Adequacy and Effectiveness of Indian Tourism Websites for International Tourism in India

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Introduction

International tourism is around U.S.$ 5 trillion business today. India can gain a lot if it captures even a 2% share in it to offset its recurring foreign exchange problem. India is a land of holy cities, hill stations and monuments of cultural and historical importance and places of sculpture and art. The country thus provides a great opportunity for tourism for the foreign tourists. However, we are unable to exploit tourism potential to the fullest and are not able to realize any significant level of tourist business.

In the past, the sole responsibility of promoting and developing tourism in India vested with the national (ITDC) and other state tourism corporations using traditional approaches. However, with advancement in the IT and the power that the Internet offers, the traditional marketing approach was slowly replaced by Internet based tools such as websites of various tourism promotion agencies to develop tourism in India to attract more and more national and international tourists.

According to Poel and Leunis (1999) Internet is an important channel of distribution for customers. Recent studies show that the Internet is the most effective when used as an advertising and marketing tools (Hoof, Hubert, Collins, Combrink & Verbeetn, 1995; Kasavana, Knuston & Polonoeski, 1997; Walle, 1996). According to Burkey (1997), a website's content has a significant effect on advertising and marketing. The tourism industry is using the Internet as part of its marketing efforts (Connolly, Olsen & Moore, 1998). As is true for any other business promotion, a website is one of the most effective tools for communication in today's world. It is a very common and popular tool for providing information about us, our activities, our strengths and facilities and so on to the outside world which in turn will benefit both; us in attracting customers (tourists in this case) and giving better understanding of prospective tourists about the tourism opportunities in India, places to visit, various facilities available to them while on tour and helping them know our credentials better enabling the tourists take an informed decision. In fact, websites are fast becoming the first source of information about any commodity a customer is looking for and tourism is no exception.

There have been many research studies conducted about the websites of the tourism industry worldwide (Countryman, 1999; Park & Sohn, 2000) but not many have been found to deal specifically with Indian tourism websites. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the official websites of Indian tourism development corporations based on the facilities and services offered by the websites.

Scope of the study undertaken

Considering the fact that website is the first source of information to the tourist about the tourism facilities available in India and also the fact that we are still not able to generate significant amount of tourism business, a study of all the known websites of various government tourist agencies were studied to find the adequacy of information and whether they are effective in promoting tourism. An attempt was also made at analyzing the reasons for inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the websites in achieving the objectives, if any.

Limitations of the study undertaken

Only the known websites maintained by the government tourism agencies were compared. There are many other privately owned and maintained websites offering similar information. However, as it is very time consuming to search for all such sites and also the fact that the information provided therein may not be very authentic, such websites were not included for the purpose of this study.

Methodology

Though Jeong and Lambert (1999, 2001) proposed with empirical evidence that website quality

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consists of six potential dimensions; information accuracy, completeness, relevancy, clarity, ease of use and navigation quality. However, in this context, the site content mainly in terms of information accuracy, completeness, relevancy and clarity only were used to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of the websites.

All the official websites of the tourism development corporations of India were compared for the contents and facilities that they offer to the tourists. The following data from each site was collected for the comparison purpose and analyzed:

1. Comparative Information – What they have
2. Interface language
3. Hyperlinks to different state/state tourism websites
4. Information about states
5. Information about
   i) Tourist Season
   ii) Places to Visit and why
   iii) Connectivity
   iv) Packaging
   v) Hospitality at different places
6. Booking Facility
   i) Accommodation
      o Availability suiting different pockets
      o Advance Booking
   ii) Travel
      o Modes
      o Rush Period
      o Availability
      o Advance Booking
7. Money Transfer Facility
8. Safety and Security while at a specific tourist place
9. Health and Hygiene
10. Language Issue, if any

Findings

Official tourism websites
There exist dedicated and exclusive websites of Ministry of Tourism, Government of India and all other state tourism development corporations except for the states of Jharkhand and Punjab. Both Jharkhand and Punjab do not have dedicated/exclusive tourism websites. In case of Punjab the detailed information about tourism in Punjab is available through the official website of government of Punjab (http://punjabgovt.nic.in/). In the case of Jharkhand, very limited information about tourism in Jharkhand is available through the official website of Jharkhand government (http://www.jharkhand.nic.in/).

Website naming convention
Though most of the state tourism development corporations sites have tourism word included in the site addresses, the official tourism website of Ministry of Tourism, Government of India is known by the name 'http://www.incredibleindia.org/'. Similarly, the official website of Department of Tourism, Govt. of Bihar is named 'http://www.discoverbihar.bih.nic.in/'.

