

## **STUDY REGARDING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BIHOR COUNTY COMPANIES' WEBSITES**

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**Abstract:** Number of Internet users who access the websites of different companies to find information and to buy online is growing. In these conditions, the companies to be able to communicate the informational message, promotional message or intention to initiate trading exchange, must be present in the virtual environment. The company's website can be used as a tool in marketing strategy, as a means of developing identity or increasing the brand exposure, as a support for communication with potential clients or as a means for market research. The website, as an interface between customers and company, must answer as many questions as possible and it must trigger the impulse that motivates consumers to return and buy products/services from the company. This paper contains a study of the websites belonging to 330 companies from the Bihor County. In the study conducted were considered companies in Bihor County that are present in the virtual environment through websites. The elements that have been analysed are the measure and the manner in which companies use the online environment to communicate their identity. The websites are analysed in terms of their design, in terms of the way it influences the experience in visualising the site and in terms of the design elements used to facilitate navigability, to encourage interaction between the visitor and the company, to prove credibility, accuracy and valability of the information and to demonstrate that the information is presented in an objective manner. We considered the following criteria for evaluation of sites: the presence of information about the organization such as general information, information about products and means of distribution, company location; the structure used to present the information on the website home page, the navigability elements, the elements to prove credibility, the quality level of the company products, the presence and percentage of graphics, applying the design principles, the presence of those elements that ensure interaction with the website visitors.

**Keywords:** website; virtual environment; design elements; design principles; marketing strategy

**JEL classification:** L81; C85

### **1. Introduction**

An increasing number of users of Internet use to search for information about products and services and to buying products or services. In these circumstances companies should be present in the online environment to initiate a dialogue with them. Must be present in the online environment to be able to communicate the informational message, promotional message or intention to initiate commercial exchange (Gay, Charlesworth and Esen, 2009).

Companies use websites for different purposes: to communicate information about the company, to promote products or services, to provide potential customers the opportunity to purchase these products online, to interact with them (Charlesworth, 2009). Website of a company ensure its constant presence and can be used as a tool in marketing strategy, can be used as a means of developing identity and increase brand exposure, as support for relationships with potential buyers or as a means of achieving market research (Armstrong and Kotler 2010). But for the website to fulfill the purpose for which it was made must give due consideration to certain aspects.

In the study conducted we watched those elements of websites, which in combination, can lead to obtaining a successful website (McClurg-Genevese, 2005). Website design must consider customer requirements. Some interactive features of the website, such as ease of navigation, ease of product selection they can attract customers (McClurg-Genevese, 2005)). But the elements that confer trust, privacy, security are decisive for triggering the buying process.

## **2. Research methodology**

The websites analyzed in the research conducted were selected from a database composed at national level ([www.listafirme.ro](http://www.listafirme.ro), accessed september, 2012). The database used has a search engine that allows searches based on criteria such as name, location and domain, advanced searches based on the number of employees, turnover, profit, filtering of results based on: phone number or fax, e-mail, website, etc.

The websites selection had three stages:

- Selecting companies from the Bihor county. Grouping companies by type of activity carried out in three categories: manufacturing industry, trade and services. Share of companies by type of activity carried out is presented in Table1

**Table 1:** Percentage of firms according to the type of activity carried

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Manufacturing industry	10,98%
Commerce	10,04%
Services	78,98%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

- Selecting those companies from the Bihor county that have websites. The result is a number of 1553 companies with websites.
- Selecting websites for analysis. 330 websites were selected, taking into account the percentages in Table 1. We obtained the situation presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The number of company websites, selected depending on the type of company activity

Activity	Number of websites	Percent
Manufacturing industry	33	10%
Commerce	33	10%
Services	264	80%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>100%</b>

### 3. Website evaluation criteria

We considered the following criteria for evaluation of sites:

