

Marketing Activity of Guesthouses and Other Hospitality Units from Harghita, Mures and Covasna Counties

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Abstract—Since the Internet as a communication and distribution channel left its experimental state it has changed the approach to marketing communication. Considering the rapid growth of Romania's tourism market, small tourism enterprises such as guesthouses also began to keep up with the newest marketing communication trends. We present two exploratory studies in order to have a general look on the way online marketing is used in the local tourism industry.

(1) Owners of hospitality units already have a competitive vision to some degree on adequate marketing strategies and using related tactics. In the first study, using an online questionnaire on a sample of $N=65$, we gathered data about the way hospitality units think about their marketing activity, the marketing tools they use, with an emphasis on online marketing tactics and tools.

(2) In the second study we emphasize the importance of the use of online marketing tools in influencing the customer's decisional process in the case of Harghita county guesthouses, especially the website as a central hub in communicating the service and the brand.

Keywords—commercial websites, marketing tactics, online marketing, Romania, tourism industry, strategy

I. INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION IN THE MARKETING MIX OF SMALL TOURISM ENTERPRISES

SINCE the Internet as a communication and distribution channel left its experimental state it has changed the approach to marketing communication. This new trend in marketing communication has a great impact on the way small businesses spend their marketing budgets [1], [2].

The information-intensive nature of the tourism industry suggests an important role for the Internet and web technology in the promotion and marketing of destinations and not only [3]. In a time of constant change small businesses which have some or most of their target segments online it's crucial to learn, to innovate and to adapt to the new trends in online marketing communication [4].

Regarding the concept of constant innovation Romania still has a long road to adapt to international trends in the tourism industry. According to Mazilu [5], the main reasons, compared with other central and Eastern European countries, Romania has a quite modest presence regarding the economic performances of the tourism industry. The main causes of this utterly modest presence are:

(a) the lack of a coherent and stable action program regarding the development of tourism and,

(b) the lack of funds for the investments for the development, the modification and the rehabilitation of the general and specific infrastructure, as a consequence of the slow and complicated process of privatization, the application of an improper taxation,

(c) the inexistence of facilities in the field of bank loans [5].

As one recent study concludes, the most important feature of tourism in many rural areas in Romania is the gap between the remarkable tourism potential of this extremely poor area and its capitalization [6].

According to the Master-Plan for the Development of National Tourism 2007-2026, published by the World Trade Organization in 2007, the national vision for development consists in transforming Romania into a quality tourism destination, based on its natural and cultural heritage, that would meet by 2013 the European Union's standards regarding the products and services provided, and the sustainable development from the environmental point of view for the tourism sector, at a higher rate than other tourism destinations in Europe [7].

In the case of a small business which is active in the field of tourism the need to choose properly the elements of the communication and promotion mix is even more important. For a small tourism enterprise, such as a guesthouse the online marketing mix can contain the following tools in order to achieve its ultimate marketing goals: website, navigation and search tools (in case the website contains a critical amount of information), ordering tools (in the case of a hospitality unit website a booking system), recommendations and suggestions, usability and testing, dynamic pricing, banner ads, text ads, sponsored links, outbound emails, viral marketing, e-coupons, affiliates, help desk, message boards, user ratings and reviews, reputation scoring and other tools or tactics which can be used for a building and implementing a coherent marketing strategy [4]. The customer decision making process in an online environment depends on the way information is processed by the customer. This decision making process is in most cases the function of the information available about a product or service [8]. The market of tourism services has the reputation of a very competitive one, however the demand is rapidly growing and almost every competitor can achieve its well

deserved place on the market [9].

Permission marketing is also becoming an important strategy in maintaining relationships with travelers via the Internet, for example via a website. Its growing importance can be seen in tourism marketing, specifically in the tourism industry [10], [11]. With an increase in industry use, the trend of implementing the technique of permission based marketing will intensify in the case of small tourism enterprises, such as guesthouses, motels and hotels also. A growing and a central role in the competition for acquiring new clients in the tourism industry has the website as a central channel in the communications mix and a hub in the information circulation.

II. NATURAL TOURISTIC RESOURCES OF THE REGION

Third of the region territory is covered by mountains with big forests hiding gold metal trophies of dears and wild pigs. Transylvania means in Latin language the country behind the forest.

