Analyzing the online promotion of a tourist destination: the case of Saariselkä

Cristina VIJOLI[1], Nicolae MARINESCU[2]

Abstract: *Promoting a tourist destination online becomes increasingly popular due to the high rate of internet usage by tourists from all over the world. This paper analyzes the online image of a northern Finnish resort, Saariselkä. For this purpose, data was gathered from the official website, search engines, social media and the mobile application. The main findings of the analysis allow us to draw some major conclusions concerning the online communication plan of Saariselkä. This also reveals flaws, which may hinder it attracting more potential tourists. Firstly, Saariselkä needs a unitary image on all communication channels. Secondly, a competitive advantage has to be indicated and promoted accordingly. Thirdly, online visibility of the destination has to increase.*

Key-words: *online promotion, tourist destination, Saariselkä Finland*

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze the way in which Sariselkä, a tourist destination located in northern Finland, is promoted in the online environment. Thereby, this research tries to improve the image of the destination, by proposing initiatives meant to increase its competitive advantage, as well as its notoriety.

The paper is structured as follows: after a short introduction, we start by surveying the most important online promotion tools for tourist destinations. In the next section the online information which promotes Saariselkä (official website, search engines, social media, mobile application) is thoroughly analyzed with a critical view on assessing its efficiency in creating a proper image for this tourist destination. In the last section we draw some conclusions considering the way Saariselkä is currently promoted and we suggest some recommendations, designed to enhance the notoriety of this tourist destination, and to its differentiation from the main competitors.

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[1] KONE Oyj, Espoo, cristinavijoli@yahoo.com
[2] Transilvania University of Braşov, marinescu@unitbv.ro

2. Online promotion of tourist destinations

A tourist destination has been defined as a packaging of products and services partly created by public and private operators, where the core is not the single attraction in itself, but a combination of factors made through the tourist's consumption experience (Leiper, 1990).

Promotion is one of the essential activities managed by the organization in charge of a tourist destination. This activity has an essential role in creating the destination's brand and its competitive advantage over other tourist destinations.

One of the major roles of promotion is information, which leads to the increased notoriety of the tourist destination, and also to the public's correct notification upon the services to benefit from and upon the activities to perform in that location. It is important for the information displayed on various media channels to draw the reader's attention, persuading him/her to book the services provided by the respective tourist destination. Likewise, promotion plays the role of being an ongoing reminder and of ensuring the loyalty of the tourists who have already visited the location.

The internet has greatly facilitated the promotion and distribution of tourism products and has potentially enabled tourist destinations to compete on a level playing field (Dixit, Belwal and Singh, 2006). Moreover, the internet has reshaped the tourism industry in a comprehensive manner; there is hardly a business that can escape its influence (Marinescu and Toma, 2012).

With the increased popularity of the internet and of the various online promotion channels, the marketing managers' attention has turned in this direction. Moreover, the people's way of booking their holidays has changed, due to the internet. Accordingly, more websites that allow online booking have emerged, diminishing the role of traditional travel agencies. Using the internet with a view to promoting a tourist destination is a great opportunity nowadays. Thus, tourist destinations can highly benefit from the popularity of social networks and web services, using these instruments in order to create a unitary image on the global market, as well as to interact with potential tourists.

2.1. Websites

Websites have turned into an important tool in the promotion of tourist destinations. It is important for the information to be presented as interactive as possible, so as to awaken the potential tourists' interest.

The website is considered the cornerstone of any marketing action on the internet. The first step of a tourism firm that wants to use the internet is to create an online presence, which in turn, represents the key point for communicating with customers (Baltescu, 2010).

Another role held by websites is to promote the services and products offered to tourists. It is essential for the information to be presented in multiple foreign languages, permanently updated, and also culturally adjusted. The pictures, videos, online cameras and interactive maps are an additional attractive feature. However, the website of tourist destinations should not be overloaded.

In order to increase the website visibility, partnerships with other related websites are helpful. Likewise, the website should be optimized, containing a number of keywords, meant to bring it among the first results at a Google search.

