

The online potential for the development of eco-certified accommodation units in Romania

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Abstract: *The Internet and electronic communication have generated significant changes in the marketing strategies of accommodation units. On the other hand, sustainable development is a goal which requires concrete actions and changed mentalities. In Romania operates a number of eco-certified accommodation units. The online tools allow them to communicate the advantages and benefits of the sustainable services, and also to obtain a quick feedback from the consumers. This paper highlights the extent to which eco-certified accommodation units in our country offer relevant information to potential consumers and analyzes the online reviews regarding the eco-certified accommodation services.*

Key-words: *eco-certified accommodation units, hotel websites, online reviews*

1. Introduction

The importance of high environmental quality for the development of tourism was acknowledged by the WTO in the late 1970s with the establishment of the Environmental Committee. Following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, which identified tourism as one of the priority areas for sustainable development, the green movements within the hotel industry gained momentum and recognition. Hotel and tourism organizations and hotel companies are developing environmental guidelines, training programs and publishing best practice case studies (IH&RA et al. 1995; UNEP and IH&RA, 1997).

The European eco-label system was implemented by Regulation (EEC) no. 880/1992 and altered by Regulation (EC) no. 1980/2000 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the revised EU scheme on the award of eco-label. As regarding the eco-label for accommodation services, the applicable legislation consists of Decision of European Commission no. 287/2003/EC on setting out the ecologic criteria for awarding the Community eco-label to the accommodation services for tourists, and Decision of the Government of Romania no.1855/2005 on setting out the criteria for awarding the eco-label to accommodation services for

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tourists. The criteria for awarding the eco-label for tourist accommodation services are aimed at reducing energy consumption, reducing water consumption, reducing the amount of waste generated, promoting the use of renewable resources and of substances less harmful to the environment, as well as the promotion of communication and education in the field of environmental protection.

2. Theoretical background

Governments along with the green movement within the hotel and tourism industry and also travelers, have become increasingly aware of the need for more effective measures to protect the environment. Hotels are major tourism actors and therefore cause strong environmental impacts. Hotel businesses affect the sustainability of the destination in which they are developed and operated by the consumption of significant amounts of natural resources (Scanlon 2007, 720). In this sense, if the hotels could increase their environmental commitment activities, this could become a source of the destination competitive advantage (Molina-Azorin et al. 2009, 521). Based on the preponderance of the emotional factor in relation to the rational one in terms of tourism services, the way the potential consumer reacts to stimuli coming from the consumption of tourism services and how he perceives the “universe” of a destination becomes essential in creating the image of that destination (Stăncioiu et al. 2013, 40).

The hoteliers recognize that their facilities influence the natural surroundings and they are also aware that the hotel industry would benefit from environmental pro-activeness among operators (Bohdanowicz 2006, 676). The “green hotel” is defined as an eco-friendly hotel operation that performs/follows various environmentally friendly practices/programs such as saving water/energy, using eco-friendly purchasing policies, and reducing emission/waste disposals to protect the natural environment and reduce operational costs (Green Hotel Association, 2008). The level of responsibility of business corporations played the strongest role in driving customer’s intentions to pay more for a green hotel (Manaktola and Jauhari 2007, 374; Han et al. 2011, 352). In this respect, numerous hotels are practicing environmentally friendly policies and recycling to manage waste, which is benefitting them by an increase in profit and getting positive customer response and improved corporate brand image (IHRA, 1995, Chan 2005, 529). Another environmental tool which was adopted in the hospitality industry was the eco-label (Ayuso 2007, 145). Nowadays hotels are increasingly implementing environmental policies and practices, and pursue official certifications for their initiatives (Geerts 2014, 88). But, simply adding a certification logo to a business’s advertising is not going to increase occupancy rates. There are, however, two other important early gains that accommodation units can receive from certification: 1) improved standards through compliance with recognized norms of best practices, whether for

quality, environmental protection, or social responsibility, and 2) cost savings derived from reducing energy and water consumption (Constantin et al. 2013, 538).

With more intense competition in the global market without quality and without special skills in its obtaining, assessment and continuous improvement, companies will not be able to meet the increasing demands of consumers (Madar 2014, 71). The assessments are very different between countries, not only because of market performance but also because of cultural and economic differences of consumers (Duguleană and Duguleană 2015, 202). A large number of customers show increased environmental awareness and a preference for green firms and their products, revealing their willingness to purchase and pay more for environmentally friendly products/services (Manaktola and Jauhari 2007, 375). Gradually, going green is believed to be an effective competitive edge in the lodging market (Manaktola and Jauhari 2007, 376; Han et al. 2009, 527). As more environmental rules/regulations appear and individuals' environmental awareness increases, consumers are increasingly searching for eco-friendly hotels over conventional hotels (Han et al. 2011, 351). New trends also arise in food consumption which encourage natural products (Neacșu 2015, 64).

In Romania institutional arrangements relating to the awareness of the necessity of sustainable development were numerous, exemplifying the actions carried out by the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development for introducing the European eco-label for tourist accommodation services and the camping services, as well as for promoting the use of the eco-label in Romania among interested hotels and guesthouses (the promotion campaign was supported by the Ministry for Small Enterprises, Trade, Tourism and Liberal Professions), HG 314/2009 on the taking over of the concept of the eco-label hotel in Romania, the campaign to promote and implement the ecological label with application in tourism organized by the Romanian Association for ecological tourism and accommodation - "Bed & Breakfast" (<http://www.eticheta-ecologica.ro/index.php>), the project entitled "The awareness of the raise of cross-border tourism cluster and environmental protection and management" with the deadline for completion, 21.10.2013 which aims, among other things, educating tourism cluster and the consumer of touristic products of the need for sustainable touristic use in natural resources and methods and the introduction of EMS and ECO LABEL (www.greenwebportal.eu).