Carpathian Mountains from Central Europe belonging Transylvania area is having volcanic peaks ranging from 2100 meters, peak Piertosu, from Calimani Mountains and 1800 meters peak Harghita Madaras in the mountains of Harghita. Apart from these chain in Transylvania Carpathian Mountains are folded mountains with metamorphic rocks whose peaks are between 1792 meters, peak Hasmasu Mare from Hasmas Mountains and 1104 meters peak Cetatii from Persan Mountains. Last but not least we find here the folded mountains of sedimentary rock whose peaks have a height of 1301 m peak close to Ciomatu Bodog Mountains.

The other third of territory is covered by heals that hides the biggest natural salt deposit from all over the world wide can feed all population for 300 years for now on. This resource are just the Salty Heal in Praid Harghita County covers on its 567 meters tall more than three billions of salt. The Praid Salt mine has a unique microclimate with constant temperatures during all year long between 14 and 16 Celsius.

Transylvanian Plateau, with altitude of 500-600 meters, consists of almost horizontal sedimentary layers, which accumulates methane gas, one of the main wealth of the country.

Plateau is divided into three divisions: Tarnavelor Plateau, south of Mures, with heights of 500-600 m east-west oriented, Transylvania Plain, north of the Mures, with hills about 500 m, with shale and clay-substrate as Siclod Biheci (1800 meters the highest hill in the Transylvanian Depression) Firtus, Sinoara.

The most important depressions from this area are Bistrita, Valeni de Munte, Praid, Horghiz, Homoroadelor are crossed by rivers with an medium volume of water. The most important rivers are Mures river which springs from Hasmasu Mare Mountain and cross Transylvanian region and after 803 km it flows into the Tisa river. The second river twin in springs with Mures river is Olt river that flows after 615 km into the south flows into the Danube river. Other rivers from the Transylvanian area are Tirnava Mare and Tarnava Mica, Niraj and Gurghiu and many others with small length but rich

in trout.

The most important lakes are natural lakes, Lacul Sfanta Ana (Holy Anna) and Lacul Ursu (Bear Lake). Sovata Bear Lake combines the resources of water with salt in the place.

Lacul Ursu from Sovata combines the water resources with salt resources having a specific heliotherm effect. With of 300 grams of salt per water liter, water gets covered with a fine linen tape of fresh water to ensure that lake surface temperatures from 25o to rise inversely with the depth for which up to 1.8 meters deep water temperatures increase over 38 o .

Also we have to remind about the artificial lakes Zau de Campie and Saulia populated with large amounts of fishes, carp and perch being the most predominant species.

Transylvanian area has numerous mineral water springs that gives over 6 billion liters daily. Only 8% of these waters are captured and bottled in centers, like Borsec Sancreieni, Stancenii Tusnad and others.

The last third of territory covered by plains which hides the purest natural gases from all over the world 99.96 pure.

The wild life of Transylvania Area could be split into 3 levels

- The mountain level which contain various animal species including: carpathin deer (*Cervus elaphus carpathicus*), brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) lynx (*Lynx*) marten (*Martes*) wild cat (*Felis silvestris*) squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) boar (*Sus scrofa*) wolf (*Canis lupus*) eagle owl (*Bubo bubo*)
- The hill and plateau level where can be found animals like: rabbits (*Lepus europaeus*), weasel (*Mustella nivalis*) hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) chaffinch (*Fringilla*)
- The vegetation of the alpin level includes greenlands herbage and bushes dwarf. At altitudes under 2000 meters vegetation contents primary and secondary grasslands mixed with grass (*Agrostis rupestris*) rocks and juniper (*Juniperus sibirica*).

Hills and plateau vegetation contains hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), sessile (*Quercus cerris*) shrubs as hazel (*Corylus avellana*), briar (*Rosa canina*), oak (*Quercus robur*) ashes, maples.

As specific for Transylvanian on a Romanian – Hungarian – german cohabitation the ancient daco-latin heritage is doubled by medieval castles and fortresses in combined styles.

Also on here we can found mineral water sources witch sometimes combined with salt gives the flavor of SPA development.

Based on the salt and natural water sources from Transylvania ancient time many places where used as Spas. At the moment one of the most important Spa in the region is Sovata Spa from Mures County whose medical treatments bases are gynecologic effects. For the second place are competing Covasna and Tusnad specialized in the medical treatment bases and effects.

