Benchmarking the Visibility the 50 State Tourism Offices in Google:
Implications for Search Engine Marketing for DMOs

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ABSTRACT

Search engines have become an important channel for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to communicate and promote their products. This study examine the visibility of the websites of the 50 US state tourism offices. Specifically, website visibility is measured by their rankings among other search results in Google based upon a number of most frequently used queries. By comparing website visibility among various tourism businesses and destinations, this study offers important insights into the challenges and search engine marketing strategy for DMOs.
INTRODUCTION

Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) play an important role in bridging between the potential visitors and the destination, and their online marketing efforts can have significant impact on the destination. Importantly, with the huge amount of information available on the Internet, search has become the dominant mode in the traveler’s use of the Internet for travel planning purposes (TIA, 2005). However, with the growing importance of search engines in online travel, the tourism industry is facing many challenges, particularly due to the diminishing visibility of the websites of many tourism businesses to prospective visitors (Wöber, 2006; Xiang et al., forthcoming). As such, the goal of this research is to investigate the visibility of the 50 U.S. state tourism offices in search engines. By benchmarking the rankings of websites of these states, the results of this study will offer useful insights into the effectiveness of the search engine optimization strategies of these organizations.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The Internet can be seen as a communication platform between the consumer and various businesses (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). A primary task in tourism businesses’ marketing and promotional efforts is to ensure relevant information is made visible and accessible to potential visitors (Werthner & Klein, 1999). It has been argued that the challenges for the tourism industry in large part arise from the role the Internet in mediating the communication between the traveler and the industry (Wöber, 2006; Xiang et al., forthcoming). For example, Pan and Fesenmaier’s (2006) found that looking for
relevant information for trip planning often leads to an unsatisfactory experience. Recently, a series of studies have examined the role of search engines in the online travel planning context. For instance, from a marketing perspective Xiang and Fesenmaier (2006) argue that travelers’ use of search engines can be seen as the initial step in the persuasion process for tourism organizations. Further, Kim and Fesenmaier (2008) posit that the use of search engines can have significant impact on the formation of first impression toward, and, subsequently, the overall evaluation of, a DMO’s website.

When exposed to the list of search results, a number of factors can influence the traveler’s evaluation and selection of a specific search result. Particularly, the ranking of a specific search result link, along with its relevancy to the search query, is widely recognized as the most important factor in influencing the travel information searcher’s behavior. For example, the majority of search engine users do not look beyond the first three pages of search results (i.e., the top 30 search results) (Henzinger, 2007). Also, the rank position of a specific search result has been shown likely to determine whether it will be reviewed and evaluated by an information searcher (Pan et al., 2007).

Recently, Wöber (2006) found that many tourism businesses can only achieve low rankings among the search results for travel related queries, which makes it extremely difficult for online travelers to directly access the individual tourism operations through these search engines. In another study conducted by Xiang et al. (forthcoming), it was found that a handful of “big players” dominate search results in Google, leading to the diminishing visibility of many tourism businesses (the “long tail”). Given the important role of destination marketing organizations in connecting the potential visitors to the destination, this research investigates the visibility of DMOs’ Websites in search engines.
METHODOLOGY

This research investigates the rankings of the 50 state tourism offices’ Websites in Google by mimicking a traveler’s use of the search engine for trip planning. The reason for choosing these websites is that they represent the major tourism destinations in the United States. While there are many other applications, the main reason for choosing Google is that it is highly popular among Internet users and dominant in the online search market (Bertolucci, 2007). To simulate a traveler’s use of the search engine for trip planning, a set of 30 keywords most frequently used by online travelers (e.g., “tourism”, “travel”, “information”, “accommodation”, “activities”, “attractions”, and etc), identified based upon a number of past studies (Xiang et al., forthcoming), along with the state names (e.g., “Alabama” were used to query Google. A crawler program written in Perl programming language was used to extract the search results which were then parsed in order to identify the rankings of the state websites. Data analysis focused on comparing the visibility of these state tourism offices in relation to different search queries as well as their rankings in relation to other types of websites.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study provide useful insights into the challenges destination marketing organizations are facing and potential solutions to their online marketing efforts. For example, it can be expected that certain keywords will generate higher rankings than others. Also, by identifying the DMOs’ rankings among other search results, it provides the basis for the state tourism organizations to conduct competitor analysis (i.e., who they are competing against). In addition, this research will enable the states to compare their rankings with other destinations in terms of the effectiveness of
their search engine marketing programs, leading to potential strategic changes. By tracking the visibility of DMOs’ Websites over time, the approach to website benchmarking will enable DMOs to respond to the dynamics in the online market in a more effective way.

REFERENCES