

Boosting Hotel Guest Information Search for Decision Making Through Internet

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Abstract: *The hospitality industry offers products and services that are intangible. The consumers cannot see, inspect and touch them before making purchase decision. This makes marketing of the products to be distinct. While the supplier has to acquaint and equip himself with necessary resources to make sales, the buyer has to depend on the information provided by the supplier to make a purchase. Information search is very critical to the hotel patrons in making buying decision and repeat custom. One of the ways this large volume of information is made available is through the internet. Successful hotel companies have found the internet very reliable in disseminating information but its effectiveness depends on the quality and quantity of product information supplied. This paper examines the effectiveness of the customer information system in Sheraton Hotel Nigeria, especially on the internet and how it contributes to realization of corporate goals.*

Keywords: *Information search, Internet, Buying decision, Guest satisfaction*

I. Introduction

Central in the issue of marketing in the hospitality industry is the guest decision making process. The hospitality sector offers products consumers cannot see, inspect nor touch before purchase. To a large extent the consumer will depend on information to process purchase decision (Palmer 2009). The hotel may put in much effort in convincing potential customer to make purchase decisions but if the customer does not decide positively then, it is a loss effort. The large volume of information available to travellers has made the internet to be a platform for the exchange of information between the customer and the supplier. The internet has changed the way tourism and hotel information is displayed and distributed (Bahalis and Law 2008). It is therefore very important for the supplier to understand the technology and the changes around the behaviour of the traveller, since supplies can positively affect the consumer purchase decision at the information search stage (Spreng 1996). This study critically examined how Sheraton Hotel Nigeria makes effort to give customer information especially on the internet. The work is aimed at elaborating on how suppliers can influence the decision making process through, information search and the use of internet to supply information that may have influence on customer information search and subsequent purchase decision.

Sheraton hotel is located at one of some of the top most world destinations. It is perfect for both business and leisure. Sheraton is a brand in Starwood hotels and resorts offering upscale full service hotel, resorts and residence. It has 75 years of full service, it is known upside for quality and consistency. The hotel operates a global distribution system (GDS) Hotel reservation code. Therefore the study on how the internet boosts the guest buying decision in Sheraton hotel and towers can reveal and emphasise the ideal information search technique which may be useful to other comparable hotels.

Conceptual frame work

Consumer decision process has been described by Ramathan and Shive (2001) and Boone and Kurtz (2010) as steps to making purchase decision. The process includes identifying problems, seeking for alternative, assessing the alternative, making choice, and decisions after buying. Hoyer (1994) examined the consumer decision process for a repeat purchase and observed that the traditional model seems to apply models that were lifted from social psychology, economics and cognitive psychology. The challenge of these models are that they demand a lot of cognitive effort and commitment, but the question is whether they really represent the decision making process. The traditional model was reviewed by Bareson (1992) and a model of three stage decision making process was produced. The three stages are pre-purchase, purchase and post purchase. Information search is one of the core areas of the pre-purchase stage.

Information Search

Theoretical model that incorporates psychological/motivational economics and process approach was developed by Gusoy and Mc-clean (2004). The model explained holistic undivided understanding of consumer search behaviour. Their finding revealed that consumers are likely to look for information that would have been stored in memory. When the guest memory seems pleasant decision will be made based on internal search

(Schull and Crompton 1983, Fondness and Murray 1997). Where they cannot remember they have to search externally. External search was explained as seeking for the information from the environment where information was not stored in the memory or consumer cannot recall. The information search is the first - stage where useful information can be provided to positively affect the consumer decision process. How do the suppliers position themselves to be there when consumer want to get external information?

Suppliers can position themselves at the point of information presentation. An example is the study made by Beteman and Kakar(1972). They looked at how information presentation

can have effect on consumer information search. The study reported on how Russ 1971, Russo and Dsher(1975), agreed that people have tendency to process information by attributes with a little difference in the extent to which brands are processed. The implication is that people find it convenient to process information by attributes rather than by brands. Where is the place of brand loyalty in information processing? Because the consumer is seeking for external information perhaps when these attributes are tested the hotel brand may eventually receive loyalty. How should the information be presented?

