A marketing-led web site evaluation framework

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Abstract

This paper proposes a checklist for evaluating tourism and hospitality web sites and is applied to small rural accommodation businesses. There are a plethora of web site evaluation studies with the Modified Balanced Scorecard a common framework to facilitate evaluations. The framework presented in this paper is marketing-centric and grounds the evaluation in the customer's buyer behavior. It is a customer-centric framework which evaluates the site according to the customer's information needs at a given time in the buyer cycle, the business objectives at that stage and finally the online marketing support tools to help achieve those objectives. The study adds a marketing perspective to web site evaluations which has not been a strong feature in previous evaluation studies.

Keywords: web site evaluation, Modified Balance Scorecard, search engine marketing, rural tourism

1 Introduction

Rural tourism makes a significant contribution to the UK economy. According to the UK Travel Survey statistics for 2008 total UK Tourism Spend was £16,433,000,000 of which countryside-spend accounted for £2,777,000,000 (16.9%) of that total. 67.8% of the rural tourism expenditure was on leisure and 23.7% on VFR travel, with the remaining 8.5% on business and other forms of tourism. The accommodation sector plays a major role in rural tourism with 29.4% of countryside-spend on hotels and guest accommodation, 17.3% on self-catering, 19.3% on staying with friends and relatives.

2 Purpose

There are two main purposes of this paper:

1. To provide a critical insight into the level of e-marketing effectiveness of rural micro accommodation businesses.
2. To contribute to the e-marketing literature through the development and application of a web site evaluation checklist; this critically evaluates the web site as an online marketing tool.

This paper views the web site first and foremost as a marketing platform designed to acquire and retain customers. The emphasis is on online marketing and the web site as a vehicle for delivering the marketing mix.

3 Theory / Issues

Citing Morrison, Taylor and Douglas (2004), Roney and Özturan point out that: "the number of frameworks or models used to measure the effectiveness of tourism web sites is comparatively limited and none of them provide comprehensive evaluations" (2006: 44). This, they argue, is partly due to an inability to agree on principles of web design, web site effectiveness and technical considerations. Morrison et al conclude their paper "with a call to action for industry leaders, academics, and consultants to develop a unified procedure for Website evaluation in tourism and hospitality" (2004: 233). A number of studies have deployed the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) to evaluate websites (Kline, Morrison & John 2004; Morrison, Taylor and Douglas 2004; Feng, Morrison and Ismail 2004). The Balanced Scorecard Collaborative (2002) defines the BSC as "a tool that translates an organization's mission and strategy into a comprehensive set of performance measures that provide the framework for strategic measurement and management system (cited in Morrison, Taylor and Douglas 2004: 235)."

The structure for the evaluation checklist proposed in this study is borrowed initially from a tender document issued by a national tourism office inviting technology companies to propose a web site and reservation system. This document is not in the public domain but the framework included in the NTO's tender included the following stages: Find, Look & Plan, Book, and Follow-up. For each stage of this customer journey the NTO created a 3-column table with the first column listing the consumer's needs at that stage, then the business's objectives, followed finally by the online support tools which can assist in meeting the consumer's information needs and the business objectives.

For example, at the 'Find' stage the customer is looking for a trusted and useful source of information, the business wants to attract the customer to their site, and the e-support tool is search engine optimization. There is overlap with the framework proposed by Han and Mills:

> "Aesthetic features raise the interests of online travellers; informative features provide detailed information that online travellers are seeking; and interactive features trigger a response behaviour from online travellers such as sending inquiring emails or planning trips to the destination through the website (Han and Mills 2006: 414)."

In this case "aesthetic" maps to awareness and interest and 'find'; "informative" to desire and 'look and plan'; and "interactive" to action and 'book'.

4 Methodology & Results

The methodology comprises a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and is based on a convenience sample of 33 businesses. The first step involved an

online survey; although not intended as a statistically representative study, it is nonetheless interesting to look at the snapshot of marketing by small rural accommodation businesses, provided by the 12 responses:

- 9 out of 12 sites designed by local design company – only 1 of these a CMS solution;
- Half update their sites at least weekly;
- 3 out of the 12 less than once every 3 months;
- 8 out of 12 do not think it is important to take online bookings;
- 9 out of 12 consider web site as a main marketing tool;
- All store customer data but only 1 sends email promotions;
- None use any Web 2.0 apps (except 1 who quoted YouTube)
- 8 out of 12 use Google Analytics
- 3 out of 12 have run a Google Adwords campaign
- 2 out of 12 place ads online

Site evaluation

Following the survey, as detailed content analysis of a respondent's (who has requested anonymity) site was undertaken in order to test the framework discussed previously.

