

THE USE OF THE ONLINE TOOLS FOR CUSTOMER RETENTION IN BIHOR COUNTY MOUNTAIN GUESTHOUSES

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Abstract: *In economic development of the Bihor County, its touristic potential plays an important role. A significant part of the before County touristic potential represented by the Apuseni mountains. In this area there is a high number of touristic guesthouses prepared to receive their guests. Online presence of these guesthouses is an important aspect, because a larger number of tourists are booking and paying online their stays, they are informing themselves online regarding the tourist destinations. In the conducted research we have analyzed the websites` offer of the touristic guesthouses in the Bihor County, situated in Apuseni Mountains area. We dealt with the online instruments used by touristic guesthouses in customer retention strategy. We have analyzed the measure in which those instruments are used on the accent made on each of the instrument categories mentioned in this study.*

Keywords: *marketing online; online tools; customer retention tools; loyal customers.*

JEL Classification: *C80; M21.*

1. Introduction

It is well-known that the tourism contributes to the economic development of a region. As a fact the touristic potential of a County is important and must be worthwhile. According to (Dodescu and Borma, 2017) Bihor County has a great and diversified touristic potential, (business, cultural, mountain, spa, etc.) covering a great area of the county.

The Apuseni Mountains, with their unique landscapes and unrivalled karst richness, Baile Felix and 1 Mai spa resorts, the cultural and historical heritage of Oradea city, are important points of attraction for tourists.

A significant part of the Bihor County touristic potential concerns the Apuseni Mountains. This is due to the fact that Apuseni Mountains are showing the following characteristics:

- They lay on a significant area of the county
- They are close to a dense modernized road network
- They are crossed by a rich network of forest roads and marked paths, thus being easily accessible
- Offer a great variety of landscaping
- Offer cultural and historical attractions
- Existing amenities give value to a lot of touristic objectives
- They are in the vicinity of the national borders thus being a point of attraction for foreign tourists in the neighbouring country
- Oradea airport makes them accessible to tourists from far away countries

- They are an attractive destination for rest, recreation, hiking, mountaineering, speleological tourism, agritourism, winter sports.

In this area one may find enough touristic guesthouses prepared to receive their guests.

It is well known the fact that an increasing number of customers are shopping from websites. Many of the touristic guesthouse customers are booking or paying online there stay or they are informing themselves regarding touristic destinations.

According to Bilgihan and Bujisic, for the case of online shopping the clients buying decisions are based on information (such as room images, product information, virtual tours, customer reviews) existed on the websites (Bilgihan and Bujisic, 2015). According to Ye, Law and Gu, in tourism industry bookings are influenced by the online reviews (Ye, Law and Gu, 2009).

The Internet have a major impact on all domains which involves marketing (Schibrowsky, Peltier and Nill, 2007). As a result of the explosive growth of the Internet, a large number of firms have integrated technology into their marketing and operations. Many firms are adopting a multichannel strategy. The impact of this strategy was high in field of services (Fernandez-Sabiote and Roman, 2012).

Increasing Internet popularity and the emergence of increasingly easy-to-use computer technologies have determined:

- Increasing the number of tourist boarding houses that have created their own websites
- Increasing of the websites which offers the possibility of online booking
- Increasing of the number of guesthouses' websites accessing prior to choosing the booking location
- Increasing the number of people booking online accommodation.

Thus, the understanding of online consumer behavior is important and so is the development of strategies for increasing the clients' loyalty for the website (Bilgihan and Bujisic, 2015).

2. The premises and research methodology

In this research we have analyzed 60 touristic guesthouses' websites in Bihor County situated in Apuseni mountains area. We focused on the tools which the guesthouses have used for customer retention.

According to Bruhn, customer retention can be achieved by satisfying the clients' needs using customer oriented offer, and also increasing the customer satisfaction with the service provider performance. Consumers compare their own perceptions after buying a product or service with their previous expectancies which today have before buying decision. This comparison may conduct towards the following situations: satisfaction, unsatisfaction or beyond expectancies (Bruhn, 2001; pp.111).

To increase clients' loyalties a multitude of instruments can be used. Bruhn classified these instruments as follows (Bruhn, 2001; pp.124-125):

- The category of tools focused on interaction
- The category of tools focused on satisfaction
- The category of tools aiming to prevent customer migration.

In the conducted research in order to classify the customer retention instruments identified on the analyzed websites we have considered the above-mentioned categories.

We started from the hypotheses:

- Touristic guesthouses websites offer visitors a positive experience
- Touristic guesthouses websites offer visitors needed trust to come back for a new booking
- Touristic guesthouses are focusing on online instruments focused on increasing client satisfaction in their needs for increasing customer retention.

The following issues were considered:

- How much online customer retention tools are used on touristic guesthouses websites
- How much the touristic guesthouses websites are using each of the previously mentioned customer retention tools.

