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NATIONAL TOURISM ORGANIZATIONS' ONLINE TRAINING OFFER. SWITZERLAND TRAVEL ACADEMY CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

A large number of studies have been undertaken so far both by academic researchers and by communities from the industry on the use of the Internet for educational purposes. However, very limited research has yet been done on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as educational and training modes within the hospitality and tourism field. Travel agent training, certification processes and the use of ICTs to deliver training to the travel trade have been largely excluded from previous academic research.

This study aims to address this research gap in order to understand the range of e-learning in the tourism field. It explores the use of e-learning courses created by national tourism organizations for the education and certification of their travel trade partners. This research will present the managerial perspective and will evaluate one of the best cases of e-learning courses presenting tourism destinations – the Switzerland Travel Academy.

This paper will present the overall cycle of the course design, looking in particular at how the e-learning course has been designed, developed, implemented and assessed. Switzerland Tourism's motivation for having such a training tool, the history of the training platform, management structure and usages will be discussed as well.

KEYWORDS

Tourism Training, E-learning, DMOs, Travel Trade, Destination Marketing

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INTRODUCTION

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) operating as an umbrella brand for all local stakeholders: tourism suppliers, including accommodation, transportation, catering and attractions, use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as the main tool for planning, managing and marketing (Xiang et al., 2008). Several DMOs around the globe have understood and embraced potential opportunities arising from ICTs, which are helpful in spreading promotional messages worldwide, as well as improving a country's performance on the global tourism market. DMOs around the world are using official websites for interacting with tourists (Choi et al., 2007) and providing essential information about the destination. Furthermore, the development of Web 2.0 techniques has resulted in additional information sources and more sophisticated and effective tools which can be used by the destination marketers (Lee & Wicks 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). Nevertheless, the constantly increasing competitive and dynamic nature of the tourism industry prompts tourism destinations to develop and integrate effective marketing plans and strategies for possible collaboration with all stakeholders, including trade suppliers and intermediaries. For instance, ICTs can enable DMOs globally to better support and train travel professionals, travel agents and travel consultants, while offering them more extensive, structured and current information about the tourism destinations they sell. In fact, according to UNWTO (2008), there are several ways in which this support can be performed: website, e-newsletters and online trainings: "destination specialist" programs.

In the last fifteen years, DMOs around the globe have started to use the opportunity of involvement of ICTs in the provision of tourism education. As of 2013, seventy five DMOs at national level were offering e-learning courses in order to educate travel agents and travel consultants on the destination particularities, help them in their sales activities and certify them as destinations specialists (Kalbaska, 2012). These e-learning courses are designed for the needs of the travel agents and provide travel consultants and distributors with a comprehensive view of what a destination is about and what it has to offer. E-learning courses are able to give to the travel trade the knowledge and skills to sell the destination effectively and to the right people.

Although a growing interest has been shown by tourism practitioners in the field (ABTA, 2008; Tnooz, 2011), scant academic research has been done on the use of ICTs as educational and training modes within the hospitality and tourism field (Braun & Hollick, 2006; Kuttainen & Lexhagen, 2012, Liburd & Christensen, 2012; Sigala, 2002). In particular, little is known about the status of e-learning training practices for the travel trade. For instance, no empirical research has yet been done on the corporate, DMO perspective on the issue under study.

In order to present the best practice in the field of e-learning courses created by Destination Management Organizations at national level, the following research objectives were defined:

- Describe strategies that were used for pedagogical, technical, content and testing activities development;
- Present integrated approaches for online training promotion and positioning;
- Evaluate the history of the e-learning course, its management structure and statistical data.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND LIMITATIONS

From the preliminary online questionnaire that has been undertaken in 2010 with the travel agents globally (Kalbaska & Cantoni, 2011), the

list of 15 best-evaluated online training courses about tourism destinations was received. All 15 DMOs were approached with the proposal on undertaking interviews in order to evaluate their experience. Two course providers agreed on participating in current research, one representing a European destination and another one representing a destination in the Asia-Pacific region. This research will present a European case study: Switzerland Travel Academy set up by Switzerland Tourism (Zurich, Switzerland).

