To What Extent Are Chilean Regional Tourism Organisations (Rtos) Leveraging Web Technologies To Promote Regional Tourism?

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Abstract

The information-intensive nature of the tourism and travel industry suggests an important role for Web technology in the promotion and marketing of tourist destinations. With reports of travel purchases and reservations being one of the fastest growing segments of the Internet community (eMarketer, 2002), it is no surprise that the number of tourism operators on the Web has increased considerably in recent years. This paper presents the results of a study of the use of Web technologies by Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) in the Chilean tourism industry. The Extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA) (Burgess and Cooper, 2000) is used to assess the web sites of RTOs to determine the extent of adoption of web technologies for destination marketing. A significant finding of this study is the number of RTOs sites offering Stage 3 functionality (transaction processing). The results of the study support the findings of earlier studies, that is, in developing commercial websites, businesses in this industry sector typically start simply by establishing a presence on the Web and build on functionality over time, as their experience and expertise in the use of Internet technologies increases.

Keywords: Electronic Commerce, Regional Tourism, Destination Marketing, Internet, World Wide Web

INTRODUCTION

The information-intensive nature of the tourism and travel industry suggests an important role for Web technology in the promotion and marketing of tourist destinations, while recent innovations in technology have provided regional tourism with a "new set of destination marketing tools." (Carter, 2002). With reports of travel purchases and reservations being one of the fastest growing segments of the Internet community (eMarketer, 2002), it is no surprise that the number of tourism operators on the Web has increased considerably over the past few years. Globally, revenues from the online travel industry are predicted to rise to USD 13.3 billion in 2005. The travel market in the US alone is currently worth $190 billion. By 2006 more than half of its total business will be booked online (PhoCusWright, 2004). The aim of the overall research project is to build a global picture of the use of Web technologies by Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs). Phase one of the research centred on the tourism industry in the countries and Islands of the Asia-Pacific region (Burgess and Cooper, 2000; Burgess et al., 2001; Doolin et al., 2001a; Doolin et al., 2001b; Burgess et al., 2002; Doolin et al., 2002; Burgess et al., 2003a; Burgess et al., 2003b; Doolin et al., 2002).
This current project extends the study to the Americas and reports the results (stage one) of a study undertaken in 2005 on the use of the web for destination marketing by the Chilean National Tourism Service, SERNATUR and privately operated Regional Tourism Organisations in Chile.

Research contends that the search for information used to plan travel is likely to take longer and to involve the use of more information sources than the search for information about other consumer products (Fodness and Murray, 1999; Goodrich, 2000b; Legoherel et al., 2000). The information-based nature of tourism products means that the Internet, which offers global reach and multimedia capability, is an increasingly important means of promoting and distributing tourism and travel services (cf. Walle 1996). The Internet is a potentially significant means of promotion and destination marketing for many countries in the Americas, particularly as the travelling public’s “technology confidence” (Carter, 2002) continues to build.

The tourism industry is characterised by offering complimentary business, with a tourist typically using a range of travel products including air travel, car hire, accommodation and tour services. These services are provided by a range of different organisations. Planning of such tourism and travel services can be expedited through a well designed and organised website, ensuring that the right choices are made, resulting in a more enjoyable experience for the tourist (Rita, 2000). It can also serve as a distribution point for all the services a tourist will need to plan their vacation. Tourism destinations “emerge as umbrella brands, hence, destination marketing organisations increasingly have to identify niche markets and develop their interactivity with potential tourists” (Rita, 2000, pg.2). Rita (2000) proposes that each tourist destination must have a major website acting as a gateway providing a “one-stop” portal to the destination rather than relying on a fragmented number of individual Web sites.