III. THE WEBSITE AS A CENTRAL ELEMENT IN THE ONLINE MARKETING MIX OF SMALL TOURISM BUSINESSES

Since the dawn of the Internet Era websites have always been considered as having a central role in the online communication process [12].

Websites act as proper channels for online marketing communication when their main functions are well established and exploited. Various frameworks describe the functions of commercial websites [1] but the framework we use to present the main functions is the model of Rayport & Jaworsky [13] which classifies websites functions in seven items, with a complementary 8th item. These 7C, plus the 8th complementary C are the following:

1. *Context*: refers to the arrangement, the layout and the design of the website
2. *Content*: refers to the text-based, picture, audio and video content of the website
3. *Community*: refers to the possibility of direct communication between website visitors. Its main manifestations are commenting options, product evaluation, experience sharing etc.
4. *Customization*: refers to the extent to which the website is designed according to each visitor. A simple example of this is to change the font size option, which will facilitate the elderly and visually impaired to access information.
5. *Communication*: refers to the way the websites communicate with visitors and vice versa (two-way feed-back)
6. *Connection*: refers to the extent the website is linked to other websites (ex. in the case of guesthouse websites the links to main touristic information pages or regional event pages).
7. *Commerce*: refers to the kinds of commercial transactions the website is capable of.
8. *Constant change* (8th C): is an additional item of the model which describes the continuous and systematic flux of new information added to the website content [13].

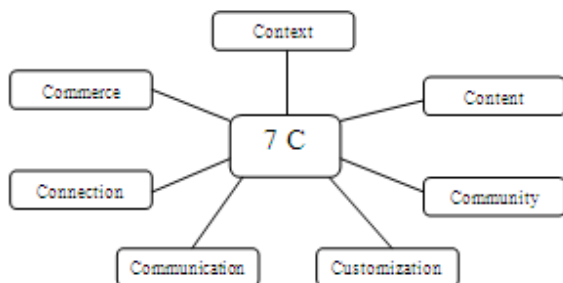


Fig. 1 - The seven C-s of commercial websites [13] page 147

On the other hand website functionality gains a crucial role. The functionality of a website refers to elements linked to the ease of usage and its interactive nature [14].

Another important function of a coherent website for a tourism business is the branding function. The website of a destination has become a crucial branding channel [15].

As we already stated, the Internet is a new medium of commerce which attracts different types of customers. Undoubtedly, online consumers seek better characteristics than those that merely satisfy them in order to entice them to return. One of the differentiating factors is building an online community of users [16]. This is why websites will become a proper milieu for consumers interested in a type of tourism service.

IV. STUDY ONE: A GENERAL ANALYSIS OF HOSPITALITY UNITS' MARKETING ACTIVITY FROM HARGHITA, MURES AND COVASNA COUNTIES (ROMANIA)

Our main purposes with this first study were:

1. To explore the way marketing executives of targeted hospitality units think about their marketing activity.
2. Whether marketing gains a strategic importance from the management's point of view.
3. To conduct an analysis on marketing tactics and tools used in the marketing mix of targeted hospitality units.

The counties of Harghita, Covasna and Mures (by some known as 'Szeklerland') is a historical region within Romania. It's also a mountainous region with a tradition in tourism services. Given the fact that the majority of the population is ethnic Hungarian, many Hungarian tourists' favorites summer/winter holiday destination are also these three counties. Therefore, it's a region with a great touristic potential on the long-term, however we still don't know much about the way hospitality units manage their marketing and branding activity. We also think that our data and the results will be useful not only to those professionals interested in this particular region but in other touristic regions within Romania, too.

A. Research methodology

In accordance with the main goals of this analysis in the first step it was determined the researched 'population' consisting of all traceable hospitality units having their activity in the three above mentioned counties.

A database containing n=476 hospitality units was created which contained the following data: name of the hospitality unit, postal address, e-mail address, telephone and fax number, town/village of residence and county. The database was populated with simple data mining techniques using four major online touristic catalogs and three additional official databases from Harghita, Covasna and Mures County Council websites.

In the first phase, the online questionnaire was sent to all e-mail addresses in the database with the explicit requirement to the recipients for helping us with our investigation.

In the second phase, the online questionnaire was submitted again to those (the majority) hospitality units which didn't answer to our first request. In this second phase we also offered an incentive for the respondents which contained a discount voucher for advertising at an important Romanian

online news-portal.

