THE IMPORTANCE OF VALUE-ADDED SERVICES TO SUPPORT THE CUSTOMER SEARCH AND PURCHASE PROCESS ON TRAVEL WEBSITES

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This article explores one potential reason for the online tourism market’s slower than expected growth rate. It investigates to what extent value-added services provided by websites for tour operators and travel agencies are actually perceived as important by the customer in the search and purchase process. An adapted version of a consumer decision process model is used and the results are based on a Web survey. The results show that most value-added services are perceived to be most important in the search and/or purchase phase and that no value-added services are perceived to be most important in the postconsumption phase. Based on this it is suggested that travel websites should try and develop more value-added services aimed at supporting the customer in the postconsumption phase in order to build strong customer relationships and loyalty, which may lead to continuous buying behavior.

Key words: Search and purchase process; Value-added services; Customer relationships; Travel websites

Introduction

The tourism industry has for quite some time now been one of the e-commerce areas with the highest growth forecasts. Although there has been growth, the growth rate has been far from as fast as was expected in the early years of the Internet. Figures on the size of the online market for tourism products need to be treated with caution, although they do provide some indication. According to World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2003), online travel purchases are projected to account for 28% of the total e-commerce market by 2003. This puts tourism and travel products ahead of other products such as computer hardware, clothing, books, grocery, music/videos, and computer software. The growth rate suggested by WTTC (2003) is that aviation, lodging, car rental, and cruise/vacation sectors are all expected to grow by between 11% and 22% from 2000 until 2005. The biggest growth is expected in the car rental sector closely followed by the air sector.

Figures presented by PhocusWright (2003a) stated that by 2002 15% of all travel was booked...
online. A slower than expected but steady growth is expected for the next few years and by 2005 30% or more of all travel will be booked online. The biggest online sector is currently airlines and approximately half of all online bookings are made through an online travel agent; the other half of the bookings are made directly with individual supplier websites.

The most commonly mentioned motivators for using the Internet to search for and buy travel and tourism products are: the richness and depth of information, the ease of finding lots of information, the search and purchase process is controlled by the customer, it is available at all times, and many products are offered at a discount by suppliers who pass on distribution savings on to customers (Buhalis, 2003). Although it is obvious there are many advantages of using the Internet for searching and buying tourism and travel products, there has not been much research on how websites actually support this process and how the services provided are perceived by the customers in relation to their needs. Recent research by Öörni and Klein (2003) suggests that “current electronic markets do not provide any obvious means to better evaluation of seller credibility and reliability of product information.” Also, the authors suggest that there is still little evidence of electronic markets leading to comparatively lower search costs, more extensive pre-purchase search, and increased price competition.

There are of course many different reasons to be investigated further regarding why growth in tourism e-commerce is not as big or as fast as expected, one of which is most likely the issue of privacy and perceived security. Another possible issue to investigate further is the focus of this article, which is on the customers’ search and purchase process and how this process is, or perhaps is not, supported by tourism websites. The purpose of this article was to study the importance of value-added services (services that add value to the process of searching for and purchasing tourism products on the Internet) provided by various tour operator and travel agency websites as perceived by their website visitors.

In the following sections concepts of customers’ search and purchase processes will be discussed as well as a presentation of the value-added services included in this study. Based on this discussion 16 propositions are proposed regarding the importance of value-added services in the different phases of the consumer search and purchase process. The methodology of the empirical study will then be described and results presented. Finally, a discussion on the results of the study is presented.

The Search and Purchase Process

There are several possible views on consumers’ use of the Internet. One is to focus their personal experiences when using the Internet and another is to focus their perceived usefulness or utility. In this article a utilitarian view of the consumer decision process is chosen as the basis from which the propositions are developed. However, some attention is also given to a more behavioral influence perspective on consumers’ use of the Internet in the form of references to Hoffman and Novak’s (1996) two consumer search modes—the goal-directed and the experiential mode—where the goal-directed mode is believed to be close to a more traditional economic and utilitarian view.

Given that customers have a need, a want, or a problem, they engage in different activities to make decisions on what to buy. A model of the consumer decision process is presented by Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel (2001), according to which there are seven different stages in the process: need recognition, search for information, pre-purchase evaluation, purchase, consumption, post-consumption evaluation, and divestment. In the tourism research literature a similar process is presented by several authors, for example by Mouthino (1987) as part of a complex model for consumer behavior in tourism and by Crotts (1999). Crotts’ (1999) model includes need recognition, internal and external information search, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase evaluations, while Mouthino’s (1987) model also takes into account cultural/social and environmental influences as well as personality and lifestyle, which form the choice criteria in the pre-decision phase of the process.