2.2. Mobile phones

In recent years, marketing strategies have turned to an increasing extent towards mobile devices, which are ever more used by tourists. Moreover, tourists want to be frequently present online, prior to as well as during their holidays.

Most mobile applications resemble travel guides, digital maps, smart cards and localization maps. They are mainly used when preparing the departure to the tourist destination, as they offer the possibility of booking the accommodation, the flight, as well as of finding out which are the most recommended places to eat out or what activities can be performed in the respective tourist destination.

When adopting a promotional strategy on mobile devices, it is important to optimize the official website for mobile platforms. As increasingly more customers access websites on their mobile, it is advisable to invest in the publicity on this channel, too.

Another suggestion would be for the tourist destination to have its own mobile application, provided with the possibility to consult geo-localized content: maps, live images (web-cam), geo-locations of the points of interest within the destination (hotels, restaurants etc.). It is essential for the tourist to be capable of booking certain services directly on the application; hence, the booking button and the possibility of payment via the application itself are fundamental. Likewise, so that the tourist might avail him/herself of various benefits, once with downloading the application, (s)he may receive several coupons or discounts, in case of using the application for booking services.

2.3. Social media

Tourist destinations are increasingly active on social media, resorting to this channel for information dissemination, communication and marketing. However, the organizations in charge with the administration of tourist destinations want to improve the strategies used in the online environment, connecting them with the objectives of the destinations. It is important for these strategies to break down into results such as the increased notoriety of the respective destination, as well as the creation of a powerful brand.

Nowadays, many tourists turn their attention towards social media, when planning their trips. They resort to this channel, in order to find information about destinations, offers, and tips on various locations, as well as some other tourists' opinion on the quality of the services. Unfortunately, tourist destinations cannot use all the aforementioned tools, as information update requires time and, often, investment. Thus, it is advisable either to conduct a research among the people who have visited the respective destination, in order to find out which are the main information sources, or to consult several studies concerning the most frequently used social media applications.

Before leaving for holidays, tourists also consult the websites of reviews, which have, in their turn, a great influence on the choice of a holiday location. The most influential sources are characterized by a content made by the tourists who have already visited the respective region. In this way, the content used on the counts administered by the organizations in charge of tourist-destination management must rely on the one generated by the tourists themselves.

Travel blogs often influence tourists' decision to choose a certain tourist destination, as they present the perceptions nurtured by those who have already visited the respective destination. The content generated on blogs, be they professional or amateur written, is a very inexpensive or, sometimes, even free customer-generated promotion. Customers increasingly turn their attention towards the content generated by other persons, which is likened to the promotion by word of mouth.

In addition to the customer-generated content, it is advisable for the organizations in charge of tourist-destination management to administer the blog of the respective location. With a view to raising the number of unique visitors on the blog, it is essential to regularly post new articles. They must have a well-defined and attractive subject, which should favour the readers' interaction.

The holiday review websites are web pages or applications which include evaluations made by tourists who have already visited certain destinations, hotels, restaurants, and have benefited from their services. The main advantage of these websites is that future tourists may avail themselves of an objective perception, unaltered by the persons in charge with the promotion of the respective destinations.

Most customers consider these websites to be characterized by credibility and to be very useful at the moment of choosing the tourist destination or the specific locations inside the destination. In the framework of these websites, there may be both positive and negative perceptions, which need to be accepted by the authority in charge with the tourist-destination management. It is important for the marketing managers to permanently monitor these websites and intervene when the reviews contain false information or admit when promises were not kept to tourists.

Social networks have a major impact on promoting tourist destinations. They are mobile or web applications, which allow the interaction between users, as well as the co-creation of qualitative and useful information. Social networks allow users

to ask questions, to find the information they are interested in and to filter them, and also to form their opinions on various subjects.

The users of social networks are also the customers whose opinions can influence the decisions on the acquisition of a product or a service, as well as the image of a brand. This aspect is due to the speed at which the information spreads through social networks.