Using the data sheet we performed a simple quantitative analysis based on the following groups of questions:

1. A question related to the position of the person who filled the questionnaire within the organization and a question about who is responsible for marketing strategy and activities within the same organization.

2. Questions about the marketing budget, additional services, used languages in communication with the clients, number of active personnel, attitude towards future trends, nationality of tourists, units' memberships in different professional associations.

3. Marketing strategy and tools related questions with an emphasis on online tactics. By these variables we processed the information and in the following we will present it in frequency tables and diagrams.

Alongside presenting we will also comment on the results in order to get a comprehensive and clear understanding of them.

B. Presentation of the results

The totality of hospitality units in the three counties sum approximately p=500 from which we managed to approach n=476 units. This means that 476 emails were sent with the link of the questionnaire in the May 30th – June 30th 2010 period. N=65 units completed the online questionnaire in total which is 13.6% of the total of n=476.

(1) *Who filled in the questionnaire?* From the total of N=65 in most cases the questionnaire was filled by the Owner of the unit (44 times, 68%), the manager of the unit (9 times, 14%), the marketing specialist (4 times, 6%), common executive (3 times, 5%), other (1 time, 2%).

(2) *Who is responsible for marketing activities within the unit?* For marketing activities mostly the Owner or the Manager is responsible (47 times, 72%). The second in the row is the marketing manager (7 times, 11%). It's outsourced activity (2 times, 7%) which means that marketing activities are the responsibilities of other companies or specialists. Marketing activity related tasks are divided depending on the nature of the task at 7 units (11%).

Table I - Responsibility for marketing activities within the hospitality unit

Position	N	percent
Owner/Manager	47	72%
Marketing manager	7	11%
Outsourced activity	2	3%
Depends on the task	7	11%
Other	2	3%

(3) Expenditure on marketing activities

Most of the N=65 hospitality units spend an amount of between 501 and 1,500 New Romanian Lei on marketing related activity (24 units, 37%), 14 units spend between 2,501 and 10,000 RON yearly (22%), 13 units spend between 1,501

and 2,500 RON yearly (20%), 11 units spend at most 500 RON yearly (17%) and 3 units spend more than 10,000 RON for marketing activities yearly (5%).

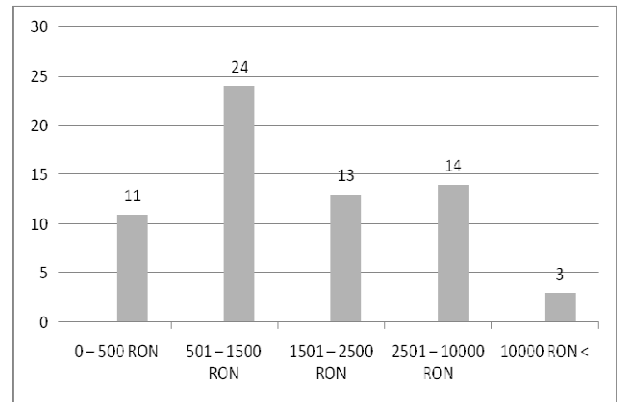


Fig. 2 - Yearly marketing budget of hospitality units (in unit numbers)

(4) The importance of widely used marketing tools

In five items responders were asked to rate on a 5 grade Likert scale the importance of some widely used marketing tools, such as discount offers, promotional catalogs, advertising in the media (TV, Radio), online marketing tools (newsletters, web-banners, contextual ads, affiliate links, online catalog membership, search engine optimization) and organizing events.

As we see online marketing tools are considered to be very important (71%) in the marketing activity of hospitality units from the sample. Event organization is also an interesting result: 35% of the respondents consider it quite important and 26% very important. Discount offers are considered to be very important by 37% and quite important by 46% of the respondents.

On the other hand, promotional catalogs and advertising in the media gain less importance in the opinion of many hospitality units from the sample.

(5) *The usage frequency of online marketing tools* - The usage of online marketing tools is already widespread. With the help of eight question-items with a rating possibility of a five-grade Likert scale (from 'never' to 'frequently') we gathered data about the frequency of online marketing tool usage. As we see frequently refreshed websites are specific to almost half of the respondent units (46%). Emailing is a commonly used online communication channel, 55% of the respondents use it frequently and only 12% never use it.