The models presented above form the basis from which an adapted model is developed (see Fig. 1). For the purpose of this study some phases have been excluded. The majority of customers’
importance of website value-added services

Figure 1. Model of customer search and purchase process used in the study.

Phase 1

In the search and evaluation phase the customer is concerned with finding information and solutions to satisfy their needs. Two types of sources of such information are presented by Blackwell et al. (2001), internal and external sources, and the Internet is thought by many to be a unique interactive external source of information (Money & Crotts, 2003). External sources are mostly personal or friends and relatives, marketer dominated (e.g., brochures, advertisements in print, and electronic media), neutral (travel clubs, travel guides, travel agents), and experiential sources (inspections, prepurchase visits, or store contacts) (Crotts, 1999). However, tourists may sometimes engage in a limited external search if they have a large amount of information available that was previously acquired and can be internally retrieved from memory (Mouthino, 1987). In this study the focus is on using the Internet as an external source of information in itself but also as a channel through which the customer can reach other external sources such as other customers. The Internet can enhance or simplify the search phase in the decision process through the wide variety of sources of information available, through giving the customer information on a specific product, brand, or retailer and where to find them, the possibility of searching for information based on a topic of interest, and through the ability to shop around various websites for products and prices. However, there might be limitations to the Internet if the customer is unsure of what they are looking for or the search might be complicated if help is not available (Blackwell et al., 2001; Peter & Olson, 2002).

The customer is also evaluating and judging competing alternatives in terms of beliefs about to what extent the product in question is capable of satisfying the customer’s need (Blackwell et al., 2001; Peter & Olson, 2002). In the process of evaluating alternatives the tourist will use both information on the range of products available (the evoked set) and information concerning the attributes of the alternatives. The assessment of the different alternatives includes an analysis of cost/value relations, attractions and amenities at the destination, travel arrangements, and the quality and quantity of available travel information. Also the customer’s confidence in the travel agent, the overall image of the alternative destinations and services, the tourist’s previous travel experience, travel constraints such as time, costs, etc., and the degree of perceived risks are important determinants in the evaluation phase (Mouthino, 1987). But customers must not only decide which product to buy but also where to buy the product and
hence also evaluate these kind of options (Blackwell et al., 2001). Specifically for experience type of products (experience products being products that have to be experienced before they can actually be evaluated) (Nelson, 1974), such as tourism products, word-of-mouth and critics’ reviews have been shown to be important influencers on customers’ final choice. In an Internet setting it should be important to provide services to support the customers’ ability and motivation to evaluate the products offered in a favorable way. This could be done on the basis of traditional marketing principles but also through using the Internet’s unique possibilities for interactivity. Previous research has shown that using interactive media for product information purposes can be effective, because the user is able to process the information thoroughly and hence will develop an attitude towards the product (Nysveen, 2000).

**Phase 2**

The purchase phase is where the customer actually buys the chosen alternative (Blackwell et al., 2001). On the Internet the customer may choose from at least four different strategies in this phase: to make the purchase on the Internet; to go through the search and evaluation phase in the traditional physical marketplace and then choose to buy the product chosen on the Internet; to go through the search and evaluation phase online but then choose to buy the product in a traditional physical shop (with their regular high-street travel agent, for example); or to not use the Internet in any phase of the process (Peter & Olson, 2002). Previous research by Christous and Kassianidis (2002) shows that the advantages and disadvantages of physical efforts and time related to traditional in-store travel agency shopping positively influence customers’ perception of the characteristics of e-shopping. Results also show that customers’ perception of the relative advantage of electronic travel shopping positively influences their intention to adopt e-shopping. Hence, websites are recommended to design simple ordering procedures that are convenient to the user.

**Phase 3**

The postconsumption phase deals with the customers’ experience of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, which will in turn affect future decisions. Both emotional experiences from the actual consumption and product attributes such as price in relation to value for money are evaluated by the customer in the postconsumption phase. In this phase the customer also weighs prior expectations against actual results (Blackwell et al., 2001; Mouthino, 1987). The postconsumption phase includes: decision confirmation, experience evaluation, satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and future response (exit, voice, or loyalty) (Sheth, Mittal, & Newman, 1999). Satisfaction is a function of the attributes of the service, the motivations, perceptions, effort expended, aspirations of the tourist, as well as the availability of alternatives. Postconsumption evaluation will impact the tourist’s store of experiences, it is a check on market-related decisions, and it provides feedback to serve as a basis for adjusting future purchase behavior (Mouthino, 1987).