**REGIONAL TOURISM**

The Tourism industry is an important driver for regional development with the emergence of new opportunities reliant on the type and quality of a region’s natural assets, the management capabilities of regional tourism organisations and operators, and the degree of appropriate support from governments at all levels (Tourism White Paper 2003). Tourism also provides an opportunity for sustainable development of regions, with the tourism industry providing a wide variety of products and services, including adventure tourism, culture and heritage, transport, accommodation, retail and hospitality. Regional destination marketing organisations called Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) form part of the Tourism industry structure, and it is these organisations that are the focus of the current study. RTOs form an important layer between central government and the local tourism industry, with the potential for provision of a coordinated and comprehensive marketing effort. RTOs also act as a portal for visitor access to tourism operators and service providers.

Regional Tourism Organisations are typically Public Funded Organisations with the primary function of promoting tourism throughout a region. RTOs may take many forms, however they tend to be most commonly represented in the form of Tourist Information and Visitor Centres. In a broader sense however, any organisation which promotes a region in terms of tourism related goods and services could potentially be classified as an RTO. Traditionally RTOs have acted as an initial contact point for tourists / visitors and provide information on attractions, accommodation and services offered within that particular region. In recent years, there has been a trend towards supplementing the traditional ‘bricks and mortar’ RTO with a website offering services via the World Wide Web (WWW).

This capacity compliments the traditional RTO locations throughout the Americas and provides an alternative and more feasible contact point particularly for international visitors who are increasingly using the Web to research their holiday destinations before arrival. A particular benefit of web technology adoption by RTOs is seen as an increased ability for smaller businesses to compete online, enabling them to market their product to the global marketplace at a greatly reduced cost.
TOURISM IN LATIN AMERICA

The World Tourism Organisation (October, 2004) reports that the period from January to August 2004 revealed an incredible resurgence of tourism in all regions. Worldwide the number of international tourist arrivals is reported to have grown by an estimated 12% compared to the same time in the previous year. Furthermore, in August 2004, the number of worldwide international tourist arrivals reached 90 million for the first time. This growth is in contrast to the previous year’s depressed figures due to the Iraq war, SARS and the weakened global economy. According to WTO Secretary-General Francesco Frangialli (27 October, 2004) “tourism has recovered strongly in 2004, in particular in Asia and the Pacific and in the America’s and is again on an ascent curve”. Central and South America have continued to grow strongly with increases of 19% and 15% respectively. Major Latin American tourism markets are depicted in Figure 1, while tourism forecasts for the period 2004-2014 are presented in Table 1.

Over recent decades some Latin American countries have experienced an important economic development due to the positive effect of tourism on the service sector. This growth rate is attributed to regional political and economic stability, favourable exchange rates and recovery of the US economy. Despite a downturn in the industry sector in the period 2002/3, Chile experienced strong growth in arrivals (+17%), second only to Uruguay with a growth rate of 29%. Factors that have adversely affected growth in recent years include: slowdown of the US economy; continuous depreciation of the Chilean peso and recession. This was further impacted by an evident lack of a coherent national tourism strategic development plan.

Notwithstanding, Chile is set to become one of Latin America’s most promising markets, due mainly to “the energy and professionalism of its entrepreneurs, the transparency of its regulation and the predictability of its decision makers” (Euromonitor, 2004). Its increasingly diversified economy and strong economic ties with the Americas, Europe and Asia present Chile with a wide array of options for the future growth of tourism in the region. With its diversified and unique geography and many climates, Chile has much to offer, from its deserts, to high mountain ranges, fertile valleys, channels islands and glaciers. In addition, Chile offers hotels of international standard, a largely quiet and safe environment with renewed political and financial stability.

Tourism Markets

Table 1: Latin America – Tourism Forecasts (Adapted from Latin America Market Trends, InfoAmericas)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US$ bn</td>
<td>% of Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Travel &amp; Tourism</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Travel</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital Investment</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitor Exports</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel &amp; Tourism Demand</td>
<td>108.5</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T&amp;T Industry GDP</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T&amp;T Industry Employment</td>
<td>4,395.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Main LatAm Tourism Markets
THE EXTENDED MODEL OF INTERNET COMMERCE ADOPTION (eMICA)

The Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (MICA) was originally developed for a study of the Australian metal fabrication industry (Burgess and Cooper 1998). The model proposes that in developing commercial web sites, organisations, specifically SMEs, typically start simply by establishing a presence on the Web and build on functionality over time, as their experience with and expertise in the use of Internet technologies increases. In addition, as Web sites build on complexity, so will the number of functional components incorporated into the site increase. MICA consists of three stages, incorporating three levels of business process – Web-based promotion, provision of information and services (marketing and customer service and support) and transaction processing. The stages of development provide a roadmap that indicates where a business or industry sector is in its development of Internet commerce applications.