This study has been conducted combining both primary and secondary data analysis. Primary data collection has been done in two phases: firstly expert analysis of the platform has been undertaken. This looked at the teaching methods integrated, contents and incentives strategies used to develop the practice of e-learning. Afterwards, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the representatives of Switzerland Tourism who were involved in the production and delivery of the e-learning offer. The interviews were carried out in order to provide an in-depth corporate view on the subject matter: Switzerland Travel Academy. The next employee of Switzerland Tourism was interviewed: Project Manager Market Services at Switzerland Tourism. The interview was carried out in February 2012 in the headquarters of Switzerland Tourism in Zurich (Switzerland) and lasted two hours. The second interview was completed using the VoIP service Skype with Market Manager Western India, who is also responsible for education and training in India within Switzerland Tourism. The interview took place in March 2012 and lasted 55 minutes.

The use of secondary data analysis (e.g. internal corporate reports and historical data) helped to build on existing knowledge and therefore enhanced understanding for professional theory and practice within e-learning in the hospitality and tourism field.

The case will be presented along the next structure. The description of the management structure of Switzerland Tourism Board will initiate, followed by the discussion of the online presence of Switzerland as tourism destination and strategies used in order to support trade partnerships globally. Furthermore, the history of the e-learning platform and its success in terms of the e-learning usages will be discussed in order to generate an overall context and understanding. The case will be presented alongside ADDIE model (Morrison, 2010). It will be concluded with the discussions of the findings and an overall evaluation, taking into consideration both strengths and limits of the case presented.

FINDINGS

SWISS NATIONAL TOURISM OFFICE, ITS ONLINE PRESENCE AND TRADE PARTNERSHIP

Switzerland Tourism is the national tourism board of Switzerland, whose main purpose is to encourage demand for trips and holidays in the country by foreign and local visitors. Switzerland Tourism is a complex institution whose main aim is to market products and services for Swiss tourism in a given number of countries. Subsequently, it is responsible for evaluating and responding to international tourism trends, market analysis and designing and implementing promotional campaigns around the country. Switzerland Tourism is in charge of organizing promotional events, as well as the provision of services for the media and trade partners. Switzerland Tourism also works with regional and local tourism agencies on promotional activities. Organizationally, Switzerland Tourism is divided into six different units:

 Market services department and meetings;
 Portal management, e-marketing, and IT;

- Corporate communication, media and market research;
- Marketing and strategic partnerships;
- Business development;
- Finance, control, and human resources.

Switzerland Tourism embraced all the possibilities that the development of ICTs and the Internet has brought in recent years. The latter is believed to be the most important source of tourism information, coming into contact with all potential tourists planning to visit the country. In the online market sphere, Switzerland Tourism mainly operates with a website named www.myswitzerland.com. This operates as a hub for all required information that potential clients might look for while preparing their trips to the country. The website acts as Switzerland Tourism's central unit for online communication, allowing marketing and sales activities on the website itself. Textual and multimedia content, which are present on the main website, can be adapted and published on partners' websites and/or distributed via other applications e.g. iPhone applications (Inversini et. al, 2012).

Switzerland Tourism is managing also an online trade corner, which can be found at the web address: www.tradecorner.stnet.ch. This website provides travel consultants, travel agents and wholesalers with important information and current updates about Switzerland, enabling effective design and planning of a tourist visit to the country. Moreover, it serves as a core component to provide additional support and resources to assist trade partners with travel sales activities. Along with the trade corner, Switzerland Tourism has an extensive policy of trade partners' coordination and their expertise and knowledge development. This happens through initiatives by Switzerland Tourism such as sales calls and one-to-one meetings with market representatives, road shows, webinars and familiarization trips, as well as through online training.

The Switzerland Travel Academy, which can be found at the web address: www.elearning.myswitzerland.com, is an e-learning training course created by Switzerland Tourism for travel professionals. The online training course has been created as the main tool to educate trade partners with practical information on how and where to travel in the country, enhancing their knowledge to plan and market trips. This e-learning course is being offered free of charge to travel agents globally.