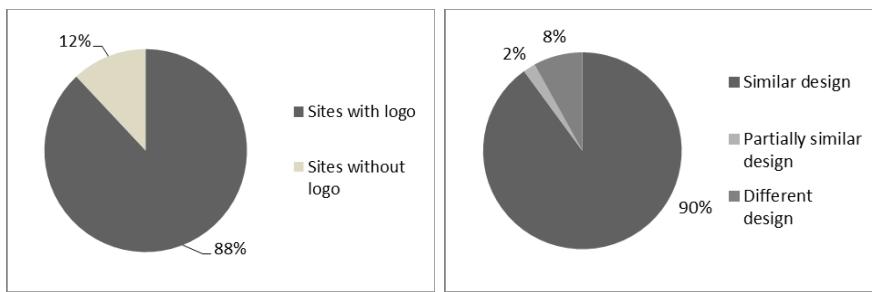
1. The presence of the following types of information about the organization: general information, information about products and means of distribution, company location.
2. The structure used to present the information on the website home page: framing, horizontal or vertical page segmentation, presence of the scroll bar, proportion between text and image/animation.
3. The navigability elements: page number, existence of an internal search engine, whose importance is strongly connected to the complexity of the site, options to display the text in multiple languages.
4. Elements that demonstrate credibility, the quality level of the company products. This category includes those elements that prove the existence and competence of the company and its employees in the domain activity: portfolio, partners, independent quality certification, company history, organisational chart and resumes of the most important employees
5. The presence and percentage of graphics: images, video and animations. The right proportion between text and visual elements has a great influence on the general aspect of the web page (Williams and Tollet 2002), the purpose of the latter being to animate the „dead zones” in the page or to create contrast.
6. Colour scheme and font, as well as applying the design principles: alignment, proximity, repetition and contrast (Fong-Gong and Cheih-Ying, 2009). All these design concepts refer to elements in a web page and how they interact in order to create a pleasing overall appearance. (Beaird, 2011).
7. The presence of those elements that ensure interaction with the website visitors: newsletter, comment or message section incorporated in the website, online purchase option, instant messaging IDs, blogs, social networking contact options, useful links to websites with additional information, product advertising outside the website domain, through social networks, public websites, entertainment or informative websites, generating the economic exchange or any other type of exchange that is included in the company activity domain or which is complementary to it.

#### 4. Data analysis and interpretation

The data related to the analysed websites were separated into two groups (general information and design related information) and were organised into an Excel table. After data analysis we concluded that:

1. Regarding the appearance (the identity elements, colour scheme, layout type, usage of photography, video or other graphic elements, scroll bar and the percentage between text and graphics were all taken into consideration):

- A percent of 12% of the companies did not have identity elements such as logos and taglines. In the case of the other, the majority of them have used de logo design to generate a consistent general appearance, by copying and repeating the colour scheme, the font and the font graphics (Figure 1).
- Just 2% websites have a partially similar design to their logo, while 8% other websites have a design that is completely different, thus isolating the logo from the other site elements (Figure 1). As a conclusion, there still are companies that do not use the basic tools to identify themselves in front of the public. The logos are placed on the page by following the convention which consists of placing important site elements: logo, menu and other navigability assistance tools on the top part of the page, in the first frame.



**Figure 1:** The usage of the basic identity elements

- As far as the website domain names are concerned, two different tendencies have been noticed: usage of the company registered name as website domain name (71% of the companies) and of a descriptive name, different from the official one.
- In the case of the home page structure, the most popular layouts are the ones with vertical framing, which help organise the information in columns. From the total number of websites, 91% use this type of structure, 7% have cut the pages on horizontal frames and 2% are unstructured. Sectioning the pages in frames is a simple way to structure the pieces of information depending on the group they belong to, and to help the visitors in finding the information they are looking for. Sectioning the page in a number of frames higher than two columns creates a vague appearance; the visitors are overwhelmed by the quantity of information they are being offered and thus they don't succeed in separating the important information from the additional one, destined to provide further explanation and detail concerning the products. In this case most of the websites use two columns, the percentage of the websites that have one and three columns respectively, being equal.