As sites move through the stages of development from inception (promotion) through consolidation (provision) to maturity (processing), levels of complexity and functionality are added to the site. This addition of levels is synonymous with the business moving from a static Internet presence through increasing levels of interactivity to a dynamic site incorporating value chain integration and innovative applications to add value through information management and rich functionality.

Since the original study in 1998, MICA has been applied to the government sector (Boon 1999) and tourism industry (Burgess and Cooper 2000) in Australia, resulting in its enhancement and extension (eMICA). The central tenet of the extended model is that while businesses develop Internet commerce applications in stages as proposed by MICA, complexity and functionality vary greatly between applications, and even between businesses in an industry sector. In line with this, the extended model proposes that a number of additional levels (levels) of complexity, ranging from very simple to highly sophisticated, exist within the identified main stages of MICA. Increased levels of interactivity are also evident as businesses leverage on the benefits of multi-media web technologies and as sites progress through each of the stages/levels of the eMICA model.

The extended model (eMICA) adds several levels of sophistication of functionality and innovation within the three main stages, in order to accommodate a wide range of Internet commerce development phases evidenced in industries such as tourism. The eMICA model and functionality is summarised in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>eMICA</th>
<th>Examples of functionality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 1 - Promotion</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 – basic information</td>
<td>company name, physical address and contact details, area of business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 – rich information</td>
<td>annual report, email contact, information on company activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 2 - Provision</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 – low level interactivity</td>
<td>basic product catalogue, hyperlinks to further information, online enquiry form higher-level product catalogues, customer support (e.g. FAQs, sitemaps), industry-specific value-added features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 – medium interactivity</td>
<td>chat room, discussion forum, multimedia, newsletters or updates by email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3 – high interactivity</td>
<td>secure online transactions, order status and tracking, interaction with corporate servers and databases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA) (adapted from Burgess and Cooper, 2000, in Doolin et al. 2001).

WEB TECHNOLOGIES

Turner (2000) describes one of the main technology demand-side drivers of the evolving information economy as convenience. The easier technology is to use and thereby demonstrating usefulness to users, the more open consumers will be towards that technology. Conversely, technology which is difficult to master will slow the pace and demand of growth. RTOs throughout Chile have adopted web associated technologies (web pages, forms, JavaScript’s,
animations, videos, sound files, interactive maps, shopping carts and electronic payment systems –
transaction payments) to suit both their individual business processes and the needs of their
customers. In the most general form, the web page mediates the interactivity between the RTO
website and visitors to that site. This mediation process may involve websites with limited
interactivity or conversely websites with increased interactivity and functionality using so-called
‘PULL technologies’. Websites with limited interactivity often provide static information such as
descriptive text about sightseeing locations and travelling directions or in other instances, material
which the RTO believes is of interest to the website viewer. PULL technologies allow for greater
user-initiated interactivity as the website viewer decides which information they require or would
be interested in viewing on the webpage and make selections from drop down menus, online
databases and assorted forms in a self-service type process. Web technologies typically utilised by
RTOs are categorized in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web Technology Categories</th>
<th>Common Applications of the Web Technologies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information Browsing</td>
<td>HTML pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currency Converters</td>
<td>Weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia</td>
<td>Animation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Commerce (EC)</td>
<td>Shopping Carts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Web Technology Categories

Typical uses of web technologies by RTO’s include: Web Forms that allow website users to enter
data into designated areas on screen, check boxes to indicate preferences or answer questions.
Forms are an ideal web technology to receive feedback, take bookings or capture website user
details [such as email addresses] which can then, in turn, be used for direct marketing; Scrolling
Marquees send a line of text scrolling across the screen of a website. These technologies can be
 utilised by RTOs to highlighting special events; “Mailto” protocols is a very popular and effective
way for RTO websites to provide a basic feedback mechanism; Image maps are commonly
constructed of a single image which is divided into ‘transparent’ sections linked to different
URL’s. When the user moves their cursor over that part of the image and clicks, they are taken to
the corresponding link. This is used on RTO websites where the Image is often a map of the
region, displaying locations of towns or attractions.