Simon (1972) argued that the structure of the information influences the method of searching for it. The research strongly put the overall notion to be that, consumers decide on information that is clearly explained and displayed in the form shown. These studies are related to the general principle of (Slovic 1972 p 14) that a judge or a decision maker only makes use of the information that is clearly shown in the object of stimulus and will use it in the way in which it is shown. The object of stimulus may be a virtual picture of the hotel room or a restaurant site. More over the quality of information can be assessed based on content, physical environment and format of the information. The design of the website is the responsibility of both the marketing department and the web designer as such all of these stake holders have to be involved in some way in the provision of information as a useful means of decision making (Auster and Choo 1993)

Furthermore, in Gusoy and Mc-clean (2004) the guest external search is likely to be affected by his understanding of cost and the level of his involvement in the search process. An example is where the guest takes time to navigate, to load and at the end the site is empty. This frustrates the guest and he cannot resist the temptation of looking somewhere else. When suppliers provide enough information that can be easily accessible the cost of information search is reduced, instead of general search, the search will be directed to attribute and brand. Suppliers are to make search less expensive and easy. The finding also revealed that different approaches should be adopted for expert and familiar tourist. Strategy for unfamiliar tourist should be simple and easy to use (Anderson1985). For supplier to have favourable recommendation by word of mouth from the friends of unfamiliar tourist they should be providing services that far out- weigh the customers expectation. The communication strategy to be adopted for expert tourist should be detailed including attributes of the hotel that are important to the target market because different guests have different information needs. The supplier should be able to identify expert tourist from unfamiliar tourist. The other source of external information search are travel information document such as brochure, magazine and newspaper, etc. The internet is a useful source of information on accommodation, (Schidt and spreng 1996)

II. Internet

The internet is noticed as middleman for the interaction of the supplier and the customers (Klein 1999). However customers seem to doubt the quality and sincerity of some of the information on the internet (Xue and Helps2004). Amazingly, the travel industry Association America discovered that 64% of people planning to travel extract information on internet. Optimal search engine marketing sets out to develop a model that assesses the search engine strategy for marketing in the light of profit making of the on line supplier.

The study identified and analysed situation that makes supplies choose particular search engine strategy and avoid others. The findings revealed that search activity is a continuous activity therefore search listing is a strategy that is not being avoided because it is pulling the market of the online suppliers. Paid placement on search engine was seen to be effective than adds and pop ups especially when used to reach buyers. The argument is that customers prefer the editorial link to paid placement. When search engine optimisation and paid placement were compared the cost was the same. However search engine on the ranking list is higher (international journal of electronic corners 2005).

Six popular search engines were studied to find out the visibility of the tourism destination and an individual hotel operation in Europe. It was discovered that the websites where these destinations and hotel were found are represented low in ranking. The consumer information search will therefore be costly and discouraging. Online tourism domain from the perspective of people like (Leiper 1979 & Smith 1974), (Dann1997; Leiper 1990) and (Crompton 1992) analysed by Xiang et al discovered that only Google had an adequate representation of the industry showing the peculiar nature of the destinations. The diversity of informational needs of the consumer was revealed. Search engine like Google determine the representation of the domain. Thus the supplier and the consumer are depending on such search engines like Google, where the supplier's information is properly conveyed to the consumer. On the other side Bulahs(2003) revealed that

guests are not likely to search for information on the hotels website; they will rather seek information from their friends and relatives. The finding is related to Nysvee (2003). Whereas people boarding flight will rather seek information and flight directly from the source, why are the hotel product consumers not confidently searching for the information on the hotels site? The trend indicates that hotel marketers are to consider the relationship of the potential market with the third party more keenly.

An example were about 10,383 search results and 1,150 (11%) representing social media which suggests that social media covers a large part of online tourism domain and is performing a significant function. There were a total of 335 domains and 20 out of them are unique domain, representing (6%). The top 20 are social media sites; it has a higher frequency of about 50%. It should be of interest to the suppliers and the hotel marketers to identify these top 20 social media for consideration when deciding on a social media web site. Virtual communities represent about 40 % of all the 1,150 social media sites. Video/audio models sharing sites are not well represented e. g YouTube. Com, face book.Com The top 20 social media sites shows the websites that have travel related content. The example of such websites are virtual tourist.com, igougo.com and consumer review sites such as yelp.com, post.com, personal blog sites such as BlogSpot (Xiang,wober and Fesenmaler2008).

Social Media on the Internet

The formal definition of social media is not found but it is understood to mean the use of internet in communicating with people on issues of interest, and experiences as expressed on line (Blackshow 2006). Online information is gathered from the content of these social media. The reason for giving out this information by consumers is to educate each other on brand services and product.

There is a difference in the content produced by consumers and those produced by marketers or suppliers. The content of the consumer information are generated by them for themselves(Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan 2008). The information generated by the consumers may be true, false, an opinion sentiment or impression.

However guests seem to be confident about information they get from their friends than information from marketers (smith 1993). Marketers use virtual internet service to reach the potential market through their user. But on the contrary, the virtual video was rated low in the research carried out by Xiang et al (2008) on user generated and consumer opinion website. The purpose is to influence potential friends and relations of the current guest. The argument however is that a guest who believes and feels strong about their friends and relations will always refer to them. Hospitality guests now get excited at sharing experience. Guests can be solicited to give qualitative and quantitative assessment on a destination or hotel after their experience. Third party reviewer seems to be performing this responsibility as an independent body.