Newsletters are rarely used by 22% and moderately by 21% of the respondents. 31% don't use newsletters at all. Link exchange seems to be moderately used by 31%, never by 22%, rarely by 18%, quite frequently by 17% and frequently by 12%. Half (49%) of the respondent units frequently use online catalogs as online marketing tools, 26% use it quite frequently, 18% use it moderately. Search engine optimization (SEO) is an undervalued online marketing tool by many of the respondents: 35% doesn't use it at all and only 8% use it frequently. Web-banners are also underused: only 3% use them use it frequently and 38% never used it. Social media, as a new

online marketing tool is not widely recognized and 40% of the respondents never use it. On the other hand almost 20% use it quite frequently or frequently

Table II - Importance of widely used marketing tools

	Not important	Not that important	Moderately important	Quite important	Very important
Discount offers	3%	8%	6%	46%	37%
Promotional catalogs	11%	28%	37%	14%	11%
Advertising in media	3%	12%	17%	28%	40%
Online marketing tools	2%	6%	9%	12%	71%
Organizing events	8%	15%	15%	35%	26%

Table III - Usage of online marketing tools (in %)

	Never	Rarely	Moderately	Quite frequently	Frequently
Website (regularly refreshed)	5%	6%	12%	31%	46%
E-mailing	12%	11%	13%	9%	55%
Newsletters	31%	22%	21%	11%	15%
Link exchange	22%	18%	31%	17%	12%
Presence in online catalogs	5%	2%	18%	26%	49%
Search engine optimization	35%	17%	26%	14%	8%
Web-banners	38%	31%	17%	11%	3%
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, iWiW)	40%	23%	18%	14%	5%

(6) The role of online marketing in the future marketing activity of hospitality units.

We also addressed a question about the role of online marketing tools in the future marketing activity of the respondents. We found that 51% of the respondents (33 units) think online marketing tools will have an increasing role in their marketing activity in the following 3 years. 32% (1/3rd) think that online marketing tools will have a rapidly increasing role in their marketing activity in the following 3 years.

Only 5% (3 units) said that the role of online marketing tools in their future marketing activity will rapidly decrease.

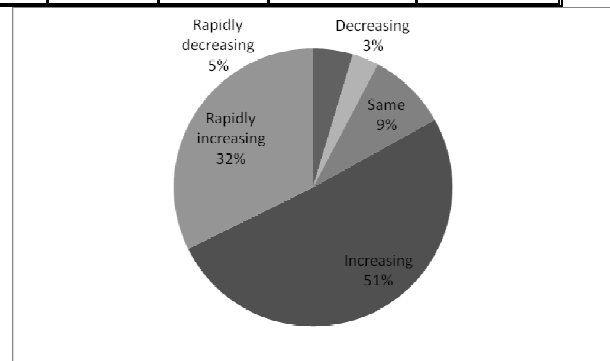


Fig. 3 - The role of online marketing in the future marketing activity of hospitality units

C. Main conclusions and further research directions

Since our study is a simple attempt to conduct an introductory analysis in order to set new and more specific goals for further research, we consider our attempt a success.

Harghita, Mureş and Covasna county hospitality units in addition to classical marketing tools (such as ATL and BTL advertising, event organization) already use some online marketing tools and most of them are aware about the importance of online presence in terms of generating leads and future clients.

In interactivity we observed a lack of imagination and recognition of the importance of interactive communication.

Search engine optimization is still a very new online marketing tool for most of hospitality units and in most cases there isn't any effort invested in it.

As one further research direction we would set the exploration of how hospitality unit owners measure, quantify consumer satisfaction and how do they use data in service innovation.

Another interesting research direction would be the alternatives by what interactivity can be included in a hospitality unit's communications mix.

V. STUDY TWO: AN INTRODUCTORY ANALYSIS OF SOME GUESTHOUSES' WEBSITES AND THEIR ROLE IN THEIR ONLINE MARKETING MIX

Our main purposes with the second study were to:

1. Explore the way websites are being used by guesthouses in the administrative region of the county of Harghita, Romania.

2. To conduct an introductory analysis on the role of these websites in the online marketing mix (and the marketing mix) of researched guesthouses.

