Benchmarked Wine Tourism Destination Websites

Nina Mistilis

Tourism and Hospitality Management Unit, School of Marketing
University of New South Wales, Australia
n.mistilis@unsw.edu.au

Abstract

This paper aimed first to benchmark wine tourism websites in Spain and Australia, using the eMICA model, evaluating the extent of their Internet commerce adoption and second to test the robustness of the approach. The model served as a valuable tool to benchmark wine tourism websites in Spain and Australia in terms of the highest stage and level reached, both in a short time series and in a cross national sense. Although the research did not confirm the evolutionary, staged approach to developing websites as proposed by eMICA, it did allow their non linear progression to be recognised. In this sense, it proved to be quite robust.

Keywords: wine tourism; tourism websites; Spain benchmark; Australia benchmark

1 Introduction

Wine tourism has become an important tourism market segment for many nations and growth is forecast to continue (Getz, 2000). As one of the few national industries outside metropolitan areas, wine tourism plays a significant role in regional development, offering well recognised opportunities, mostly related to economic and cultural considerations (Carlsen and Dowling, 2000). There is a significant relationship between wine and tourism as both the wine and tourism industries rely on regional branding for market leverage and promotion (Hall et al, 2000). Competition may be between wine tourism regions within a nation or cross nationally.

In Spain and Australia wine tourism is a niche market. In Spain, through the European Union (EU) there has been government assistance for wine tourism, usually in the broader context of regional and/or rural development. EU funding has assisted wine tourism in several projects, a significant one being the LEADER strategy for rural development in the Rioja and other wine regions. In Australia, there has been national government assistance within the context of regional development. Notwithstanding this assistance, in both nations there are still substantial issues in respect of policy formulation and implementation often associated with the absence of suitable local institutions, which can lead to unrealised tourism projections and potential (Hall, 2000).

Given the importance of wine tourism in regional development and the destination choices tourists have today for the same themed product, it appears imperative to
develop tourism marketing for a particular wine region, regardless of the nation within which it resides, in order to maintain a competitive advantage. It is also useful for regional marketing organisations and individual wineries to measure and monitor their comparative advantage in marketing and distributing the wine tourism product.

It is frequently argued that the strategic use of technology ultimately provides a firm or organisation with competitive advantage. Online technology can drive opportunities for development of the wine tourism destination by more easily providing information to potential visitors and by enabling the wineries to compete with larger, urban attractions. Visitors to wineries tend to belong to higher socio economic groups, compared to other tourists, and therefore are more likely to have online access - a situation underpinning its importance to wine tourism marketing. Wine tourists may wish to book a time for a special wine tasting, for a tour of a particular winery or of all the wineries in the region. They may also wish to book accommodation in the region or other tours or attractions.

One form of online technology used for marketing tourism in a rural, regional or urban locality is the destination website. The purpose of this research paper is to apply and test an approach to benchmarking the relative maturity of wine tourism destination websites and test the robustness of the approach.

2 Theory

Definitions of websites are ‘ambiguous and ill defined’ but they can be defined as a ‘cluster of pages’ composed of a ‘unique node on the web’, with one domain name (Pan and Feisenmaier, 2000). Building on the website work of Ho (1997), Pan and Feisenmaier (2000) developed typologies of tourism websites. They based their analysis on information users and the information itself, identifying categories associated with the nature of information flows and level of information richness.

In some circumstances the destination website may have a sophisticated electronic system such as a destination management system. Being relatively new and still evolving, they do not really have a universally accepted definition (Frew and O’Connor, 1999). Their mandatory features and content may differ according to the perception of the country and developer though information, reservation and client database are generally distinct categories (O’Connor, 1999). Whatever the level of sophistication, the websites analysed in this research paper are destination defined websites which underpin the function of the tourism destination marketing organisation (DMO) in the primary task of promoting wine tourism within a defined region.

Benchmarking is generally concerned with how to improve business activity, processes and management, though there is wide variation in their definitions. In one type of external benchmarking - competitive benchmarking - organisations are compared with other organisations who are their competitors (Woer, 2002).
model, which has recently been developed to benchmark regional tourism websites, is
the eMICA model, adapted from the Model of Internet Commerce Adoption
(MICA).

MICA was originally developed for a study in the Australian metal fabrication
industry (Burgess and Cooper 1998). The model proposed that in developing
commercial web sites, organisations build on functionality over time, as their
expertise in the use of Internet technology increases. As sites move through the three
stages of development from inception (promotion) through consolidation (provision)
to maturity (processing), layers of complexity and functionality are added to the site.
The stages of development indicate the relative maturity of the business or industry
sector in Internet commerce.

The addition of layers 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 (Timmers, 1998). Thus MICA consists of three
stages, incorporating levels of business process – first the Web-based promotion
stage, followed by provision of information and services stage and finally the
transaction processing stage.