Javascripts – embedding Javascript code into an HTML page is used to increase usability,
functionality and interactivity of a website. Many Javascripts are freely available on the Internet
and can be easily modified by a website designer to suit a particular purpose on a website. In
relation to RTO’s, these Javascript applications may include:

- Interactive Menus - allow website users to easily navigate through the pages contained in
  the RTO website. As websites increase in size, the ability of the website user to find
  information becomes more difficult. A well structured, easy to use menu helps alleviate
  this problem for large websites.
- Tracking website visits – through the use of ‘Cookies’ and other website specific statistics
  available as Javascripts or as services offered by Internet Service Providers.
- Customisation – gathering user details such as name or email address enables a more
  customised and personal interaction between user and website on subsequent visits.
- Image Rotation – displaying different images on a page so as to appear fresh and vibrant
  to frequent users of the site.
- Automatic Email and Newsletter Subscriptions – simple ways off ‘locking-in’ website
  visitors. Automatically generated and efficient way of direct marketing. This method is
  more acceptable to online customers as they generally have ‘opted-in’ to receive the
  information rather than the RTO sending out unsolicited information. Also avoids the
  backlash associated with unwanted, unsolicited emails, newsletters and other assorted
  online information commonly referred to as ‘Spam’.
- Search Function – allow a website user to enter a text string into a text box, submit the
  search criteria and have corresponding results displayed on screen, often with a hyperlink
  taking the user directly to the information they requested.
- Slide Shows – enable website visitors to view a set of repeating images. This enables
  RTO’s to visually promote their local area’s attractions and provides the visitor to the
website with a “virtual” feel for unique features of the region (for example, a rainforest experience).

METHODOLOGY

The ultimate aim of our ongoing research project is to build a global picture of the use of the Web by RTOs. A comprehensive online search was conducted targeting Chilean RTOs. A list of Chilean RTOs was obtained from Google Internet Search Engine (www.google.com), Yahoo (www.yahoo.com) and the Chilean National Tourism Service, SERNATUR (www.senatur.cl). The search resulted in the identification of 118 Regional Tourism Organisations websites which were analysed over a two month period from January to February 2005. The distribution of Chilean RTO’s according to geographic zone is depicted in table 4, below. As observed, the greatest concentration of tourism offices with a website is Patagonia (3.8%), followed by the central zone (15.3%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic Zone</th>
<th>Number of sites</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre-South</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patagonia</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapa Nui</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Geographic Distribution of the sample

Informed by insights from earlier research, a coding protocol was designed for the RTO website assessments. To eliminate bias, coders were given descriptions of each of the features and functional components and were asked to examine and code each of the 118 Web sites according to the coding protocol provided. The process involved examining in detail the functions and features of each website and grouping sites according to levels of functionality, interactivity and sophistication. Each site was then categorised according to the stages and levels of the extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA). From the groupings, a clear indication of the stage and level of eMICA could be determined.

RESULTS

Table 5, below, provides an indication of where the 118 sites evaluated fit into each of the stages/levels comprising eMICA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of eMICA</th>
<th>Number of sites</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1 Level 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1 Level 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 Level 1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 Level 2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 Level 3</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>34.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Results of the 2005 RTO Web site evaluations

Of the 118 sites evaluated, all had established more than just a presence (Stage 1). The majority of the sites (63.5%) exhibited functionality consistent with Stage 2 of eMICA (provision). Sites developed at this stage are characterised by levels of interactivity and features consistent with all
three levels of stage 2 as well as both levels of stage 1 of eMICA. The levels of sophistication exhibited on the sites developed to stage 2 varied considerably across the three levels. Functionality ranged from basic to high-level product catalogues, value-add hyperlinks and low-level to advanced customer support systems (online enquiry forms, FAQs, sitemaps). Industry-specific value added features such as multimedia presentations of the unique features of the region, virtual tours, static to interactive maps, chat rooms, discussion forums, newsletters and automatic email updates were also evident.