By 'guesthouse' we understand a house larger than a 'bed & breakfast' accommodation, typically offering breakfast included in room rate. Guest houses range from low-budget rooms to luxury apartments, and tend to be like small hotels in larger cities. They are rated from one to four stars (one to five diamonds in UK) on the basis of the level of cleanliness, quality of food, hospitality, and service, and whether or not they offer attached bathrooms [18].

Most Romanian guesthouses already have websites with marketing functions included to some degree. It's highly likely that in most cases basic marketing features present on guesthouse websites were included by the design firm by default, therefore these tools were not requested by the guesthouse. This means that the attribution of importance to online marketing strategy is not typical in the case of guesthouse owners.

A. Research methodology and presentation of the results

In accordance with the main goals of this introductory analysis the inventory of all guesthouses in Harghita county was obtained from the official online portal of the Council of Harghita County – www.cchr.ro [19].

The inventory of guesthouses and other touristic facilities

provided us with the necessary data for creating a datasheet with the names and website URL-s of guesthouses only. Using the datasheet we performed a simple quantitative analysis using the following main variables:

- (1) Whether the guesthouse owns a domain name for its website - nominal variable

- (2) Whether the website of the guesthouse is self made or outsourced (procured) – nominal variable

- (3) Number of languages used on the website – nominal variable

- (4) Website content analysis: use of multimedia features in the marketing communication process – nominal variable

- (5) Use of affiliate marketing – nominal variable

- (6) Use of interactivity features – in most cases presence of guest books as two-way online communication tools – nominal variable

- (7) Contact information accuracy and visibility – nominal variable

- (8) Presence in online tourism-, agro tourism catalogs – nominal variable

- (9) Presence of SEO activity by measuring the number of backlinks – scale variable

By these variables we processed the information and in the following we will present it in frequency tables and diagrams. Alongside presenting we will also comment on the results in order to get a comprehensive and clear understanding of them. N=133 guesthouses were selected from the CCHR Inventory whereof N(a)=70 guesthouses have their own websites (52%). The other guesthouses (N(b)=63) or own memberships in different online tourism catalogues with a lone page dedicated to each of them, or they don't have websites as online marketing communication platforms.

Website ownership is in most cases the evidence that guesthouse managers are aware of the importance of the Internet as a marketing channel and the importance of a webpage as a branding tool.

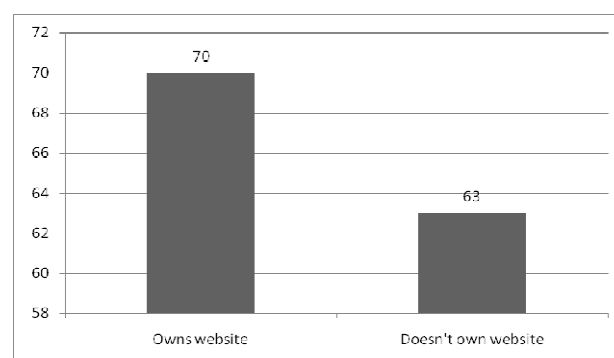


Fig. 4 - Harghita County guesthouses and website ownership

- (1) From our group of N(a)=70 guesthouses with a directly visible online presence (website ownership) 60 guesthouses (85.7%) have their own domain name for their website and the remaining 10 guesthouses (14.3%) don't. Domain name ownership is in most cases the evidence that guesthouse

managers are aware of the importance of the domain name as a part of the branding process and an important instrument in the communication of the brand.

(2) From our group of N(a)=70 guesthouses with a directly visible online presence (website ownership) 65 guesthouses (92.8%) own a website created by website design companies and the remaining 5 guesthouses (7.2%) have 'self made' websites (in most cases blog-like engines and interfaces).

The outsourcing of website creation is evidence that guesthouse managers realize the importance of websites as online marketing communication tools and invest money and time into them.

(3) Most of the N(a)=70 guesthouses with a directly visible online presence (website ownership) have two, three (or more) languages available (56 websites, 80%). All the other 20% (14 guesthouses) represent those websites which contain information only in Hungarian.

Table IV - Website content and available languages

	No. of websites	Percent
website content in more than one language	56	80%
single language website content	14	20%

There are 12 websites in 4 languages, in most cases Romanian/Hungarian/English/German, but there are 2 websites available in Dutch, too.

(4) A quick website content analysis concluded that the use of multimedia features in the marketing communication process is widely used. 17 websites (24.2%) don't have their own pictures and/or other multimedia material posted. On these websites pictures and other graphic content are used for esthetical purposes only.