**Value-Added Services and Research Propositions**

Several previous studies give an impression of the dissemination of value-added services in the tourism industry (Cano & Prentice, 1998; Lexhagen & Nysveen, 2001; Nysveen & Lexhagen, 2001; Oh, 1998; Procaccino & Miller, 1999; Rahman & Richins, 1997; Weeks & Crouch, 1999). The results of these studies, although focused on different types of businesses and in different geographical regions, give an overview of what kind and to which extent value-added services are provided by the tourism industry online. The results indicate a trend towards more value-added services being provided now than previously. Value-added services offered on a tour operator and travel agency website give access to information, applications for communication, and other kinds of support and advice that contribute to the customers’ ability to search for, make decisions about, and buy tourism products, thus suggesting that providing value-added services at tour operator and travel agency websites is important. The value-added services included in this study are based on online services discussed among other researchers and they are believed to be a good representation of the available types of services on tour operator and travel agency websites (Lexha-
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The definition of value-added services used in this study is based on the one used by Nysveen and Lexhagen (2002, p. 489) and Nysveen (2003, p. 115). Value-added services are “Website applications that help visitors access various forms of information about the product or service offered. Value added services on commercial tourism Web sites give access to information, applications for communication, and other kinds of support and advice” that may assist the customer during the decision process.

**Contact information** is defined as information regarding a tour operator and travel agency physical address, information about telephone and fax, and e-mail address (Nysveen & Lexhagen, 2001). Contact information may give the customer an opportunity to make contact with the business behind the website in order to search for information that might not be found on the website, or clarify some question or issue, and/or actually order the product, thus indicating a relative importance through the whole search and purchase process. It has also been shown that the Internet is an important source of information for tourists (Buhalis, 1998; IPK International, 2003; Travel Industry Association of America [TIA], 1999). In 2002 one in every three Europeans used the Internet for travel information or booking prior to their outbound trip (Etourism, 2003; IPK International, 2003). However, tourists have been shown in previous studies to use a combination of external sources (Fodness & Murray, 1997). Access to contact information is thus supposed to be important as an alternative external source of information in the search process. Research has also shown that many people using the Internet as an external source of information actually are using traditional channels for purchasing tourism products (Buhalis, 2003; PhocusWright, 1998, 1999, 2004; TIA, 2002). In the postconsumption phase, however, contact information does not seem to be of vital importance. Although some people are eager to give feedback to the company where they bought the product, such activities are typically initiated only if something unusual or specific has happened in relation to the consumption of the product. Thus, we argue that contact information is a more important value-added service for customers in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase.

**Proposition 1:** Contact information is a more important value-added service for customers in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase.

**Multimedia** is the integration of two or more types of media such as text, graphics, sound, full motion video, or animation into a computer-based application (Laudon & Laudon, 1998). Through using different multimedia techniques a richer and more vivid picture of the tourism product can be provided (Cho & Fesenmaier, 2000). Vividness has also been pointed out to be one of the major factors behind the user experience on the Internet (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Hence, this type of value-added service may provide the customer with a more correct impression of the product in question and thus assist the customer in evaluating the product. However, it could be suggested that multimedia-based information can assist the customer in the postconsumption phase when evaluating the actual experience of the product bought. It does not seem reasonable, however, to think that many customers take the time to find this type of information in order to perform this postconsumption evaluation. The argument is hence that multimedia is a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase.

**Proposition 2:** Multimedia is a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase.

A **search engine** is an application where visitors can write a word or a phrase that the search engine will then use to locate specific sites or pages within the website that are relevant to the information the customer is looking for (Laudon & Laudon, 1998). Previous research has shown that the most preferred value-added service on a tourism business website is access to a search engine (Nysveen, Methlie, & Pedersen, 2003). It has also been suggested that providing more relevant information about the tourism products on offer will generate higher evaluations and satisfaction, where one important factor creating satisfaction is the
availability of alternatives (Mouthino, 1987). One way to support this process for the customer is to provide a search engine that will make it easier for the customer to find relevant information. To search for information and alternatives in the post-consumption phase, however, does not seem to be of particular importance to most customers. This study thus suggests that a search engine will be most relevant for the customer in the search phase.

**Proposition 3:** A search engine is a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the post-consumption phase.

*Frequently asked questions (FAQ)* is a structured collection of questions and answers to previous customer inquiries (Hanson, 2000). Because this type of list provides the customers with the most frequently asked questions they should also be generally relevant. Hence, FAQ will assist the customer primarily in the search phase, especially with evaluating the products because the information provided here may be more precise than that provided in other parts of the website. Other research has also proposed that when consumers can easily access information, their use of this information will increase because the cost of searching for the information is reduced (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996), something that could then work in the direction of convincing customers to actually buy the product. It is also believed that most customers spend a considerably larger proportion of time and effort to consider and evaluate the available alternatives in the search phase than they do confirming their own decisions in the postconsumption phase. Hence, it is argued that FAQ is most important in the search phase.