Social networks are used by tourist destinations, as they offer a wide range of activities which may be performed, with the purpose of encouraging tourists to express their opinions, and to interact. One of the major objectives of social networks is to create a community of people interested in the subject promoted by the owner of the respective destination. The latest news and events within the tourist destination may be thereby quickly spread among the social network community.

In conclusion, the impact of the internet upon tourist destinations may be described in the light of three aspects: the provision of specific information to potential tourists, the comprehension of customer behaviour, and the inexpensive, but qualitative promotion which may be generated by the customers themselves. The integration of online instruments in the promotional plan for the tourist destination will add to its notoriety and will lead to the construction of a strong brand for the respective destination.

3. Analysis of the online promotion of Saariselkä's image

Saariselkä is a destination in northern Finland, where tourists have the opportunity to experience a series of nature-based activities, as well as to enjoy the stunning landscapes offered by this region.

From the administrative point of view, Saariselkä is a tourist village, situated close to the Arctic Circle, and mainly surrounded by highland. It can accommodate up to 13,500 visitors (www.inari.fi).

Although accessibility is not one of the strengths of this resort, the natural landscapes, the tourist attractions and the activities within this destination convince the tourists to spend their holidays herein.

3.1. Analysis of the website

The official website of Saariselkä (www.inarisaariselka.fi) as well as its alternative version (http://saariselka.com) was analyzed from several viewpoints, such as: ease of use, quality of the retrieved information and impact of the pictures and videos.

Usability (or: user-friendliness) is a quality-related attribute which assesses the ease of accessing an interface (either a website or an application). The word "usability" refers to the ways of improving the respective interface, when designing it or when it's testing reveals some aspects which make the browsing difficult.

Accessing the website of Saariselkä, one can notice that the homepage is very loaded with information; as a result, the user may become frustrated or confused. Nevertheless, a positive aspect is that the website may be accessed in several languages, such as English, Russian, German and French. The page which offers information on accommodation may be accessed very easily, yet it may mislead the user, as it offers him/her the possibility to seek accommodation not only in Saariselkä, but also in other regions of northern Finland, and even in Norway. This aspect may lead to the choice of another tourist destination. Another problem of the official website is related to the events page, which has no longer been updated; thus, a confused tourist may think he/she might get bored, in the absence of events.

Unfortunately, the website has not been designed to be used on a smartphone. This aspect can be a great obstacle in the choice of the destination, given that, according to statistics, increasingly more internet users resort to the smartphone.

Moreover, the webpage containing information on the cultural objectives in the area mentions two museums, without stating some information on the transportation arrangements which may be used in order to reach these tourist attractions. Tourists may find this information in the sub-menu of the tab *Services*, section *Transportation*; nevertheless, it is advisable to be on the same page with the information related to the tourist attractions.

Most website pictures capture the winter landscapes of Saariselkä. They have a major emotional impact, as most images depict a fairytale landscape. Likewise, most videos capture activities which may be performed in wintertime, such as reindeer or husky sled rides, as well as snowmobile rides, or the use of slopes. The absence of pictures and videos with summer landscapes may lead to a lower number of tourists willing to visit the destination in other seasons of the year than winter.

A first suggestion in order to improve the website would be for the main menu to be divided into two sections: summer and winter. Each section should include the activities which can be performed in the respective season, as well as the list of the main events which will take place during that period.

Another recommendation would be for the tab *Transportation* to be moved in the main menu. It would be advisable for the section *Pictures and Videos* to be included in the main menu. The pictures and videos have a major emotional impact and they may influence the tourist's decision to choose Saariselkä as a tourist destination. Likewise, it is important to display pictures captured throughout the year, not only in wintertime. The website should be customized, with a view to its being used on mobile platforms, such as a smartphone.

3.2. Analysis of the search engines

In order to analyze the information retrieved on search engines, various keywords were used, such as *Lapland* or *Saariselkä*. Rovaniemi stood out as the most popular tourist destination in Lapland. Some websites indicated that Saariselkä was the

second most searched location by tourists. However, although in Saariselkä there is an important ski centre, many times Saariselkä isn't present on specialized websites.