There are challenges coming from the hotel however, on the reliability of information faced by the third party reviews. Trip advisor is an example studied. While suppliers want reliability consumer also want same. The trip-advisor was faced with the challenge by hotels in newspapers questioning the trip -advisor on how they confirm what the reviewers write on their sites (Reter 2007), Trip advisor attempted to clear the air by explaining how they authenticated the information reviewer. In defence trip-advisor explained that there was warning against peer reviewer, with false information and hotels that would want to take advantage of the system. Trip advisor further said they will ensure hotels that attempt to manipulate are disciplined on their rankings. Keate(2007) explained different ways that might reveal a fake reviewer. The scores that differ from the average, writing about only one hotel at single visit and including posting the review, as means of assessing fake reviewer. From the findings it is obvious social media covers a wide space in the online consumer search engine domain. But they have not used all the space, there is still more space. Therefore the suppliers or marketers can have room to compete on the guest attention.

The popular sites for travel information such as igougo, virtual tourist and trip-advisor, these sites can be adopted as primary source travel information.

The research has given an insight into the conflict of information supply, consumer and supplier perspective. Thus revealing that supplier marketers cannot ignore the function carried out by these Social media, in providing travel related information. The study has also opened up to the supplier and marketer to find out the drivers for social media sites because consumers are becoming very strong in deciding what and how information should be searched and sent. The argument has been that the future of internet focused business activities around how

III. Findings and Discussions

In the analyses of the case study on Sheraton hotel Abuja, It was observed that the hotel has internet facility that is useful for interaction with the guest through Email online reservation with availability check, cancellation, online payment and real-time processing etc. The placement of Sheraton on Google search engine has made it to have fast interaction with its guest. The other good thing that was observed was the separation of the expert tourist information content from the unfamiliar tourist or guest. Information search content is

therefore expected to meet the search needs of the unfamiliar and the expert tourist guest.

There were social media network site on the hotel domain however the argument in the report is that 20 social media sites were found to be rated high on travel content. This popular site include igougo, virtual tours, trip-advisor etc. few can be adopted as a primary source of travel information as discovered by (Xang and gretzel 2009).

Sheraton however has picked Trip-mama a travel comparison site designed to provide Variety of search option to their customers. It will also serve as a means to filter the opinion of the guest. The finding is that hotel marketers do not respond prompt to reviews on the third party guest reviews. The lack of prompt responds may be an indicator that the management of the hotels might not have viewed these third party reviewers as stake holders, but they are having the confidence on their potential customers.

In the trip- advisor research conducted a design of how to filter false review was made. One way was a warning given to all false reviewers. Trip mama did not indicate how it can check mate false review because trip-advisor research has confirmed that there are instances of false review. On the trip mama site some of the reviews were not good comment on the part of Sheraton Hotel Nigeria .The reviews can discourage customers from coming to the hotel. Where suppliers are not prepared in provision of consistent quality of service, online linkages to the hotel may mar the hotel image.

Conclusion and implication

The study aimed at information search and how to use the internet to influence consumer information search that may lead to purchase decision. Case study, Sheraton hotel Abuja Nigeria was analysed. Findings from the study revealed that information on the internet can be made accessible to reduce the cost of information search. It can be achieved by adopting a strategy of separating expert tourist information content from unfamiliar tourist information (Anderson1985). Sheraton has also adopted the strategy of separating content based on target. Sheraton hotel Nigeria may need to review their physical environment to improve quality information search. (Auster and Choo 1993).

Search engines were found good in information search. However Google domain made access easy because research revealed that better placement for hotels and tourism destination were made by Google. Social media was used well in Sheraton hotel such as Facebook and YouTube, but the social media in use were rated low by Xiang and gretzel (2009). Therefore the following recommendations were made.

- The management of Sheraton hotel should develop a means of actively getting involved in the monitoring and handling of their brand and image online by using the trip-mama and their social media network.
- The use of Google as a major search engine on its website should be strengthened
- It is obvious social media covers a wide space in the online consumer search engine domain. But they have not used all the space, there is still more space. Therefore the suppliers and marketers have room to compete on the guest attention.
- The popular social media sites for travel information such as igougo, virtual tourist and trip-advisor can be adopted as primary source of travel information.
- Information on the sites are to be written in very clear manner, and suppliers are to determine what they want their consumers to use in taking decision whether attributes or brand. Whichever one the information should be presented in a format, content and physical environment of quality as perceived by the consumer. Information that will show it.

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