Table 1: The extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA); adapted
from Burgess and Cooper (2000)

<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, e-mail contact, information on company activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 2 – Provision</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 – low interactivity</td>
<td>basic product catalogue, hyperlinks to further information, online enquiry form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 – medium interactivity</td>
<td>higher-level product catalogues, customer support (eg. FAQ’s, sitemaps), industry-specific value-added features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3 – high interactivity</td>
<td>chat room, discussion forum, multimedia, newsletters or updates by e-mail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stage 3 – Processing

Since the original study, MICA has been applied to Australian regional tourism websites (Burgess and Cooper 2000) and New Zealand Regional Tourism Organisations tourism (Doolin, Burgess and Cooper, 2002) to evaluate the level of Internet commerce adoption. This resulted in its enhancement as an extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA), shown in Table 1. The extended model proposes that a number of additional layers of complexity, ranging from very simple to highly sophisticated, exist within the identified three main stages of MICA.

For eMICA, layers of complexity and functionality are added to the website at each stage. In the promotion or first stage, there are two levels, one showing basic information such as company contact details and the business areas covered on the site; the more advanced second level shows richer information with more information on activities and e-mail contact. In the second stage of provision or consolidation there are three levels of interactivity – low, medium and high. The first level of interactivity has hyperlinks and an online enquiry form; the second level has FAQ, maps and value added features; the third level of interactivity has chat rooms, multimedia and newsletters. In the third stage of maturity, processing, there are secure online transactions (Table 1).

Conversion rates (that is “lookers to bookers”), where the tourists find information on the website and then book some tourist product, are a key e-commerce operating metric (Frew, McCarthy and Horan, 2002). Certainly the ability of the web site to reach potential wine tourists and convert them to visitors to the destination in part is associated with the level of development of the web site. Evolution and development to the ‘transaction processing’ stage is an indication of the maturity of the website in terms of Internet commerce adoption.

The research paper aims to benchmark wine tourism destination websites, evaluating the extent of their development in Spain and Australia. A secondary objective is to evaluate the robustness of the e MICA model, used to benchmark the websites.

3 Method

The e MICA model was applied to benchmark the wine tourism sites in terms of the level of sophistication of Internet commerce adoption. It does not examine the purely technical aspects of websites, such as search facilities, download times or user friendliness. The sites examined in this analysis are a recognised integral part of the distribution of the tourism product, and so are worthy of examination.
It is recognised that some major differences may exist between tourism and manufacturing web sites, which may influence the robustness of the adapted model. For example tourism is part of the service sector, producing a *service*, not a *good*, as manufacturing and other industry sectors do; destination websites are *intermediaries*, rather than suppliers, providing, inter al, an interface between the customer or tourist and the supplier of the tourism product. Also, increasingly on a global scale, individual wineries may have websites with varying degrees of sophistication, but which are not tourism related (Symonds, 2001). They may market and distribute their product and are unrelated to tourism, though, of course, they may link with wine tourism websites.

Twenty wine tourism websites in Spain and Australia were analysed during two periods - February and then September 2002 - and the highest stage and level recorded for each (Table 2). The wineries were selected randomly from the four most prominent Australian wine states (South Australia, New South Wales, Western Australia and Victoria) and the four most prominent wine Spanish autonomous regions (La Rioja, Andalucia, Galicia and Catalonia).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Highest level of Internet Commerce Adoption shown in Spain and Australian wine tourism sites in February 2002 and September 2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage of eMICA</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 1 – Promotion</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 2 – Provision</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 3 – Processing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In February 2002, the wine tourism websites were accessed through the national government websites – for Australia www.australia.com (Australian Tourist
Commission) and for Spain www.tourspain (Instituto de Turismo de España, TURESPAÑA). For Australia the option was to be a New Zealand tourist, for Spain the English language option was chosen:
http://www.australia.com/nz_mhome.asp
http://www.tourspain.es/

Then links were followed through the state tourism sites to the wine region for Australia:
http://www.filewine.es/english/default.htm
and through the query option for wine to the gastronomy site to wine tourism for Spain:
http://www.filewine.es/english/zonasy.htm

In September 2002 a follow up study was attempted, again through the national government websites. However both sites had undergone construction in the interim period (which is ongoing for TURESPAÑA), leading to different methods of wine tourism site access as well as modified results. For Spain access was through the links option to the autonomous regional site, to the particular region and then to the ‘gastonomie y vino’ link; for Australia, access was through ‘things to do’ to ‘food and wine’. Both sites showed a much more standardised presentation of the wine tourism websites than just seven months earlier.

4 Results

There was some uniformity in the level reached in Spain where all sites were at the second or provision stage, and the low interactivity level and Australia where nine-tenths were at a similar stage and level but one tenth had progressed to stage three, processing (Table 2). However, surprisingly, there was no discernible pattern in the nature or extent of Internet commerce adoption in the lower levels. Consequently, for example, a site which had a stage 2 capability, may have only basic information from stage 1, level 1, not rich information. This demonstrated a nonlinear pattern of evolution. In other words, the expectation that “as sites move through the stages of development from inception (promotion) to maturity (processing), layers of complexity and functionality are added to the site” (Doolin et al 2002:558) was not shown in these results, almost without exception of a single site.