HISTORY OF SWITZERLAND TRAVEL ACADEMY AND ITS USAGES

The idea of Switzerland Travel Academy setting up an e-learning course came up in January 2004. After a series of internal discussions and developments, the training programme was launched as a pilot project for Chinese and Korean market in December 2005. At that time, the platform was managed internally at the head office in Zurich (Switzerland) within the IT department. The Market Services department is currently coordinating all the activities involved in the online training support and delivery. The employees from this department have decided on the information architecture of the current version of the online training, for instance, which modules and what type of evaluation activities should be presented. The marketing team was responsible for creating the content and testing activities for the international version of the platform. Contents and testing activities were then passed to the markets where Switzerland Tourism has representatives and different markets adapted the content to the specific needs of the travel trade.

The Switzerland Travel Academy has had rather different levels of success in different markets, possessing a varying number of users accordingly. According to the internal evaluation of online training course

performance by the management, the best examples of e-learning platform management and delivery by the markets are the German and Indian versions.

The Indian version of the online training course was launched in June 2011, when the content was specifically adopted for the market needs. Before 2011, travel agents based in this country were able to access an international version of the online training content, which was not specifically designed to cater for them. Within the first nine months of the activity, the Indian platform attracted 1,347 registered travel agents. Out of them, nearly 10% have successfully completed the course and received official certification. On average, the Indian version of the e-learning course receives around six to seven new registrations every day.

According to the Indian market representative:

"The Indian version of the platform became very successful for several reasons. First of all, due to the fact that Switzerland is a very popular tourism destination among Indian tourists. Additionally to that, very few agents and front desk personnel that are based in India have the possibility to get a visa and travel to Switzerland. For those very reasons, with the help of the e-learning courses, travel agents are getting much more information about the destination itself and the way it should be sold properly to the clients. Moreover, they are getting the possibility to visit the destination one day, while being eligible to participate in familiarization trips."

SWITZERLAND TRAVEL ACADEMY PRESENTATION ALONG ADDIE MODEL

Course developed and implementation procedure will be presented along ADDIE model, which stands for Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation.

i) Analysis

The analysis of the needs and the definition of educational and business goals of the Switzerland Travel Academy e-learning course were undertaken through two main steps:

❯ Definition of goals and strategies;
❯ Instructional and content analysis through a benchmarking study of similar courses provided by different NTOs worldwide.

In order to acquire and strengthen online business-to-business communication with national and international travel professionals, enhance training activities and deliver a modern brand identity for Switzerland as a destination, the opportunity to set up an e-learning course has emerged within the head office of Switzerland Tourism. As has been stated by its head office, the main goal of the project was to create a web-based platform for the training and certification of tourism agents in the markets in which Switzerland Tourism is represented (Switzerland Tourism, 2005). In addition to defining the goals and strategies for e-learning course development, Indian market representatives have done benchmarking research on how other destinations worldwide are developing and supporting their e-learning courses. The following e-learning offers on tourism destinations were taken into consideration in the benchmarking study: Aussie Specialist, provided by Tourism Australia; Kiwi Specialist program, provided by the New Zealand Tourism Board, and the South African Expert training program, created by South African Tourism Board.

ii) Design

The instructional strategy and teaching materials of the e-learning course were undertaken through the information architecture and instructional design. At this phase, the structure of the training, content materials, interaction elements, and course functionalities were defined by the Market

Services department. Information architecture allowed the establishment of specific steps for successful navigation within the training course and then helped to allocate possible interaction and activities in the online training. Instructional design clarified the structure of the online training modules, their functionalities and possible interaction of the users within and after each training module.

The international version of the online training course was structured into eight online training modules. The first module provides a detailed overview of the country, while the others focus on various topics useful for planning and selling trips to Switzerland:

- "Summer";
- "Winter";
- "Cities";
- "Accommodation";
- "Transport";
- "Meetings/MICE";
- "Top attractions".