- The position of the web page on the screen is of three types: centered, on the left and on the right of the screen. The most used of the three is the centered position (76% of the websites) because this gives the best visibility to the content.
- The scroll bar is present on the home page in 30% of the cases. These companies want to assist the visitors by providing as many pieces of information as possible from the first click. This decision is highly debated: on one side the Internet users don't have to make an effort to search for information inside the site, while on the other side the home page becomes crowded, thus making it difficult for the visitors to track down the information they need. The utility of the scroll bar on the home page, from the visitors perspective, depends on the type of site. News websites, portals and online shops have a good justification in the large amount of information. Meanwhile the private companies websites, especially the ones with a presentation purpose, provide a much smaller amount of information, that allows them to split it on more web pages, to encourage the exploratory side of the visitors.
- As far as the type of content found on the home page is concerned, in 41% of the cases the main content is text, in 32% of the cases the proportion between text and images is balanced and in 27% on the cases the main content are images or other types of graphics. The websites that have a high amount of text are also the ones that are missing visual and audio elements. By using text and visual elements simultaneously and on the same page, the contrast that breaks the flatness given by the solely use of text is given. The most frequently found is photography (67% of the websites), followed by animation (43% of the websites), video (12% of the websites) and audio (6% of the websites). Thereby there are two types of websites to be observed: those which use only text and those which use all forms of content. The latter exposes the companies to the danger of promoting themselves through a „noisy” design.
- The general quality level of the visual appearance is measured with the help of the following elements: alignment, repetition, contrast and proximity. The alignment refers to the position of the elements on the page but also to the position of these elements towards each other. Most websites have the alignment of the text on the left while the images are centered. 18% of them have a correct alignment given by the use of frames and of graphics to create the right position on the page for the content. 22% of the websites have problems regarding alignment, in a way that some of them are inconsistent while others are misaligned.
- Most of the websites use colours as the main means of creating contrast (71% of the websites), some of these by mixing colour with graphics (32% of the websites). Texture and spacing are used in few cases, and 20% of all the websites do not use the contrast principle in their design. As far as repetition is concerned, the situation presents itself in a better light. 69% of the websites have distinctive layout, used for all the site pages.

2. Concerning the technical elements there were taken into consideration those elements which are considered to be of direct and large influence on the visitors' experience on the websites: the presence of meta-tags, the presence of dynamic content and the loading speed on the website:

- A percent of 20% of the analysed websites do not use meta-tags. A percent of 71% use them correctly, while 9% have an insufficient number of keywords (less than 10) to describe the content of the websites.
- The loading speed is one of the first elements that gets into contact with the visitors, giving them the opportunity to get a first impression on the website, from the point of view of the time it takes for the site to load. In most of the cases the loading speed is satisfactory.

3. Concerning the typography elements (there were taken into consideration those elements that have a considerable influence on the ease with which the visitors read the content on the pages: type of font, size, diacritics, text contrast, typing errors):

- A percent of 10% of the websites have typing errors, many of them on the home page.
- The diacritics are used only in 4% of the cases.
- The most frequently used fonts are the standard ones; italic fonts are used in a very few cases, only for titles.
- The contrast on the page is accomplished through alternating the size and styles of the fonts. In many cases different font sizes are combined with different styles, in order to emphasize the text areas or key words in a paragraph. The result is counterproductive for the visitors, whose attention is taken away from the message by the appearance of the text.

4. Concerning the information content (there were taken into consideration the accuracy and validity of the information, the credibility and the objectivity):

- From the objectivity point of view, the analysis of the content followed its purpose: to inform and to advertise. Most of the websites use both types of content, but depending on the case, it is either the informative or the advertising side that prevails. 24% of the websites use equally informative and advertising content.
- The objective nature of the information can be reinforced by proving its accuracy through independent sources: clients or organisations specialised in independent evaluation. The existence of such elements was followed: references, links leading to independent evaluation websites and, insofar as the company activity allows it, free samples of the products. Despite the importance these elements have in persuading the consumers to purchase, only 30% of the websites have included them in their web pages. 48% of these websites have on display on their pages lists with important clients, messages from clients concerning the product experiences or guestbooks as references. 54% of these post links to redirect visitors to independent, specialised evaluation websites, such as websites that rate service quality of tourism companies, and 6% websites offer the visitors the possibility to test the products, taking into consideration that in each case the nature of the products imposes limitations on this marketing instrument.
- The validity criterion takes into consideration the frequency with which the information on the websites is being updated. The difference between the online product description and the real one affects consumer perception on