A comparative analysis of the sites attempted seven months later in September 2002 (Table 2), showed the same pattern of nonlinear evolutionary development. Further, although most sites had progressed slightly to a higher level of Internet commerce, reaching the provision stage two (Spain to level 3 interactivity and Australia to level 2 interactivity), a minority (10%) of Australian sites had regressed and some sites (10% Spanish and 5% Australian) were no longer accessible. Spain had also incorporated WAP and PDA interactivity functions on its www.tourspain site.
It is not possible within the framework of this research paper to suggest links between the pattern of results and the level of adoption of Internet commerce demonstrated in the websites, given the pattern results showing non-linear development. What is clear is that such evolution does not necessarily follow in an incremental way the stages and levels described in the model, and reported in previous research, at least in these wine tourism websites.

Notwithstanding their highest stage and level of Internet commerce reached, wine tourism websites in different regions in both Spain and Australia demonstrated only a moderate degree of ‘net readiness’, due to their non-linear evolution. This appeared to differ significantly from the smoother linear evolution recorded for regional destination websites in New Zealand (Doolin et al, 2002) and Australia (Burgess and Cooper, 2000).

The reasons for these changes may be associated with development of the ATC (www.australia.com) and TURESPÄNA (www.tourspain) sites, which in turn may reflect online implementation of national government policy. The Spanish central tourism body is geographically neutral in terms of marketing and promotions; its focus is now on products for example cultural tourism (gastronomie y vino) and itineraries (A country of great routes). This may partly reflect the market trend but also political realities in the post Franco period (Pearce, 1997). Reconstruction of the site now appears to reflect online implementation of this policy, as access is through any autonomous regional site and then to wine tourism (‘gastonomie y vino’).

Similarly, national government policy direction appears to explain the changes in the Australian site. The Australian Tourism Data Warehouse (ATDW) project aimed to standardise destination and product information held on the Australian Tourist Commission (ATC) and individual state and territory databases into one common format (Daniele, Mistilis and Ward, 2000; Ward, 2000). Now implemented, all information is housed and distributed, mainly through the ATC’s official websites, from a central data warehouse. The uniformity of the highest level and stage of Internet commerce adoption appears to reflect this standardised approach. It may also explain regression of some Australian wine tourism sites from the processing stage, as the ATC site does not have a processing function, due to policy and legal limitations.

McLoughlin (1999) who recognised the importance of social and technological interaction has examined the process of technological change. He and later authors argue that technology change is associated with wider influences than those within the organisation – for example, the external environmental conditions. These results appear to show the impact of external environment, in terms of government policy, on the wine tourism websites in both Spain and Australia.

The results point to ways in which the model could be adapted and increased in sophistication. First the ways in which non-linear adoption of Internet commerce is
associated with the stage of maturity of the website craves exploration. Second, and interrelated to the first, the impact of external environmental factors on the stages and levels of development, which in turn indicate the level of maturity of Internet adoption, needs to be closely examined.
5 Conclusions

The model served as a valuable tool to benchmark wine tourism websites in Spain and Australia in terms of the highest stage and level reached, both in a short time series and in a cross national sense. It also was useful in demonstrating non linear evolutionary progression through lower levels of the stage reached a finding that was not indicated either by the literature or previous regional tourism website studies. Although the research did not confirm the evolutionary, staged approach to developing websites as proposed by e MICA, it did allow their non linear progression to be recognised. In this sense, it proved to be quite robust.

Wine tourism functions within a complex network of public and private sector partnerships. The Internet commerce adoption shown in their websites in some sense results from their association with that network. Because wine tourism occurs in rural localities, the lack of suitable institutions mentioned earlier may limit or at least influence the nature of Webster development and Internet commerce adoption. Thus the external business and political environment in which wine tourism operates will impact on development of the websites, together with intra organisational factors and conditions.

Emiko explores sites from an organisational perspective, analysing the stage and level of achievement in Internet commerce adoption; what is needed in tourism to complement the model is a method of interpreting the findings, taking into account both internal (organisation) and external (environment) factors, as suggested for other industry sectors. This would also allow business and government policy recommendations to be made in order to facilitate Internet commerce adoption in wine tourism. Given the structure of tourism and the relationship between central and regional marketing organisations, such an approach would be of real significance.

References


‘Destination management systems’ (DMS) are also known as, destination marketing systems, marketing management systems, destination databases, destination information systems, destination management information systems, destination reservation systems, tourist information systems, global destination marketing systems, regional integrated computer information, reservation & management systems (Frew & O’Connor, 1999).

One of the few examples in tourism is a project which benchmarked European Union tourism regional destinations in the use of electronic practice (Oertel et al, 2001).