Course materials for the "international version" of the online training course were developed in English and are presented mostly in the form of texts. On nearly every training page there is a representative image, which in most cases is modified for the web, meaning that is presented in a small resolution and is not particularly effective for the user. On a few pages, video links about the destination, tourism product, food or traditions are integrated. No audio materials were used in this online training course.

Each seminar was designed with approximately two to four hours of study time. In order to get a certificate, participants need to go through all training materials while reading slides, watching videos and passing a test after each module. The tests were designed in the form of multiple-choice questions, which had to be answered correctly in order to proceed to the next training module. There are twenty multiple-choice questions per training module. The online training course has a randomized question database with 500/600 testing items, allowing constant rotation. Participants get a maximum of three attempts to pass the final exam. Once all the testing activities have been successfully completed, the user becomes a Certified Switzerland Specialist. The status awarded is proved by a certificate, produced at headquarters and sent to the certified specialist by an e-mail or traditional post.

Content and testing activities were developed by the Market Services of the headquarters of Switzerland Tourism and then passed to the markets. Market representatives were responsible for the translation of the content from English into their languages (e.g. Chinese, Japanese), while creating training contents and testing activities according to specific market needs. For instance, pieces of training information such as "how to get to Switzerland", "local currency exchange", "flights and airports" are adapted to market needs by market representatives.

At the beginning of 2013, apart from the international version of the e-learning course, there were ten other active platforms for different markets: Australia, Brazil, China, Germany, India, Korea, United Kingdom and Ireland, Russia, United States and Canada. Two other countries where Switzerland Tourism is represented and looking for enhanced communication with trade partners are currently designing their own online training offer: Poland and Spain.

As a general strategy, during the registration process, Switzerland Tourism is not checking whether travel agents possess an official IATA code. The course is therefore open also to potential tourists, media partners and tourism students. However, market representatives are managing single registrations manually.

For instance, in the Indian market there is a differentiation in the certificates and qualifications obtained on completion of the online training course:

❯ Individuals or companies working in the Indian outbound travel trade obtain a "Certified Switzerland Specialist" diploma;
❯ Indian students studying hospitality and tourism obtain the certificate for successfully passing the exam.

iii) Development
An external agency has developed the e-learning tool in collaboration with the IT department of Switzerland Tourism, which has coordinated the development process. According to the developer of the platform (Xiag, 2012), based on the requirements expressed by Switzerland Tourism, the following e-learning solution has been developed and currently includes the following features:

❯ An e-learning environment for the end user – travel trade representatives. It includes the online registration process, content interface, testing activities and the possibility of checking certification status online;
❯ A management interface for market representatives, with the possibility of content management, monitoring user registrations and certification processes;
❯ XML interfaces for the integration of external content;
❯ Import and export of training seminars and tests;
❯ The option to transfer training information – content and testing activities between different markets.

An internal mailing tool has also been developed, so the market representatives can pass their direct communication to travel agents in order to remind them about the course, congratulate them on the certificate

obtained or send out promotional brochures. As for the technologies used for the platform development, the following should be mentioned:

❯ UNIX / Linux;
❯ Programming language: PHP5;
❯ Database: Oracle 10g;
❯ User interface/CMS: AJAX, DHTML.

The overall graphic design of the e-learning course was developed to follow the corporate identity and image of Switzerland Tourism.

iv) Implementation
The Switzerland Travel Academy course was implemented with delivery to travel agents. Centralized promotion of the e-learning course is carried out through the trade corner on www.tradecorner.stnet.ch and it is rarely featured on the printed materials issued by Switzerland Tourism. Additionally, online training modules are being promoted by market representatives at sales calls, workshops, trade fairs, and meetings with travel agents and consultants. Switzerland Tourism has no centralized strategy on continuous relationships and incentives program with agents after certification. Head office makes the decision to offer certificates as well as the Swiss Specialist logo to those who have successfully completed the course, while the markets then decide for themselves on other incentives. Together with an individual certificate, a travel agent receives a transparent door sticker, which enables clients to recognize its knowledge and specialization as a fully trained and qualified Switzerland Specialist. Moreover, a certified travel agent receives the rights to use the Certified Specialist logo for business letters, brochures, and in online marketing strategies. In addition, if three travel agents who are working at one branch are certified, the agency is listed on the www.myswitzerland.com website as a suggested Switzerland Specialist in the region. All Swiss certified agents are automatically subscribed to the Switzerland