With a view to raising the visibility of this destination on the main search engines, it is important to optimize the official website of this location, as well as the content in the social media, in order to appear in the top search results on Google. It is also advisable to use more frequently, within the site, the expression *Lapland holiday in Finland,* so as to gain visibility among the tourists who make this search. Likewise, it would be useful to initiate collaboration with a few international bloggers, who are renowned for their articles on travel and tourism.

Another suggestion is to find that element which differentiates Saariselkä from the rest of the destinations in northern Finland. At the moment, the image of Saariselkä is not very clear and, moreover, there is no element promoted in order to differentiate this destination from its main competitors.

3.3. Analysis of the social media content

YouTube is a website whose content consists in videos, uploaded and watched by users. Using this channel, many videos can become viral and thus exceed the number of people that can be reached resorting to television ads. Over 800 million unique users monthly visit YouTube at international level (Seabrook, 2012).

Most videos including Saariselkä-related content promote the main tourist attractions, such as Santa Claus, the reindeer or husky sled rides, as well as the snowmobile races. Many of the videos have attractive images; yet their quality is not very high, and the language used for describing the activities is Finnish, which renders it more difficult for foreign tourists to understand the videos.

Facebook is the most popular social networking website in the world (Statista 2016). This social network is used by more than 1.6 billion active users monthly, and over 700 million people access it daily (Facebook, 2016).

The analysis of the Facebook page for Saariselkä reveals that the description and general information thereof are in Finnish. Nevertheless, the posts on the page are both in English and in Finnish. Their majority was drafted by travel agents or can be found on the official website. Yet most comments with this label are in Finnish. On the other hand, the photo albums are truly amazing and have a major potential to influence the tourists' decision to choose this destination.

A first recommendation for raising the Facebook page visibility is to post at least 3 times a day. The page description must be in English, in order to attract foreign tourists. A second suggestion is to continuously analyze the statistics provided by Facebook, in order to understand who the page audience is, what the target public wants, and which the most efficient posts are.

Twitter is one of the most popular social networks, functioning as a micro-blogging platform. Likewise, users may post messages up to 140 characters, called *Tweets*. Twitter has more than 300 million monthly active users (Twitter, 2015).

Twitter may be used to help increase the website traffic. The Twitter account can be connected with the Facebook account; thus, messages posted on Facebook will be also posted on Twitter. However, it is advisable for the messages on each social network to be adapted according to the target public of the destination.

Much of the Twitter content on Saariselkä is drafted by Lapland Travels, yet in Finnish. There are also posts in English, made by J2Ski Snow Reports, which provide very useful information on weather and snow depth.

3.4. Analysis of the mobile application

Nowadays the number of mobile phone and tablet users is on the increase; hence, it is advisable for tourist destinations to adapt to this trend and to create applications for mobile devices. The application for Saariselkä can be found currently only on *App Store* and *Google Market*, thus ignoring Windows Phone users, who are, nevertheless, in large numbers in Finland. Moreover, although the application contains helpful information for tourists, it is not promoted within the destination.

As regards the interface of the application, it is highly user-friendly; and the existing pictures have a major visual impact. However, the menu is not very well organized and it may confuse the user who is unfamiliar with this destination.

It is advisable for the menu to include only the following sections: maps that can be accessed without using the internet, live webcam with images from the slopes, accommodation (each proposed location being followed by a button - *Booking*), activities that can be performed within the destination, taxi phone numbers and emergency phone numbers. Likewise, the information within this application should be translated in at least two languages: English and Finnish.