3. Data analysis and interpretation

We have identified 19 customer retention tools used on the analyzed touristic guesthouses websites, categorized as follows (Table 1):

Table 1: Use of customer retention tools

| Category of customer retention tools for touristic guesthouses | Number of tools used |
|--|----------------------|
| tools focused on interaction | 4 |
| tools focused on satisfaction | 12 |
| tools aiming to prevent customer migration | 3 |

As it can be seen most of the identified tools are in the category of tools focused on satisfaction. This leads us to the conclusion that touristic guesthouses are focusing on this type of tools in trying to increase their clients loyalty.

- In what regards the tools focused on satisfaction:
 - The most used tools are those regarding information related to localizing, room and guest house pictures, and services offered.
 - The least used tools are those regarding information about touristic activities, cultural activities and curative tourism that can be carried out in the area.

The small number of the tools focused on interaction and of those aiming to prevent customer migration made us search in detail the way in which they are used.

- Regarding tools focused on interaction:
 - Although websites contain at least a telephone number for reservation or information. Because the guesthouses are located in Mountain area there are places where telephone signal is intermittent (which is specified on the website). In these situations the email address or the online form represents an alternative.
 - The majority of the websites contain the email address or online forms for booking or information. Still there are guesthouses which offers reservations only by phone. These guesthouses are able to attract more customers if they would offer also online booking.

- The most of the analyzed websites do not have sections for comments or customer reviews. Instead a lot of guesthouses can be found on websites specialized on bookings (such as booking.com) where also exists customer reviews.

Figure 1 shows the extent to which tools focused on interaction are used.

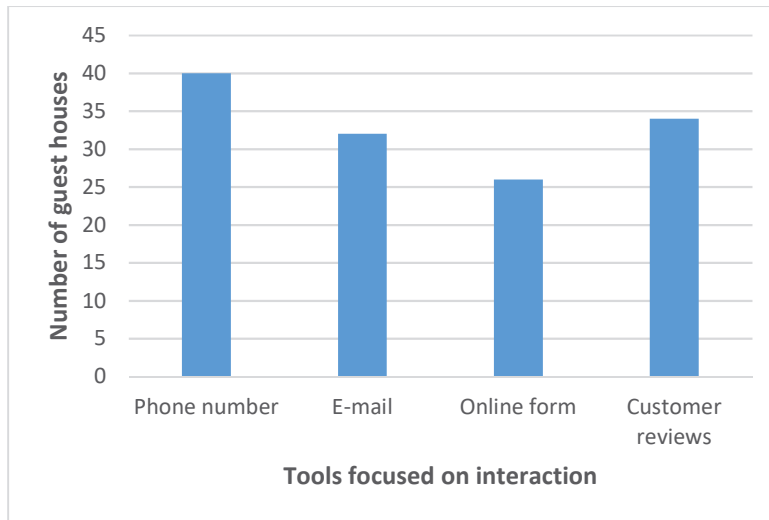


Figure 1: Use of the tools focused on interaction

- Regarding the tools aiming to prevent customer migration:
 - The most common tool used was the one regarding the reputation of the guesthouse.
 - The other two tools have been used on a small number of websites.

Figure 2 shows the extent to which tools aiming to prevent customer migration are used.

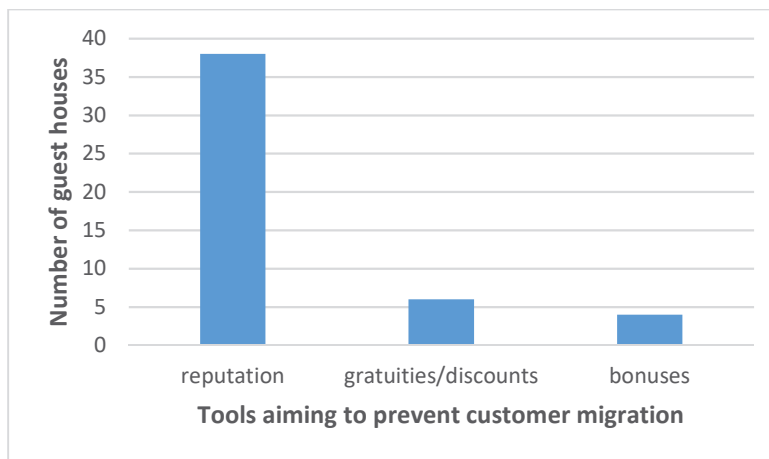


Figure 2: Use of the tools focused on customer migration prevention

4. Conclusions

Taking into account the increasing importance of the Internet in the tourist activity, the guesthouses in the Apuseni Mountains area are also present on World Wide Web. What differs from one website to another is the importance given to various online tools used to attract and retain customers. Websites that use a wide range of online tools have the chance to attract more clients and turn them into loyal customers. Many guesthouses have similar accommodations but using the right online tools they can create themselves advantages.

The study shows that guesthouses use mainly tools focused on satisfaction. A small number of tools focused on interaction are used, but apart from one of them, all the others are present on almost all of the analyzed websites. The smallest importance is given to those tools focused on barriers for customer migration.

Understanding the importance of having as many Internet users as possible, part of the analyzed guesthouses are also present on specialized online booking systems. Thus, 80% of the analyzed guesthouses which have their own websites are also listed on the booking.com platform.

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