Table 1: Web site evaluation checklist (Find Stage)

		Remarks
Page rank (Google, Alexa)	1	The site has a low overall page rank as measured by both these methods. Some of the possible reasons for this are discussed below.
Different title tags on each page	3	Dynamic title tags used throughout.
Title tag contains relevant keywords (3-5 max)	2	Homepage does not feature keywords associated with location or activities. Too many keywords – need to prioritize.
Appropriate keywords in meta description	2	Meta description reads: "Self catering holiday cottages in Cornwall just north of St Austell Bay and close to The Eden Project, beaches and various beautiful gardens." Too generic - e.g. beaches, gardens – instead refer to Lost Gardens of Heligan – a popular local attraction; St Austell Bay not relevant to user who is unlikely to search on such a specific geographic term. *Recommend*: investigate key search terms used by main target groups and be more concise in meta description.
Meta tags on each page (avoid using the same Meta tags on all	2	Meta tags differ from page to page but again lack conciseness and not tailored to context of

pages)		page – e.g. of the more than 25 meta keywords on the page aimed at the 'couples' segment only one is related to couples specifically.
Search engine-friendly URLs	3	Every page's URL is search engine friendly e.g.: http://www.stayingincornwall.com/pages/families.asp
Alt tags on images	0	No images feature alt text
H1 HTML heading used on pages	1	Some text is bolded but H1 function not used and text chosen is not keyword-rich e.g. the following on the home page: Your holiday should be special. Time to talk, time to indulge, time to relax and time to enjoy.
Appropriate keyword-rich pages	2	Pages are content-rich but not always focused on specific audience-related key words – e.g. page on short breaks does not feature key attractions or places of special interest in bold or using H1 heading function. As a result, with the exception of the homepage, the pages have a Google page rank of 1 or less (the homepage is 2/10 – a comparatively low score).
Sitemap available	3	Yes
Clear customer targeting (content aimed at segments)	2	In the online survey the 3 target groups are listed as 1) families with young children 2) couples 3) those "seeking an attractive place in Cornwall to relax while at same time allows easy access to all parts of Cornwall"; the first two are reflected on the homepage with top level navigation links to the relevant page. The imagery is first class – professional photos which show the target audience – e.g. the couples page features couples of different ages enjoying specific activities – walking on the beach, sitting at a restaurant. However the text on the page lacks specific content related to these groups. *Recommend*: specific keyword-rich ideas for couples enjoying a break; link to user generated content and recommendations from couples who have stayed there.
Use of customer reviews (trust and referral)	0	None
	21/ 36	

Although a limited evaluation is shown here, a full report is available from the author upon request. The site featured in the evaluation above is the strongest site from the 9 out of 12 respondents who completed the online survey; however there is clearly room for improvement. In general, while the site is very strong in design terms and has significant depth and breadth of content, it has a low page rank. While this does not of

itself indicate a weak site, the Google page rank is a measure of the site's importance and a low score indicates that, while the site has many links out to other sites, there are a comparatively low number of sites linking back (back-links). This adversely affects the performance of the site in the search results.

While the site owner has a clear marketing focus and has positioned his 'brand' in distinct market segments, there are some simple steps he could take to reinforce this positioning. Making more use of the H1 tag in the HTML source code would serve to highlight key audience-related content which would then be 'picked up' by the search engines when indexing and ranking the site. Secondly, adding alt text to the images would improve search engine ranking. Thirdly, the use of customer reviews (particularly by the target markets of couples and families) would add the credibility of user generated content while at the same time improving the overall importance of the site from the search engines' perspective.

In general marketing terms although the owner has focused on distinct segments the content could be better structured and tailored specifically to the needs of these groups. For example, make it clear what the family-friendly visitor attractions are nearby or suitable restaurants for couples. Where possible encourage external sites to link back in order to increase overall site ranking. This is a particular weakness of all the businesses that participated in the online marketing workshops run by the author and revealed on their web sites – a failure to reach out beyond the web site and extend their online marketing (e.g. by reciprocal linking, placing ads online, leveraging the Web 2.0 space, running specific lifestyle-oriented pay per click campaigns).

5 Conclusions and implications

The checklist in its entirety has the potential to facilitate a critique of a web site expressly from a marketing perspective. By focusing the evaluation framework on the user's buying process, the corresponding business objectives and the e-support tools, it provides a tool which can be used to feed actionable data back to the site owner. Clearly there is an element of subjectivity and personal judgment in assigning a score to each criterion and that subjectivity increases when the criterion is non-technical e.g. market segmentation. It should be reiterated at this point that the principal purpose of the framework is to encourage the site owner to reflect critically on his site and that where marketing is concerned there will inevitably be subjectivity – it is as much if not more so art as science.

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