When the names of the sites do not include anything to reflect that it is a site providing information about tourism in India it becomes difficult for the users to locate the correct site even through Internet search engines. In this scenario, it becomes difficult for the individuals to locate the correct official sites and at times leading to get the information through other unofficial websites maintained by third party.

Website promotion
Though discoverindia.org regularly advertises tourism potential in India through TV and other

media including its website address being prominently displayed, there is nothing much being done by other agencies to promote the official tourism website of India/states. Hence the only source to find out the sites is through Internet search engines such as Google. Depending on the search keywords provided by the user, the search engines return a long list of websites including the unofficial websites leaving the decision on the users to get the information from whichever site in the list they want from.

A Google search for 'tourism' luckily returned 21 addresses of relevant official Indian tourism websites amongst top 100 results. Amongst top 100 results for a search in Google for 'tourism in India', however, did not include any official site except for 'http://www.incredibleindia.org/' and http://www.tourisminindia.com/ (The official Web sites of Ministry of Tourism, Government of India). It may please be noted that Google search engine is intelligent enough to understand contextual searches hence returned the sites relevant in Indian context; however, the result could be surprisingly different if searched from other geographical locations other than India.

Website content
General Information
All the sites contain general information about India/State such as history, geography, arts and culture, people, life style fairs and festivals, cousins and places to visit etc. However, except for incredibleindia.org, most of the other sites do not provide information about visa requirements and customs rules.

Interface language
Except for the national tourism website (incredibleindia.org) and tourism websites of the Gujarat (www.gujarattourism.com), Kerala (www.keralatourism.org) and Maharashtra states (www.maharashtratourism.gov.in), the interfacing languages for all the websites is English only. incredibleindia.org offers information in English, Hindi, François, Japanese and Chinese. Gujarat tourism website offers information in English, Hindi, Gujarati, François, Portuguese, Deutsch and Espanol. Kerala tourism website offers information in English, Malayalam, François, Deutsch, Italiano and Espanol and Maharashtra tourism website offers information in English and Japanese.

The choice of languages is limited to English and other very few languages mentioned above as if the tourism promotion is limited to people knowing English, François, Japanese, Portuguese, Deutsch, Espanol and Italiano only. It seems that the agencies responsible for tourism promotion are not targeting people speaking any language other than above languages.

Hyperlinks to different state/state tourism websites
incredibleindia.org provides links to about 37 different tourism website which includes all the regional websites. Lakshadweep tourism website links to 21 different tourism websites. Andhra Pradesh (AP) tourism website provides links to only two other websites which are also about tourism potential in AP. Puducherry tourism website on the other hand provides links to incredibleindia.org and www.tourism.gov.in only. The remaining majority of the sites do not link to other similar sites.

Some of the links provided by incredibleindia.org are not correct; for example, Bihar tourism site has wrongly been linked to Bihar Govt.'s site (http://gov.bih.nic.in/) and also to http://www.nic.in/ptdc/, which does not work. Similarly, AP Tourism site has wrongly been linked to http://www.aptourism.com/ where as the correct link should have been http://www.aptourism.in/.

Information about other states
None of the sites except incredibleindia.org provide direct information about any other state. Some sites do provide hyper links to other state tourism sites for example Lakshadweep tourism site provides link to maximum number of tourism websites, which includes Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, J & K, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamilnadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Government of India and also to Government of India's directory of official websites, Chandigarh tourism provides information

about Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh with links to their sites, Gujarat tourism website provides links to websites of Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, World Travel & Tourism Council and incredibleindia.org, Himachal Pradesh tourism site provides link to National Portal of India (http://india.gov.in/), Orissa tourism website provides links to websites of Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India. All the remaining sites do not provide even a hyperlink to other states.

Information about
Tourist Season
Information about tourist season helps the tourists plan their trips in better way, thus making this information very vital for the people wishing to plan a tour. However, except for Andaman and Nicobar and AP sites, no other site provides information about the best tourist season. A misinformed tourist may plan a trip to J&K in the winter and to Rajasthan in the summer.

Places to Visit and why
Most of the sites provide detailed information about the places to visit and why. However, there is still scope of improving the content as recommended at 7(i).

Connectivity
Most of the sites provide information about connectivity to different places within the tourist region covered by the site. Some (5 sites) also provide the tourist maps.

Packaging
Though most of the sites provide information about various package tours conducted by the tourist agencies, online booking facility for the same may also be included.