**Proposition 4:** FAQ is a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the post-consumption phase.

To provide information in other languages than the language of the business behind the website is thought to be a valuable service to customers interested in the product but who are from other parts of the world (Oh, 1998). That the customer can understand the information provided is a precondition when entering the search and purchase process in the first place. Language customization has also been used in previous research to measure website user satisfaction (Muylle, Moeneart, & Despontin, 2004). To provide information in different languages adapted to customer needs is thus thought to be important when searching for and evaluating the information found on the website.

**Proposition 5:** Information in different languages is a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase.

*Links (hyperlinks)* is a method of moving between websites (Chaffey, Mayer, Johnstone, & Ellis-chadwick, 2003). Links are thought to provide the customers with easy access to relevant information and other services available at other websites that might assist customers in their search for travel and tourism products and also in evaluating them. The Internet is thought to simplify and enhance the search process to, for example, identify a specific product title, name, or brand and retailer selling the item (Blackwell et al., 2001). However, locating prospective sellers and suitable products in the electronic marketplace for tourism products has been shown to be more difficult than previously believed (Öörni & Klein, 2003). Locating the websites of the right service providers requires knowledge, or time, perseverance, and luck, especially when it is not always possible to buy the separate parts of a trip through the same supplier (Anckar & Walden, 2002). One way to overcome this problem for the customer is for the website to provide links to other websites that might assist the customer when searching for and purchasing tourism products. As with a search engine it is believed that only a limited amount of time and effort is spent by customers to confirm their decision through searching for information in the postconsumption phase and therefore the need for links in this phase is believed to be small. Thus, the argument is that this will be perceived to be an important value-added service for the customers in the search and purchase phase.

**Proposition 6:** Links are a more important value-added service for customers in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase.
A community (also called forum) gives customers the opportunity to communicate with other customers who use the website as well as with representatives of the business behind the website through posting open messages on an electronic bulletin board (Webopedia, 2003). Perhaps the most interesting value of a community is that it provides access to third-party information or word of mouth, which is often thought to be an important and trustworthy source of information (Blackwell et al., 2001). However, in the postconsumption phase, as previously mentioned for contact information, it is believed that few customers actually bother to voice their opinion or read others’ opinions unless something has gone wrong during the actual consumption of the product. Access to a community is therefore thought to be especially important to customers in the search phase when the customer is evaluating the products under consideration.

**Proposition 7:** A community is a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase.

High-quality maps are important to tourists because they represent information based on the geographical dimensions of a place of interest. Maps can also serve as a tool assisting the customer in deciding how the place of interest relates geographically to other places of interest or to means of transportation, etc. (Zipf, 2002). Similar to multimedia presentations on a website, it is suggested that a map will give a richer and more detailed picture of the tourism product, especially if the product is a vacation package to a specific destination, but also if the customer is considering which travel options to consider on how to get to a destination. This need for deep and detailed information is believed not to be of particular relevance in the postconsumption phase because the customer will then have learned this from personal experience of the place in question. Hence, a map is thought to be important especially in the search phase.

**Proposition 8:** Access to a map is a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase.

Decision support includes applications such as currency converters and different types of agents such as “Ideal vacation finder” (see, e.g., www.11thhourvacations.com). Decision support systems are defined as interactive systems under user control that are used to solve semistructured problems (Laudon & Laudon, 1998, p. 647). The most basic level of decision support involves information displays that increase the customers processing capacity, and at the more sophisticated level a decision support system is designed to assist customers’ decision making. Both of these are aimed at reducing the risk of information overload, which might create fatigue for the customer (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Time pressure is often thought to be of high relevance for the customers of today when making decisions on which products to buy, when to buy them, and where to buy them (Sheth et al., 1999). Different kinds of decision support are thus suggested to assist the customer in different ways when making the decision and these types of services are thus thought to support customers especially in the search and purchase phase. Because the postconsumption phase does not involve any decision making but rather confirming the decisions made, this value-added service is not believed to be particularly important for this phase.

**Proposition 9:** Decision support is a more important value-added service for customers in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase.

Comparing prices is often a key factor in deciding which product to buy (Grewal, 1998) and hence it is important to provide the customers with services to support the need for information on prices and make the comparison as easy as possible for the customer. Customer knowledge of the range of prices for a particular product type may influence customers’ perception of whether the price offered is reasonable or not and the Internet is thought to enhance or simplify the process of comparing prices (Blackwell et al., 2001). Price comparison services can be either interactive, such as search agents where the customer can define the criteria for comparison, or noninteractive, such as comparable price lists. Price comparison services are thought to be most important in the
search phase when making choices among different alternatives. The service is not believed to be of particular importance in the postconsumption phase because the price in relation to value for money would probably be based on comparison of the price paid with the value perceived from the product rather than a price found from a price comparison service.