Of the 118 sites evaluated 34.7% (41) sites were offering functionality consistent with Stage 3 development (i.e. processing). Sites at this stage of development offered functionality ranging from interaction with corporate servers and databases (for information retrieval) to full e-commerce functionality including secure online booklings and product sales (souvenirs and other tourism-related products). This finding was unexpected and inconsistent with findings from our earlier studies of countries and islands in the Asia-Pacific Region, where sites typically matured at Stage 2 of eMICA.

The level of Internet adoption by Chilean RTOs must be considered in the context in which tourism offices are regionalised. This research indicates that RTOs with a national presence (i.e. those prominent as national offices and categorized within the National Geographic Zone in Table 5) have developed to Stage 3 (59%) of eMICA (online provision). National sites are more likely to act as tourism ‘gateways’ or portals and as such, these websites are often government funded, professionally designed and regularly updated and well maintained. RTOs represented at this Stage incorporate high levels of functionality into their websites. The RTOs located within the North Zone have reached a similar Stage of development (44%) as the National offices, while offices within the Central region of Chile exhibit functionality consistent with Stage 2 (Provision), however, have only progressed to Level 2. These RTOs fall short of offering full eCommerce functionality consistent with Stage 3 of eMICA. Around forty percent (40%) of RTOs located in the Southern–Central region have reached the Processing Stage and an equal number of RTOs have developed consistent with Provision within Stage 2, Level 3. Of the offices in the South zone, 46.6% are at the Processing Stage, whereas in the Patagonia zone, the websites sit within provision, Stage 2, Level 3 (53%), and processing, Stage 3 (43%). These results are presented in Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic Zone</th>
<th>Stage 1 Level 1</th>
<th>Stage 1 Level 2</th>
<th>Stage 2 Level 1</th>
<th>Stage 2 Level 2</th>
<th>Stage 2 Level 3</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre-South</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patagonia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapa Nui</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Level of adoption of Web technologies by geographic zone.

**DISCUSSION**

The information-intensive nature of the tourism industry fits particularly well with interactive media like the Web, and indications are that tourism Web sites are constantly being made more interactive (Goodrich 2000a, Gretzel et al. 2000, Hanna and Millar 1997, Marcussen 1997, WTO 2003). Moving from simply broadcasting information to letting consumers interact with the Web site content allows the tourism organisation to engage consumers’ interest and participation, increasing the likelihood that they will return to the site, to capture information about their preferences, and to use that information to provide personalised communication and services. The content of tourism destination Web sites is particularly important because it directly influences the
perceived image of the destination and creates a virtual experience for the consumer. This experience is greatly enhanced when Web sites offer interactivity (Cano and Prentice 1998, Gretzel et al. 2000, Legoherel et al. 2000; Burgess et al., 2001; Doolin et al., 2003).

Interactive Web site presentation runs a spectrum from information provision, through brochure ordering and inquiry services, to booking and payment online (Marcussen 1997). A summary of the key features of 25 “best practice” destination marketing organisations, evaluated by the World Tourism Organization, is presented by Goodrich (2000b). These features include navigational assistance and branding on the home page, multiple means of communication (including the use of colour, photographs, maps, symbols, and multimedia), interactivity, rich information on a wide range of topics, the use of managed and updated databases, and multilingual support. Standing and Vasudavan (1999) used a similar list of functions in their evaluation of Australian travel agents’ Web sites. Features of travel agent Web sites include provision of product, service and destination information, transaction capability, customer interaction and feedback, and links to value-added information sources. Although Standing and Vasudavan were evaluating travel agencies, it is interesting to note that relatively few sites provided higher levels of interactivity such as online booking, payment and value added customer service.