Hospitality at different places
Though most of the sites provide information about hospitality by providing the list of hotels with the phone numbers, it is felt that the same is not sufficient needing improvement as recommended at 7(j).
Booking Facility
Accommodation
In the past, guests reserved accommodation by phone, letter or fax. The process, however, was time consuming and at times ineffective. Getting before hand information about availability of various types of accommodation as well as online advance booking facility from the place of the tourist is immensely helpful in planning the tour. This eliminates the uncertainty about availability and the time and efforts needed to search for the accommodation at an unknown place.

Availability suiting different pockets
Almost all the sites provide information about availability of accommodation suiting different pockets by providing the list of different categories of hotels with the phone numbers. But to make real sense of this information, it may also be linked to the websites of the hotels and other hospitality providers.

Advance Booking
incredibleindia.org, Andhra Pradesh, Chandigarh Tourism, Himachal Pradesh, MP, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Tamilnadu provide online accommodation facility. Most of the other sites provide details of the available hotels along with their phone numbers. Some also provide the details of the websites of the hotels.
As most of the tourist development corporations also own hotels at different tourist locations, providing online booking facility for booking the accommodation in all such hotels may help the tourists.

Travel
As is the case with accommodation, before hand information about availability of various types of travel modes, availability of tickets to/from other destinations during a specific season as well as

advance booking facility from the place of the tourist is also very important and can help the tourists plan the tour and book the tickets in advance, once again eliminating the uncertainty about availability of tickets and efforts needed to book the onward/return tickets after reaching the place. No website provides for online bookings. There is a need for adding this feature now that technology is available for the same.

Modes
All sites provide information about the mode of transport and how to reach etc. However none of the sites clearly indicates the best/optimal mode.

Rush Period
Except for Kerala and Lakshadweep sites, no other sites provide any information on rush period. If this information is available, one may plan the tour according to his/her choice, whether to go during the rush period or during the lean period.

Availability of travel tickets and advance booking facility
Assam tourism site provides link to various websites of domestic airlines and Indian Railways. Bihar tourism site provides link to Air India and Indian Railways. Chandigarh tourism site provides link to Indian Airlines, Jet Airways, Air Deccan and Indian Railways. Goa tourism site provides link to Indian Airlines, Jet Airways, Air Deccan, Sahara Air, Spice jet, Kingfisher Airlines, Air India and Konkan Railways. Gujarat tourism site provides link to Air India and Indian Airlines. Haryana tourism site does have a link named 'Online Reservation' but the resulting page is still under construction. Himachal tourism site provides online bus ticket reservation facility. J&K tourism site provides link to Indian Airlines and Jet Airways. Maharashtra tourism site provides link to Kingfisher Airlines, Indian Airlines, Deccan Airlines, Air Sahara and Indian Railways. Orissa tourism site provide link to Indian Airlines, Air Sahara and Indian Railways. Tamilnadu tourism site provides link to Indian Railways. Tripura tourism site provides link to Indian Airlines.
Other websites do not provide ticket availability and booking facility.

Money Transfer Facility
None of the sites provide any relevant information about money transfer facility other than local money exchange facilities. If such facility is provided, the visitor need not worry about carrying money.

Safety and Security while at a specific tourist place
AP tourism website provides phone number of emergency services. Delhi website provides detailed information on Dos and Don'ts. Gujarat tourism website provides Safety precautions and emergency information. Kerala and Maharashtra tourism websites provide Police helpline and other emergency numbers. Puducherry tourism website provides Safety precautions and emergency information.

Health and Hygiene
Delhi, Gujarat websites provide Health precautions and other related information. J&K website provides list of hospitals, nursing homes and other healthcare and medical assistance. Puducherry tourism website provides health precautions and other related information. The health precautionary information enables the tourists to come prepared in advance and information about healthcare can be useful in case on any unforeseen health problem.

Language Issue, if any
Except for Gujarat, Maharashtra and Puducherry, no other website provides details on the local languages.

Summary of Findings

The tourism websites are not just an online channel for providing information about tourism

potential in India but also an electronic platform for generating desired tourism business. It is an aid for both the tourist - for planning and finishing a successful and satisfactory tour; as well as the government - for attracting more and more tourists thereby generating more tourism business. Well designed sites with useful and relevant information can surely help realize a significant level of tourist business.

The analysis of the websites revealed that many vital information components needed to plan and successfully and peacefully complete the tour are missing from many of the official tourism websites. There is a serious need to fill all such information gaps to make the websites more adequate and effective to attract more and more tourists to India in order to fully exploit the tourism potential of the country.