**Proposition 10:** Price comparison is a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase.

According to Jupiter Communications (Jupiter Research, 2003), *personalization* is defined as “an automated approach to tailoring communications or interactions between a company and a specific sector or individual customer to drive revenue, customer satisfaction, or loyalty” (i.e., a possibility to use technology to customize information for both the company and the customer). Personalization has also been shown to be the third most important value-added service on tourism business websites (Nysveen et al., 2003). Personalization as an example of customization may also be one way to increase the speed of interaction between seller and buyer (Sisodia & Wolfe, 2000) and hence enhance the efficiency of the search and purchase process for the customer. To personalize a website according to customer preferences also give the business behind the website a better position to build strong relationships. Because the need for information, and thus personalized information, on products and alternatives is not believed to be of main importance in the postconsumption phase, the argument is that personalization is most important in the search and purchase phase. If personalization is to be perceived as important in the postconsumption phase it would probably have to be in connection to other more specifically designed services to support the customer in the postconsumption phase, such as personal account information on products bought, etc.

**Proposition 11:** Personalization is a more important value-added service for customers in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase.

The Internet is by definition a pull-based technology where the web browser requests information to be sent from the server. Broadcast media, on the other hand, is based on push-based technology because they send information regardless of whether anyone has requested it. Increasingly, the Internet is also used to send information in a push-based manner (Webopedia, 2003). However, the Internet allows customization of the information being pushed to the customers in that they themselves may set the criteria for which information they would like to receive, when to receive it, and by which mode (e-mail, sms, printed information, etc.). Push-based services should then be based on permission from the customers and adapted to their preferences. This type of service is thought to be important in the search phase because it contains additional and personalized information that might assist the customer when making the decision on which product to buy. However, in the postconsumption phase it seems reasonable to believe that the need for additional information is limited and hence that this service would not be perceived as important in this phase.

**Proposition 12:** Push-based services are a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase.

Mobile access to information and services on the Internet makes it possible for customers to have access to information anywhere (Buhalis, 2003). To effectively and efficiently market a tourism product it is vital to identify the types of sources of information customers use but also when they use them. It is important to recognize the timing of customers’ need for information. For tourism products there is a need for information prior to the trip, on the trip, and after reaching the destination (Crotts, 1999). Hence, it is important to provide information accessible through different mobile devices to meet the timing of those information needs and to influence customers’ decision process. Because mobile access to tourism information and services is by definition intended to assist the customer during the trip and during the actual consumption, it seems logic that the need for mobile access in the postconsumption phase is not the
most relevant. The customer may then simply find it easier to access information and services through other means and sources.

**Proposition 13:** Mobile access is a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the post-consumption phase.

*Short Message Services (SMS)* are services for sending text-based information to a mobile phone (www.webopedia.com). It is a suitable tool for push-based services assisting and supporting the customer anytime and anywhere. Similar to the argument behind the importance of mobile access to information, SMS are important for the tourist operator and travel agency to influence the customers’ decision process in accordance with their timing and need for information. SMS are therefore thought to be perceived as most important in the search phase and not in the post-consumption phase, because the need for additional information in this phase is believed to be limited.

**Proposition 14:** SMS are a more important value-added service for customers in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase.

*A booking form* is an e-mail-based standardized form of booking (Nysveen & Lexhagen, 2001) inquiry that can be characterized as a preliminary booking that then needs confirmation. This may therefore be a suitable form of booking service for those customers who experience a high degree of uncertainty about their product decision. If no booking services are available at the website this might prove to be an important weakness because customers then cannot act upon the information found and the decisions made. A booking form is thought to be most important in the purchase phase.

**Proposition 15:** A booking form is a more important value-added service for customers in the purchase phase than in the search or the post-consumption phase.

*Online booking* is defined as a booking made directly with a global distribution system (GDS), or through a switch systems, or through various proprietary systems available on the Internet (Richer & O’Neil-Dunne, 1998). The more Internet experience the customer has the more likely it is that they actually book a tourism product online rather than just look for information about a product (Weber & Roehl, 1999). To turn lookers into bookers it has been shown that, among other things, it is important to provide a clear online booking procedure that includes handling customers’ ambiguity about reservations procedures, uncertainties over reservations and cancellations, doubts about online security, and difficulties in making reservations online (Morrison, Jing, O’Leary, & Cai, 2001). Given that the customer has chosen the strategy to buy the product in question on the Internet, online booking services are thought to be most important for the customer in the purchase phase. However, it could be argued that online booking would also be important in the postconsumption phase for the customer to perform a check on what was actually bought in comparison to what was received and hence base their opinion on satisfaction or dissatisfaction on this. However, this need is believed to be limited because typically most customers would only do this if something went wrong.

**Proposition 16:** Online booking is a more important value-added service for customers in the purchase phase than in the search or the post-consumption phase.