Tripadvisor is often used to search accommodation or holiday deals. Thus, it is recommended for the content to be updated and monitored, so as to keep up with the opinions from previous and potential customers. Tripadvisor includes a range of information related to Saariselkä, referring to accommodation possibilities, yet there is not too much detail on the activities to be performed in this tourist destination (only six activities are promoted). A suggestion would be to update the activities and to include also the cultural attractions. Likewise, it is advisable to upload more pictures with the landscapes of this destination, during both winter and summer.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the communication plan for Saariselkä reveals a series of marketing problems. Its image as a tourist destination is not unitary on all promotion channels. Its main tourist attractions are not sufficiently promoted on the online channels. Furthermore, the official website and the mobile application should be improved in terms of navigability and attractiveness, so as to be easier and more enjoyable for

tourists to access. Another aspect that should be considered is the importance of displaying the content both in Finnish, and in English, and even in other languages. Also, there is no element differentiating this destination from its main competitors.

With a view to raising the visibility of Saariselkä as a tourist destination, and also to improving its image in the online environment, a series of recommendations is formulated below.

Research highlights that the main reason for tourists who visit Saariselkä is to practice cross-country ski. However, several slopes specially designed for this sport can be found in other tourist resorts in the Finnish part of Lapland, too. A large portion of tourists mentioned they chose Saariselkä as, while skiing, they could enjoy the stunning views along the ski slopes. A part of the cross-country-ski slopes pass across the national park called Urho Kekkonen, tourists having the opportunity to admire the winter landscapes, in an environment untouched by humans.

Thus, one can pinpoint that the main competitive advantage of Saariselkä is nature, as well as the tourists' possibility to play sport while enjoying a fairytale winter. This element which differentiates Saariselkä from its main competitors can be used for promotion, in the form of messages meant to attract the seekers and admirers of stunning landscapes in their purest form. Thus, the authorities of Saariselkä could establish a new slogan, such as - *Rediscover the pure Lapland!*

The message behind each promoted activity should remain the same – discovery of the natural landscapes, unchanged by humans. By segments, the message may be: *Rediscover the purity of Lapland in a fairytale landscape!,* for families with children. During the period in which young people are interested in Saariselkä, the message may be: *Enjoy pure Lapland from sunrise to sunset!*; whereas, for the elderly, the message may be: *Enjoy the purity of Lapland!*

Also, to raise the visibility of Saariselkä, initiating a social media promotional campaign would be helpful. A first suggestion would be to make a selection of the most popular international bloggers who write on travel and tourism, inviting them to spend a week in this resort. They could visit all tourist attractions, as well as perform all activities offered by Saariselkä. This way, a number of articles referring to this destination will be issued, and potential tourists can benefit from an informed opinion on the destination. The downside of the bloggers campaign is its high cost.

Likewise, in order to raise the notoriety of this resort on social networks, its administrators can organize a number of contests on Facebook. These contests can take the form of answers to questions such as: *Which has been your most beautiful experience in Saariselkä?* Another suggestion would be to organize contests of pictures or videos, to be posted under a label such as: *#SaariselkäInPictures, #DiscoverPureLapland, #MemoriesOfSaariselkä etc.* This way, the administrators of Saariselkä in the online environment could use the materials to promote it.

The Facebook promotional plan should include information on the sights, as well as on the leisure activities, and the events hosted by Saariselkä. Furthermore, during the ski season, it is very important that one of the daily posts should be on

weather and snow depth on slopes. With a view to raising the interactivity with users on Twitter, it is advisable to create a multi-label campaign. A few proposals might be: *#SantaInSaariselkä* – an urge for the users to write to Santa Claus (the most creative wish might be rewarded), *#SaariselkäStories* – an invitation for tourists to share their experiences within this destination, *#RediscoverPureNature* – the promotion of the national park, by means of the pictures posted by tourists.

Another recommendation would be to keep only one of the two existing websites: www.inarisaariselka.fi or http://saariselka.com. Whatever website is chosen, it could benefit from a more attractive design, and it should be adapted for mobile platforms. A last suggestion, referring to the mobile application would be to provide the possibility of downloading it from the official website. Moreover, each location in the region (bar, club, restaurant, accommodation unit) should have a poster with a QR code, for tourists to access the application. Another recommendation would be to create several interactive activities within the application, which should make any tourist curious and interested in its use.

5. Acknowledgements

6. References

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