

WWW.Branding.States.US: An analysis of brand-building elements in the US state tourism websites[☆]

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Received 3 March 2004; accepted 11 May 2005

Abstract

The Internet plays a significant role in attracting visitors and facilitating their trip planning and reservations. The website of a destination has become a crucial branding channel. However, electronic branding has yet to be adequately conceptualized, particularly in the context of destination marketing. The current study aims to fill this gap through the analysis of the 50 states' official tourism websites. Specifically, the researchers attempt to delineate the unique selling propositions (USPs) and positioning strategies of destination organizations at the state level through a content analysis of slogans, graphic projections, verbal expressions, and other explicit or implied messages. The state tourism slogans are categorized and analyzed in terms of USP building and market targeting. Among other findings, five types of slogans emerge: (1) buy us because we are good; (2) common attribute-based; (3) unique attribute-focused; (4) exclusive appeal; and (5) average Joe. Results also show that almost all the states emphasize nature and culture/heritage, and that many of the states' official websites do not maximize their utility as marketing tools due to lack of consistency among the website elements.

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Keywords: Internet; Destination branding; US tourism website; Slogan; Destination image; DMO

1. Introduction

1.1. Internet branding, a hybrid mix of art and science

Electronic commerce has a far-reaching impact on the way travel is marketed, distributed, sold, and delivered (Williams & Palmer, 1999; Pollack, 1995). Because of its role in information provision, the Internet is becoming increasingly important as a destination-marketing tool for tourism organizations, including state tourism offices and national tourist organizations

(NTOs). If “information is the lifeblood of the tourism industry,” (Sheldon, 1993, p. 633), the Internet is the heart that circulates that lifeblood. The US State official travel website has been recognized not only as a key promotional vehicle but also as a major distribution channel for domestic and international tourism, potentially able to reach the 167 million Internet users in America (Nielsen/Netratings Hot off the Net, 2001), as well as the 400 million worldwide (Computer Industry Almanac, 2001). In 2000, Americans made purchases of travel and travel-related goods and services over the Internet worth more than \$13 billion (TIA, 2001).

The Travel Industry Association (TIA, 2003) estimates that 95.8 million Americans over the age of 18 with Internet access are part of the travel market (see Fig. 1). Of these, more than 64.1 million people have used the Internet to make plans for travel. According to

[☆]These fifty websites were visited during the month of November 2000 from the links of URL: <http://www.july15.com/julia/statetravel.htm>.

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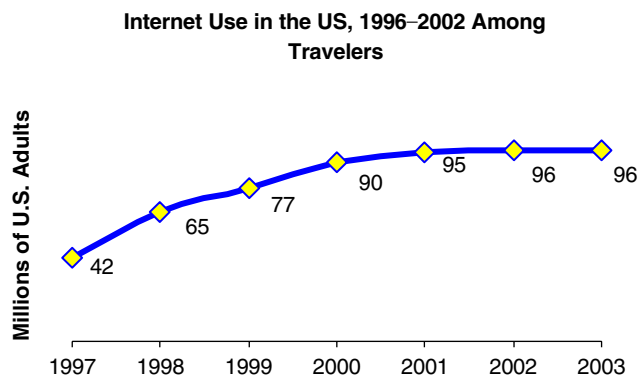


Fig. 1. Online travel market growth.

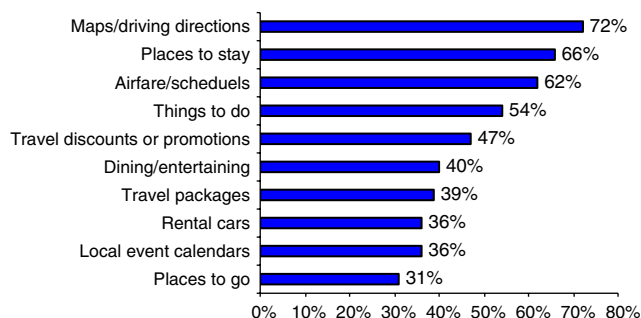


Fig. 2. On-line pleasure trip planning activities (Source: Travel Industry Association of America (TIA)).

the TIA's (2003) report on travelers' use of the Internet, destination-related searching, including searching for things to do, dining, entertainment, and local events, gained more popularity in 2003 than in previous years. Destination-related online planning is steadily becoming more popular each year (Fig. 2). The report also shows that destination websites are very popular with online travel planners, a vast 55% among 64.1 million online travelers who used the Internet to make travel plans, along with the most popular websites, such as online travel agencies (e.g., Microsoft Expedia, Travelocity, or Priceline), and search engine sites. In addition, 31% of those 64.1 million online travel planners reported that they use the Internet to search for ideas on what destinations to visit (TIA, 2003).

Accordingly, destination-marketing organizations (DMOs) are increasingly interested in exploiting the Internet's unique features, such as graphical interactivity with the audience, low-cost accessibility world-wide, hyperlinks with other travel suppliers and design flexibility, to attract more tourists and better position their state in the intense competition for visitors. An important way in which the DMOs can use the Internet to serve their branding needs is by selecting a consistent brand element mix to identify and distinguish a destination through positive image building (Cai,

2002). Branding has arguably become one of the most important marketing strategies, functioning as "the glue that holds the broad range of marketing factions together" (Ries & Ries, 1998, p. 2). Compared with more traditional information sources such as pamphlets, print, and media, the Internet can be an extremely effective tool for destination branding in terms of both cost effectiveness and market penetration. Via its unique merits of flexibility, interactivity, and cross-selling among complementary products within a destination, the Internet can facilitate and strengthen the process of destination brand building (Williams & Palmer, 1999).

However, branding as a concept is still in its infancy in the hospitality and tourism industry (Morrison, 2002). While brands are found in many categories of tourism products and services and permeate almost all facets of tourist activities, branding is practiced less vigorously in destination marketing than in general marketing fields (Cai, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that most of the branding literature focuses on packaged goods (Morgan & Pritchard, 1999, p. 213) and research on destination branding is a relatively recent endeavor (Gnoth, 1998).

Some evidence supports the theoretical argument for the Internet's great potential in this area. For example, Williams and Palmer (1999) note that the Brand West Australia (Brand WA) marketing campaign has created a strong destination brand, which is being reinforced through an electronic distribution strategy, mainly by way of the Internet. They further conclude that in making Brand WA even stronger, the Western Australia Tourism Commission (WATC) needs to realize the synergistic potential of electronic commerce in brand building.

The need for more research is critical in light of the observed difficulties in implementing destination branding. Williams and Palmer (1999) find that the diversity and complexity of tourism products makes information provision difficult for both national and regional tourism organizations. Consequently, branding a region, a country, or a state can be very difficult and often cumbersome. Research needed to address this problem is hampered by the lack of a conceptual framework. As Morgan and Pritchard (1999) pointed out, there is a research gap in destination branding in terms of how its principles are translated into practical marketing activity and, further, in how to conceptualize the empirical analysis of the application of branding to tourism products. A well-recognized conceptual framework that facilitates empirical research is still hard to identify.

1.2. Objectives

This study expands an existing framework by Richardson and Cohen (1993) and applies it in the context of Internet destination branding by analyzing

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