**Methodology**

A Web questionnaire was used in this study to collect data. The questionnaire was made available on four different websites in Sweden: two tour operator websites and two travel agency websites. One of the travel agency websites is a pure online player while the other websites use traditional distribution channels as well as the Internet. The businesses behind the websites are all major players in the Swedish tourism industry. Visitors to the websites were invited to take part in the study, where they were also offered to take part in a price drawing, and asked to click on a link that led them to the Web questionnaire. The wording of the questionnaire was adapted to the respective type of website to give the respondent a mode for an-
swering the questions. For example, the wording might be “When you visit a tour operator website how important are the following services?” The words “tour operator” would then be exchanged for “travel agency” where the respondent clicked on the link from such a website. Respondents to the questionnaire were first given a description and introduction on how to fill in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into nine webpages and most of them had explanatory texts, available through links, to give the respondent further support in answering the questions.

The first page in the actual questionnaire was designed to investigate issues in connection with the Web visitor’s mode or purpose of the visit, such as a question on whether they were mainly looking to buy or find information on a business trip or a pleasure trip. The responses to these questions then followed the respondent through the rest of the questionnaire such that the top of the page always stated their respective reply and then asked the respondent to please bear this in mind when answering the questions that followed.

The next set of questions measured the importance of the various value-added services, which was then followed by a set of questions that is not reported in this article. In the next section issues of importance of the different value-added services in relation to the different phases of the search and purchase process were measured. The last section of the questionnaire was designed to measure the demographics of the respondents.

The questionnaire was published on the websites during the spring of 2002 and the availability timeframe varied from 4 to 10 weeks on the various websites. Responses to the questionnaire were automatically transferred to a database and later imported to SPSS for analysis. The results presented in this article are based on the use of paired sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA tests.

In total, 669 respondents are included in the sample for this article, all of which stated that they where primarily looking for a leisure trip: 430 respondents used the Web questionnaire link on a travel agency website and 239 used the link from a tour operator website. Thirty-one percent of the respondents were men and 57% were between 21 and 39 years of age. The rest of the sample was distributed as follows: 10% between 15 and 20 years of age, 19% between 40 and 49 years of age, 11% between 50 and 59 years of age, and 3% above 60 years of age. There is a potential bias effect for gender and age if compared to the Swedish population or the population of leisure travelers in Sweden according to the Swedish tourism database. In the case of gender this was found to have a direct effect on the perceived importance of two value-added services (telephone/fax, $F = 5.37$, $p = 0.02$, and booking form, $F = 5.68$, $p = 0.02$). Age was found to have a direct effect for three of the measured value-added services (availability of different languages $F = 4.81$, $p = 0.00$, personalization $F = 2.44$, $p = 0.03$, and mobile access $F = 2.49$, $p = 0.03$). Thus, gender was found to have an effect on two of the 18 measured variables while age was found to have an effect on 3 of the 18 variables. It then seems reasonable to conclude that the sample bias for gender and age does not pose a serious threat to the validity of the study.

Two types of measures were used in the study. The opening question on purpose for visiting the website was measured on a dichotomous scale (business/pleasure). The other type of measure used was a 7-point Likert-type scale with different wordings of the end points of the scale, such as strongly disagree/strongly agree, not at all important/very important. This scale was used to measure degree of importance for the different value-added services.

Regarding the potential limitations to the methodology used in this study it should be noted that although analysis of means was used, which usually requires a metric scale, the response format of this study was only an ordinal scale. The decision to use parametric methods of analysis in this study was based on Kerlinger’s (1992) argument that equality of interval can often be assumed and that the scales used in this study were often used in studies of, among other things, perceived importance. The reader is encouraged to use modest precaution when interpreting the results of the study.

Results

The results of the general perceived importance of the different value-added services show that the most important value-added service on a web-
site for tour operators and travel agents is online booking.

The results in Table 1 give a description of which of the value-added services were in general perceived as most important among the customers. Online booking seems to be the single most important value-added service as perceived by the customers, followed by price comparison, map, e-mail, search engine, booking-form, and details of telephone/fax, which have an average importance of above 5. The least important value-added services as perceived by the customers were SMS and mobile access, which both have an average importance of less than 3.

The results in Table 1 do not shed any light on the propositions presented in this article. In Table 2 a comparison of the importance of the various value-added services across the phases of the purchase process is shown.

Proposition 1 postulated that contact information would be more important in the search and purchase phases than in the postconsumption phase. The results show that contact information was perceived as significantly more important in the search phase than in the postconsumption phase. Also, the results show that contact information was perceived as significantly more important in the purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. Therefore, it is concluded that proposition 3 is partly supported.

