75-89.

Buyers, L., (2017). Major Issues Facing the Hospitality Industry in 2017, *Hospitality News & Events.* [online] Available at: https://impos. com. au/blog/hospitality-issues-2017/ [Accessed 08 Jan 2018]

Carroll. B. and Siguaw. J., (2003). The evolution of electronic distribution: Effects on hotels and intermediaries. *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 38-50.

Happ, É. and Ivancsó-Horváth, Z. (2018). Digital tourism is the challenge of future – a new approach to tourism. *Journal Knowledge Horizons-Economics,* 8 (4), 72-80.

Langford, G. and Weissenberg, A., (2018). Travel and hospitality industry outlook. *Deloitte*. [online] Available at: https://www2. deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/consumer-business/us-cb-2018-travel-hospitality-industry-outlook. pdf [Accessed 20 May 2018]

Law, R., Ho, D., and Cheung, C., (2004). A study of the functionality of hotel websites in mainland China and the United States. *Journal of the Academy of Business and Economics*, 3(1), 202-209.

Moraru, R.Ch (2018), Online social value in the hotels online environment, *Phd Thesis, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies,* Bucharest.

Payea, B., (2011). Top tips to maximize the impact of a hotel page on *TripAdvisor. [online]* Available at: https://www.tnooz.com/article/top-tips-to-maximize-the-impact-of-a-hotel-page-on-tripadvisor/