The Web sites of the Chilean RTOs display the same range of functionality as earlier studies of RTOs in Australia, New Zealand, Asia and Pacific Islands, however, a large number of the Chilean RTOs sites have progressed beyond provision and promotion to incorporate eCommerce functionality, albeit restricted to online booking and sales. The RTO sites evaluated in all studies can be distinguished on the basis of the level of interactivity they offer to the consumer of tourism information and services. In fact, the eMICA model uses interactivity as the primary means of establishing the various stages of Internet commerce adoption. This study further confirms the usefulness of Web site interactivity for this purpose adding more support our earlier studies (Doolin et al., 2003; Burgess et al., 2002), suggesting that in the tourism industry, major milestones in Internet commerce development are:

1. moving beyond a basic Web page with an email contact, to providing links to value-added tourism information and the use of Web-based forms for customer interaction;
2. offering opportunities for the consumer to interact with the Web site through (a) value-added features such as sending electronic postcards or recording their experiences and reading others’ experiences in Web-based guest books, and (b) the provision of online customer support via internal site search engines and searchable databases;
3. the beginnings of Internet commerce transactions with the acceptance of online bookings for accommodation, travel, and other tourism services;
4. full adoption of Internet commerce, where consumers are able to complete transactions online through secure Internet channels.

One finding of note in the Chilean study is the number of RTO sites that provide functionality at the transactional level (34.7%). This is an unusual finding, given that the organisations in this industry sector are mainly in the business of promoting regions, their unique features and offerings primarily through the provision of value-added information and services. RTOs interviewed during the course of an earlier study, stated that the primary reason they had not progressed to Stage 3 (full online e-commerce transactions) was the difficulty envisaged with refunding purchases for accommodation and other tourism products obtained from third party providers. The RTOs further stated that while it was viable proposition to take bookings on behalf of its members, they did not have the facilities or experience required to deal with cancellations and refunds. On this basis, they were acting as a “referral” agency only for third party products. Those RTOs that had progressed to stage 3, were mainly operating at low transactional levels, selling souvenirs and maps of the region online. Given the departure from the findings of earlier studies, further investigation is warranted. Future levels of adoption of Internet commerce is likely to depend on the future role taken by RTOs in the region. However, there is potential for development on the supply side in facilitating the provision of more sophisticated services to tourism operators in their region (Doolin et al., 2003). This would involve the deployment of more sophisticated Internet and Web technologies, such as intranets, extranets, electronic marketplaces and mobile applications.
CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has presented the results of a study that evaluated the Web sites of 118 Chilean Regional Tourism Organisations. The RTOs generally displayed a high level of interactivity, consistent with their role in marketing destinations in geographic regions in which many individual local tourism operators lack an Internet presence. Although a significant number of RTOs (34.7%) offered functionality at the highest level of eMICA (processing), more than half of the RTOs stopped short of offering consumers the capability to complete their tourism and travel transactions online through the RTO sites. Although the level of interactivity is relatively high, an opportunity exists for Chilean RTOs to develop their websites further, providing potential visitors with the option to complete all of their travel transactions online. Progression beyond this point is likely to depend on the overall maturing of the use of the Internet by domestic and international consumers, or a change in the role of RTOs.

The outcome of the research provides further confirmation of the staged approach to development of commercial Web sites proposed by the extended Model of Internet Commerce (eMICA). Further, the results of the study suggest that regional tourism organisations in Chile are at a relatively sophisticated stage of development and are leveraging the opportunities that the Web presents as a viable tool for promotion of their regions.

Ongoing research will address the following research questions not addressed by the current study:

1) How do Chilean RTO Web sites compare with RTO sites in other Latin American countries?
2) Is there potential for Chilean RTO sites to move beyond stage 3 development?
3) What distinguishes Chilean RTOs from RTOs in other regions in terms of their progression to higher levels of eCommerce functionality and sophistication?

REFERENCES


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