The results in regard to the fourth proposition, which postulated that FAQ would be most important in the search phase, show that FAQ was a significantly more important value-added service in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase. The results also show that it is a service that was perceived as more important in the purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. The conclusion is that proposition 4 is partly supported.

Proposition 5 postulated that information in different languages would be a more important value-added service in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase. The results presented in Table 2 show that languages were a significantly more important service in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. However, the results do not show any significant differences in the importance of this service between the search and the purchase phase. Thus, we conclude that proposition 5 is partly supported by the results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value-Added Service</th>
<th>Importance of Service (Mean Score)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone/fax</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search engine</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAQ</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision support</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price comparison</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalization</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push-based services</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile access</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMS</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booking form</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online booking</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( n = 662–667. \)
The sixth proposition postulated that links on a tour operator and travel agency website would be perceived as more important in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. The results of the study show that links were significantly more important in the search phase than in the postconsumption phase, and also that it was perceived as more important in the purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. The results also show that links were significantly more important in the search phase than in the purchase phase and therefore it is concluded that proposition 6 is partly supported.

The results of the study relating to the seventh proposition, which postulated that a community would be most important in the search phase when compared to the other phases of the search and purchase process, show that this service was perceived as significantly more important in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase. No significant differences in perceived importance were found between the purchase and the postconsumption phase. The conclusion is that proposition 7 is supported.

Proposition 8 postulated that access to a map would be more important in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase. The results show that a map was perceived by the customers as significantly more important in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase, but also more important in the purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. Therefore, we conclude that proposition 8 is partly supported.

Proposition 9 postulated that decision support would be perceived as more important in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. The results show that there was support for this proposition, which can be seen from Table 2. Decision support was perceived as significantly more important in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. No significant differences were found between the search and the purchase phase.

In the 10th proposition it was postulated that price comparison would be a more important value-added service in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase. The results of the study show that this service was perceived as significantly more important in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase, but also that it was perceived as...
more important in the purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. The conclusion is that proposition 10 is partly supported.

The results of the study relating to proposition 11, which postulated that personalization would be more important in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase, show that there was support for this proposition. This value added service was perceived as significantly more important in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. No significant differences were found between the search and the purchase phase.

Proposition 12 postulated that push-based services would be more important in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase. The results show that push-based services were perceived as significantly more important in the search and the purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. However, no significant differences were found between the search and the purchase phase. Thus, we conclude with partial support for proposition 12.

In proposition 13 it was postulated that mobile access would be more important in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase. The results, as seen in Table 2, show that this value-added service was perceived as significantly more important in the search and purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. No significant differences were found between the search and the purchase phase, which means we conclude with partial support for proposition 13.

Proposition 14 postulated that SMS would be more important in the search phase than in the purchase or the postconsumption phase. The results showed that this value-added service was only perceived as significantly more important in the purchase phase than in the postconsumption phase. No significant differences were found between the search and the purchase phase or between the search and the postconsumption phase. The conclusion is that proposition 14 is not supported.

Propositions 15 and 16 postulated that a booking form and online booking would be more important in the purchase phase than in the search or the postconsumption phase. These propositions where supported in the results, which showed that these services were perceived as significantly more important in the purchase phase than in the search or the postconsumption phase. Results also showed that these services were perceived as more important in the search phase than in the postconsumption phase. Therefore, we conclude with partial support for proposition 15 and 16.

Conclusion and Implications

The results of the study are summarized in Table 3. Generally, the most important value-added service was perceived to be online booking services. Hence, it seems to be a reasonable recommendation that this type of service should be prioritized and included on tourism websites. Price comparison, maps, e-mail, search engine, booking form, and details on telephone/fax were also perceived to be important services. To increase the likelihood of customers being satisfied with the support given on the website during the search and purchase process and hence increase the likelihood of the customers actually buying the product, tour operators and travel agencies should note which services are deemed important and try and include as many of them as possible on their websites.

The results showed that most value-added services were perceived to be most important in the search and/or the purchase phase and that no value-added services were perceived to be most important in the postconsumption phase. One conclusion that might be drawn from this is that most value-added services seem to be designed to support the search and purchase phase and no or few services are specifically designed for and aimed at providing support for the customer in the postconsumption phase. It might also be that customers do not perceive the value-added services provided by travel agency and tour operator websites to be important in relation to their needs in the postconsumption phase. They might simply prefer to use other tools to assist them in this phase, such as personal references or printed information.