Informing the guests about the hotel steps and efforts towards sustainable development and the application of principles concerning the eco-label is, in this context, a defining element in all managerial activities. In this respect, the website is considered an essential tool. It is reasonable to argue that a website is critical in the development of trusting relationships with customers and also to support the idea that the more experienced a company the richer the websites would be (Wang et al. 2015, 108). As technology improves, a successful hotel website should integrate

business functions of disseminating information, communication, transaction and relationship building with hotel overall marketing strategies and address a wide range of electronic commerce activities (Li et al. 2015, 138). Moreover, the level of satisfaction expressed by SMTEs hotelkeepers with regard to results obtained from Web use in business seems only to reinforce the idea that they are generally not fully aware of the vast potential that Internet could play in developing and pursuing business strategy (Franch et al. 2005, 326). An important segment of rural tourism establishments host a website and advertise on the Internet, but improving website contents affect business performance. A website with sufficient and necessary information about the business is crucial (Nieto et al. 2011, 28-29). The website should be permanently updated so as to bring an ever increasing number of visitors who, afterwards, would show up and be accommodated in the pension. The administrator or another person should be in charge with the website, to be checked and updated frequently and ideally, optimized for search engines (Marinescu and Frincu 2015, 24). At the same time, the proliferation and widespread use of online hotel reviews is, overall, an opportunity rather than a threat to entrepreneurs and managers in the hotel industry and the online reviews could be beneficial for the hoteliers. Positive reviews have a positive impact on consumer behavior, whereas isolated negative reviews have little impact (Vermeulen and Seegers 2009, 127).

3. Research methodology

In 2012, 17754 licenses to use the eco-labels had been awarded in Europe, out of which 356 for accommodation services, which represents 2% of the total number of licenses awarded. In Romania, in 2013, 23 such licenses had been issued, of which three for accommodation services. The three hotels that received them are Saturn Hotel of Saturn that received its license in 2008, Crowne Plaza Hotel of Bucharest that received its license in 2009, and Piatra Șoimului Villa of Sinaia that received its license in 2011 (Lupu et al. 2013, 637).

As there are no official statistics about the eco-certified accommodation units in Romania, the authors have analyzed information provided by the Romanian Association of Ecotourism (AER) and the websites of the eco-certified accommodations units, to which were added the online assessments retrieved from the major online travel communities.

AER has developed an internal system aiming to award eco-labels to the touristic boarding houses located in rural and natural areas, with no more than 25 rooms. A total of 9 such touristic boarding houses have obtained the eco-certification and other 20 guesthouses are eco-certified without being an AER member (<http://www.eco-romania.ro/ro/sistemul-de-certificare/produse-certificate>).

4. Results and discussions

All the accommodation units which have been analyzed have their own website. A particular reference to the guesthouse Hilde's Residence Gura Humorului, which in the authors' opinion, highlights a special attention granted to this form of communication with the current and potential guests. This website includes an application suitable to register the guests' reviews, ensuring a quick feedback and reflecting a distinct attention to the clients' assessments. Moreover, among all the guesthouses which were the subject of the analysis, it's the sole accommodation unit with numerous favorable reviews on Booking.com. The great majority of the eco-certified guesthouses' websites highlights their offer consisting in bio products and traditional recipes. Regarding the online communication, due to the reduced accommodation capacities, these units are not seriously taken into account by the major online travel communities.

Out of the 3 eco-labeled hotels, only two of them announce the guests on this subject, but with no other detailed reference. The websites do not point any differences in relation to other units' websites. As regarding the online reviews the situation is presented in table 1.

Hotel	Average Score TripAdvisor (max 5)	Average Score Booking.com (max 10)
Hotel Saturn (5 stars)	3	7,9
Crowne Plaza Hotel (4 stars)	4 (TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence)	8,3
Villa Pietra Șoimului (3 stars)	4,5	8,4

Table 1. *Average assessments of Romanian eco-labeled accommodation units*

The units with higher levels of comfort do not meet the customers' expectations, whilst the medium comfort accommodation units record high levels of appreciation.

5. Conclusions

An important observation concerns the extremely low use of online communication instruments within the analyzed accommodation units. The managers seem to express no interest in highlighting the specific and outstanding features related to eco-certification. Thus, the advantages ensured by these labels are practically canceled.

Also, the number of eco-certified accommodation units is low, due to some major difficulties, such as the lack of an environmental culture among economic operators in Romania; fear of increased costs due to investments in "green" technologies; the desire to obtain immediate profit from the completed investment associated to the lack of medium and long term plans; the appreciation of usenessless of such actions in the direction of sustainable development because they won't be appreciated by the consumers and wholesalers. The eco-certification for tourist accommodation services seems to be favourable especially in the Romanian rural context, but there is still a lack of expertise in drawing up and implementing Local Development Strategies (LDS), and in certain cases the priorities set by strategies were influenced by various rural area (Albu and Chițu 2014, 103). As for the future organic growth marketing of sustainable tourism business can become a true Marketing 3.0, where there are involved not only the clients (tourists) expectations but also those of communities (Epuran et al 2015, 936).

6. References

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