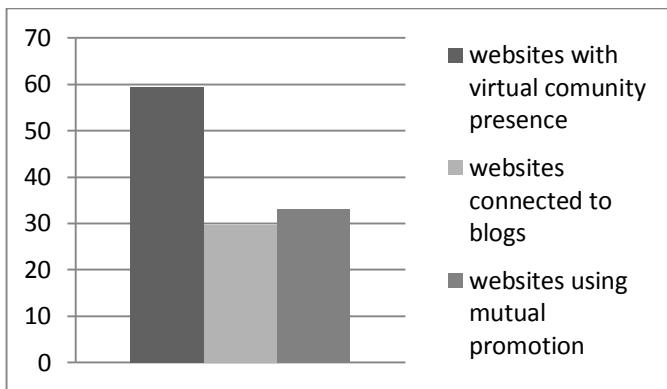
- the companies professional level and it diminishes their trust towards information given through the virtual environment. From the total number of companies, only 29% have regularly updated their websites. Most of the modifications are found in the promotional offers section, followed by the news and articles section, portfolio pages and financial information section.
- The credibility elements have the goal to prove the existence and competence of a company in its field. Offering evidence to support the actual existence of the company headquarters, its branches, workstations or points of sale increases consumer trust and helps them locate the geographic area of the company. 32% of the websites offer the visitors location maps. The competence is proven with photographs, quality certificates, through brand association with clients, business partners, other products and sponsored events, through company history or its positive financial results. Most of the websites have posted photographs (of the offices, products or the manufacturing process, as well as others), 22% websites display quality certificates or operating permits, 29% websites have at least lists with the most important business partners and clients, 14% site have resumes of their most important employees while a lot less offer the company history and financial information.

#### 5. Concerning the interaction and transaction elements:

- A percent of 72% of the websites have this type of elements, and from this group, 28% were classified into this category only because of the presence of contact forms, the most basic tools for online interaction.
- A percent of 29% of the websites allow online commercial exchange by posting links to online shops, such as companies trading in commerce or some services companies, by placing online orders, by allowing online appointments or by initiating consultancy dialogue with the clients, as it is the case with consultancy firms.
- A percent of 8% of the websites redirect visitors to virtual shops, while 14% of them give updates through newsletters and blogs and 16% of the websites communicate with public virtual spaces such as social networks and instant messaging programs. The latter category allows the exchange of information between the companies and users and it creates a community of visitors that have showed a strong interest in the company.

#### 6. Concerning the advertisement elements (there were taken into consideration advertisements through websites or virtual community programs, connections between the website and blogs with information regarding the companies economic field and link exchange between companies that belong to complementary fields), as shown in Figure 2:

- A percent of 18% of the websites have a virtual community presence
- A percent of 9% of the website are connected to blogs
- A percent of 10% of the websites made arrangements with other companies in order to mutually promote themselves through link exchange. This marketing tool uses banners placed on the right side or at the bottom of the home page, their objective being to redirect visitors interested in a certain company or a type of service to the websites of other companies or products that are complementary to the former.



**Figure 2:** The usage of advertisement elements

## 5. Conclusions

As far as the appearance is concerned, in specialised works the idea of using a traditional layout versus an alternative layout, with an original structure, is highly debated (Skal, 2009), (Scott, 2010). On one side it is advisable to follow design conventions that Internet visitors are accustomed to, while some studies show they are adaptable to new layout schemes, provided that these schemes are consistent throughout the site.

The conducted study shows that there is an approximately equal proportion between websites with modern graphics that neglect the interests of visitors as far as the information they seek is concerned and websites with basic graphics that contain relevant information for visitors. There are two trends to be observed in the site design: the utilitarian trend, which believes information content to be more important than the graphics, and the aesthetic trend of manipulating the way information is presented in elaborate graphical shapes. One of the explanations for this could be that target consumers are a guiding criterion in designing the site. Thus, if a company's target consumers are conservative in nature, it will choose the utilitarian trend, while if the target consumers are innovative the website will have distinct design.

The site, as an interface between customers and company, must answer to as many questions as possible and it must trigger the impulse that motivates consumers to return and buy products/services from the company. The low number of websites that have interaction elements (only a half, given the importance of interaction with the public in the virtual environment, and excluding those websites that use only with basic contact forms) can be explained through the perpetuation of the idea that only firms in certain fields (trade companies – virtual shops; firms with a high frequency of new product release - newsletters) can use these tools.

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