If the interpretation that tour operators and travel agencies simply don’t seem to provide any support for the customer in the postconsumption phase on their websites is chosen, this result should be interesting and deemed important when consid-
### Table 3
Summary of the Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value-Added Service</th>
<th>Search Phase</th>
<th>Purchase Phase</th>
<th>Postconsumption Phase</th>
<th>Propositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P1: support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone/fax</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P1: support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P1: support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P2: partly support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search engine</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P3: partly support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAQ</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P4: partly support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P5: partly support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P6: partly support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P7: support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P8: partly support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision support</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P9: support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price comparison</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P10: partly support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalization</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P11: support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push-based services</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P12: partly support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile access</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P13: partly support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMS</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P14: no support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booking form</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P15: partly support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online booking</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>P16: partly support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The value-added services marked with X in the respective columns means the service is most important in this phase of the process.

Considering how vital it is for a business in the long run to create relationships with the customers. Customers are believed to have the incentive to retrieve costs, such as time spent on the website, previous purchases, information transferred through community or direct interaction, which they have already invested in the relationship. If the customer perceives the costs related to switching to be too high a business should try and exploit this by increasing customer loyalty and continuous buying behavior. Such a strategy is aimed at providing commercial and economic incentives not to switch supplier (Verona & Prandelli, 2002). Another example of the importance of building strong relationships with customers at travel and tourism websites is that in a PhocusWright report (2003b) travelers who were members of a loyalty program reported that this had an important influence on their travel purchases.

Examples of how a tour operator and travel agency website might use different possibilities available through the use of the Internet and aimed at supporting customer needs for postconsumption activities is by using communities and Web logs (also known as “blogs”). Community was found to be an important value-added service in the study presented in this article and one way to exploit this further could be to provide different communities for different purposes, one of which might be to enable the customer to easily give feedback to the company and other customers after the actual consumption of a tourism product. Such a service could support customers’ needs to voice potential dissatisfaction in a constructive manner. Supporting this need has in previous research been shown to be important because a large proportion of dissatisfied customers who get the opportunity to voice their complaints actually continue to buy the product (Sheth et al., 1999).

A Web log is a service that allows customers to create, broadcast, and share different kinds of information about a particular subject or range of subjects. It is a form of microcontent publishing tool and a webpage of personal or noncommercial origin that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual with information written by the webpage owner or gleaned from other websites or sources. Web logs also often allow for other readers to interact through a discussion area.

A tour operator or travel agency website could provide the customers with the opportunity to create their own Web logs in connection to the travel agency website where they could publish their pictures and information on their travel experiences.
This would give them a motive for returning to the website in the postconsumption phase (e.g., to confirm or disconfirm the decision to buy the product that they did), and this could serve as one way of creating a long-term relationship with the customers. The website can also arrange for competitions on the best Web log or the best picture, which are then aimed at attracting visitors to the website. This is done on, for example, www.spray.no or in the members section of www.skistar.com.

The results from the study also showed that most of the value-added services are perceived to be important in more than one of the phases in the search and purchase process. A possible explanation for this might be that most Internet services at tourism websites are so generic that customers do not perceive them as being particularly useful and important in a particular phase of their search and purchase process. Of course, it might also be due to the search and purchase process itself, which is seldom very precise with clearly defined activities for each of the phases.

Further Research

The focus of this article has been to reveal which value-added services provided by travel agency and tour operator websites are perceived to be important in the different phases of the search and purchase process for the customer. Although all the proposed hypotheses were not supported in full, in total the results indicate that the value-added services provided by these types of websites do not fully support customers’ needs in all the phases of the search and purchase phase, especially not in the postconsumption phase.

As suggested in the Introduction of this article, there are many different reasons to be investigated further as to why growth in e-commerce for tourism has not been as big or as fast as previously expected. Based on this study it is suggested here that further research should focus on more in-depth studies of why certain value-added services are perceived as important or not important to different types of users. For example, it could be valuable to gain more insight into how different customer profiles, based on, for example, their search mode (goal directed or experiential) and their level of perceived risk, actually perceive the importance of different value-added services in the different phases of the search and purchase process. Customers’ risk perception is, among other variables, an important factor that has been found to influence their purchase intentions in online shopping (Nysveen & Pedersen, in press) and hence this should be important to recognize by websites trying to develop value-added services to increase sales and loyalty. Also, more traditional variables of customer profiling could be used such as lifestyle, time, effort, cost, and spatial dimensions, as well as previously used variables used by, for example, Fodness and Murray (1997) and Mouthino (1987) when researching the information search behavior and decision-making processes by tourists. These would have to be adapted to and discussed in an Internet setting.

It would also be interesting to design comparative studies on how value-added services provided through channels other than the Internet, the more traditional physical setting, for example, are perceived by customers in terms of level of importance and perceived value in the different phases of the search and purchase process.

Also, Nysveen (2003) found that there is to some extent an effect on perceived importance of value-added services from factors such as Internet experience and product experience. Hence, it is suggested that potential influencing factors such as these should be included in further studies of customers’ search and purchase process and the perceived importance of value-added services to support this process.

Acknowledgments

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