Tourism newsletter of with the latest news and updates.

v) Evaluation

No formal activities to evaluate the quality of the training materials or testing activities, overall e-learning performance or impact of the training received on the travel agents' current business activities of have been carried out centrally by the head office of Switzerland Tourism. According to the headquarters representative, such evaluation activities should be initiated and undertaken in the future by market representatives. Moreover, no activities on measuring the return on investment in the development of such an e-learning course have been carried out or are planned in the near future.

SWITZERLAND TRAVEL ACADEMY OVERALL ASSESSMENT

The Switzerland Travel Academy case study has shown the successful performance of the e-learning course, despite the fact that the management of the platform and its support is not a primary activity of Switzerland Tourism either in terms of employee time or financial involvement.The following strengths and limitations can be highlighted from this case:

Strengths:

- The training content is adapted for different market needs and is aligned with the language preferences of the respective markets.
- Switzerland Tourism has different strategies for incentives in different markets, analyzing and reflecting market needs.
- The e-learning course is open not only to officially registered travel agents, but also to the end clients, media partners and hospitality and tourism students, which can serve as an additional marketing or sales tool.

- Switzerland Tourism follows the strategy for developing and expanding online training for the BRIC countries, which are strategic growth markets also in terms of potential tourists: for instance, the new platforms that have been launched by the Brazilian and Russian markets at the beginning of 2013. The first results from the performance of the Indian platform confirm the success of this strategy.

Limits:

- No formal evaluation activities, such as e-learning course usability or usages studies, were undertaken or are planned to be undertaken in future by Switzerland Tourism.
- The visibility of the training on the NTO official website or any other online channel where Switzerland Tourism is present is very low, as most of the promotion is done through direct marketing and face-to-face training activities with travel trade.
- Little promotion and integration into the NTO's marketing and training activities has been undertaken so far.
- There is no centralized strategy on the relationship with the travel agents after course completion.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study has resulted in the presentation of a successful case of an online training initiated by a national DMO. It has looked at the evaluation of the pedagogical and technical strategies used for the online training creation. The study has shown a clear interest by a national DMO in exploiting the opportunities presented by e-learning in order to provide travel agents and consultants with a comprehensive training option, while using ICTs for the proper training development of their

travel trade partners. Switzerland Tourism, with the help of the e-learning course for its travel trade partners, is able to attract its intended audiences, achieving its internal goals in terms of the coordination and training of its global trade partners.

Thanks to the interviews with the destination representatives, it can be concluded that the main motivation of a destination to have an online training is to have well-educated travel agents who can actively sell the country as a tourism destination. Another key driver for the implementation of the e-learning platform is that, with its help, a tourism destination can enhance educational opportunities globally. This "accessibility" issue enables tourism destinations to upscale agents in the areas that are not easily physically reachable and where a DMO does not have active market representatives.

This research has implications for both academic and tourism industry communities. The academic community is presented with the results of one of the first empirical evaluations in the fields of Human Recourse Management

for the travel trade and e-learning usages within on-the-job training in the hospitality and tourism industry.

The results of the study also have industry implications, particularly as it presents the first understanding of destination-related e-learning options through the evaluation of the managerial perspective on the issue under study. This research can help representatives of DMOs globally to better understand the role of online training for travel agents, and, therefore, develop more efficient and effective strategies and actions in their global trade and training partnerships.

Although this study identifies and provides a successful case study and generates best practices in the field, the results and conclusions should be discussed under the following limitations. The interviews were conducted with the employees who are currently working with online training. Those who have left the company might have a different perspective on the platform development, history, success strategies or failures.

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