The majority of the websites (n=53, 75.8%) have their own pictures and other graphic content, in some cases embedded videos also. Websites that along the reliable text-based information contain pictures and other material, have a better functionality and a greater impact on consumer's future decision.

(5) Most of the N(a)=70 guesthouses with a directly visible online presence (website ownership) don't use affiliate marketing on their websites.

Table V - Usage of affiliate marketing tools

	No. of websites	Percent
Using affiliate marketing tools	10	14.3%
Not using affiliate marketing tools	60	85.7%

By affiliate marketing we understand link- and banner-exchange with other (complementary) services like tourism guides, event pages. 60 websites (85.7%) don't use affiliate

marketing tools and the remaining 10 websites (14.3%) do use some of the widely used affiliate marketing tools.

Affiliate marketing is one efficient way of promoting one's website. An another advantage of affiliate marketing is the positive way link-exchange affects search-engine optimization.

(6) The analysis of the use of interactivity features within guesthouse websites shows us that in most cases the presence of guest books as two-way online communication tools is the only interactivity feature in the online communications mix.

By interactivity we understand the possibility of website visitors to comment, or to rate the content presented. From the total of N(a)=70 guesthouses with a directly visible online presence (website ownership) n=26 (37.1%) have guest books and the remaining 44 (62.8%) do not have interactivity tools.

One website has a Facebook-fanpage embedded which is by far the most interactive website in the sample.

(7) One of the most important features on a guesthouse website is the contact information page. Its accuracy and good visibility are basic factors on building an online communication strategy based on trust and reliability. 80% (56 websites) of the total of N(a)=70 guesthouses with a directly visible online presence (website ownership) have an accurate contact information page by what we understand the presence of valid email address(es), telephone numbers, postal addresses and names of contact persons (optional). The remaining 20% (n=14) of the websites have an inaccurate contact info page.

(8) From our group of N(a)=70 guesthouses with a directly visible online presence (website ownership) n=64 (91.4%) are present in online tourism-, agro tourism catalogs. The remaining n=6 websites (8.6%) are not present in online tourism-, agro tourism catalogs. The presence of guesthouse websites in above mentioned catalogs is crucial in generating valuable website traffic.

(9) The presence of SEO activity by measuring the number of back links was performed by iWebTool's Back link Checker¹. By back links we understand incoming links to a website [17]. The number of back links is directly proportional with the online notoriety of a website. Also back links are responsible for obtaining better results in search engines.

Table VI - Number of back links pointing to guesthouse websites on the WWW

	No. of websites	Percent
more than 100,000 back links	3	4.2%
between 10,000 and 100,000 back links	4	5.8%
between 1,000 and 10,000 back links	14	20%
less than 1,000 back links	49	70%

Only n=3 websites (4.2%) have more than 100,000 back

¹ Available online at http://www.iwebtool.com/backlink_checker

links. Another $n=4$ websites (5.8%) have between 10,000 and 100,000 back links and $n=14$ websites (20%) have between 1,000 and 10,000. The remaining $n=49$ websites (70%) have less than 1000 back links which tells us that Search Engine Optimization is not a widely used online marketing and optimizing tool.

B. Main conclusions and further research directions

Since our study is a simple attempt to conduct an introductory analysis in order to set new and more specific goals for further research, we consider our attempt a success.

Harghita County guesthouses already use some online marketing tools and most of them are aware about the importance of online presence in terms of generating leads and future clients. More than 2/3 of guesthouses with a directly visible online presence (website ownership) perceive their own domain name as a way to make brand building efforts more effective.

Almost every guesthouse has a website developed by an agency which means that guesthouse managers perceive the Internet as a separate and special marketing communication channel. Most of the guesthouses find particularly important to communicate their services in more than 2 or 3 languages.

The general use of multimedia and interactivity features tells us that this channel is beginning to gain a greater importance in the mix. In interactivity we observed a lack of imagination and recognition of the importance of interactive communication.

Search Engine Optimization is still a very new online marketing tool for most of the guesthouses and in most cases there isn't any effort invested in it.

As one further research direction we would set the exploration of the way guesthouse owners/managers think about their online marketing mix and the way they evaluate their own online advertising campaigns. Another interesting research direction would be the alternatives by what interactivity can be included in a guesthouse's communications mix.

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