Recommendations

The following actions are recommended to overcome the inadequacies observed in the tourism websites:
a) All the tourism development corporations must have an exclusive website having rich and relevant content to promote tourism. The sites must be prominently advertised also
b) All the websites should be named to include 'tourism' word in the name of the websites that the tourist can locate the sites easily
c) The websites should be properly optimized for the Internet search engines and all the sites should be submitted to popular search engines such as Google etc. for ranking. This will allow tourists to easily search the relevant websites. Websites should also try to provide rush period information to enable tourists plan their travel for a comfortable trip
d) It is suggested that each website should contain a map of India with each state being a clickable link to the tourism website of that state. This will enable the tourist to locate the places of interest from one single point
f) The sites should be made multilingual covering all the major languages spoken in India and world over as far as possible to exploit the tourism potential in India
g) All the websites must provide hyperlinks to the tourism websites of other Indian states and UTs. As suggested in 5.4.1 and d) above, it may be done by providing a map of India with each state being a clickable link to the tourism website of that state. This will enable the tourist to locate the places of interest from one single point.
h) All the websites must explicitly mention the tourist season to help the visitor plan the trip accordingly
i) The sites may include an option such as 'More Information' that has more detailed relevant information supplemented with rich multimedia content wherever possible which can be accessed by those interested in knowing more about the places
j) Though most of the sites provide information about various package tours conducted by the tourist agencies, online booking facility for the same may also be included
k) The websites should include online booking facility for booking the accommodation in all the hotels owned by various tourist development corporations. It is also suggested that wherever possible, links should be provided to the websites of the hotels and other hospitality providers for facilitating online booking of accommodation
l) The tourism corporations must provide information for modes of travel and for forward and return travel reservations now that technology is available for the same
m) Money transfer facility without violating foreign exchange regulation must be provided if India wishes to earn foreign exchange through international tourism.
n) All websites should compulsorily provide information about safety and security so that the tourist who is mostly a newcomer in the region can use the information; while on tour in; getting in touch with the right authority in case of any safety/security issue arises
o) All the websites should provide relevant information on health and hygiene.

Issues for future research
This study tried to evaluate the tourism websites based on the variety of information, online accommodation, travel booking and other facilities and services offered by the websites for measuring the adequacy and effectiveness of the websites.

For the purpose of the study the information on the websites, their interface language, hyperlinks to different state/state tourism websites, Information about states, tourist season, places to visit and why, hospitality, online booking facility etc has been studied and compared. However, no specific weight-age has been assigned to any of the information parameter. Further research may be conducting in assigning specific weight-age to the key information to propose a quality evaluation model for measuring the performance of the tourism websites. Once this is done a composite weighted index for measurement of effectiveness of different websites can be developed.

The sheer number of gaps in the websites gives a feeling the websites preparation is not systematically done, starting with the purpose of the website. The very fact that no other website than Gujarat and Kerala have websites information in languages other than English indicates that the designer did not do it for any tourist from outside India where English language is not spoken. These websites are thus not designed for truly International tourists. The fact that most websites do not provide information even in Indian languages, indicates that they are not focusing even on Indians from other states. A detailed study is required to asses the extent to which all those in-charge of International tourism in India know about the tourism business and the significance of websites in augmenting the same. There are several strategic gaps identified earlier are left to be filled (10)

The whole tourism efforts thus seem to be focused on catering to tourist once they reach India or a state or a region, not to bring tourists to those places. This job is left to travel agencies. The study thus reinforces the contention that India may be losing out all the opportunities of earning valuable foreign exchange as the international travel agencies pocket most part of the foreign exchange by arranging travel and hotel bookings (11). India thus adds to value creation in International tourism but capturing an insignificant part of foreign exchange being spent by foreign travelers to India. A detailed study needs to undertaken on this aspect.

Conclusion

The study was undertaken to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of the official websites of various tourism development corporations of India. The websites have been evaluated based on the variety of information, online accommodation, travel booking and other facilities and services offered by the websites. The study reveals startling inadequacies and gaps in the websites that need to be bridged. Given so many inadequacies observed during the study, we found it difficult to measure effectiveness of the websites as we were not very sure whether the objective of the websites really was to promote tourism potential of India amongst international tourists. Several recommendations have been made to overcome the inadequacies observed. The study highlights the need to manage international tourism with a lot more clarity and focus if India wants to benefit from potential of International Tourism in India.

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