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Internet use among tour operators in Ghana: An exploratory study

Joss

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Abstract

The introduction of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) in the early 1990's brought in a new era in communications and transformed the promotion and sales of tourism products. Established web sites by companies have put them in position to carry out productive marketing activities. The current study presents the findings of an exploratory work on the current stage of Internet use among tour operators in Ghana. The study shows that despite the increase in the use of the Internet, Ghanaian tour operators only use it as an additional mode of communication. Currently, the emphasis is still on traditional marketing communication channels such as the print media and telephone. Their websites simply do not possess the interactive features required for Internet marketing. It is recommended that tour operators in Ghana engage in social interactions by creating virtual communities.

Keywords: Tour operators, e-Travelling, Web 2.0, Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), cultural festivals, Disintermediation.

Introduction

From a small base of just 6.7 million visitors in 1990, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) attracted 33.8 million visitors in 2012. Receipts from tourism in 2012 amounted to over US\$ 36 billion and directly contributed 2.8% to the region's GDP (total contribution, including direct, indirect and induced, stood at 7.3% of GDP) (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2013). No doubt, the travel industry has been recognised as an industry that heavily relies on information and communications technology (ICT) as most of its products and services are information-based. Significantly, web-based transactions have affected the way businesses are conducted in the travel industry. Recent trends in mobile computing and social networking technology have shown that customers who are web-savvy have gained more bargaining power since they can compare prices and services from their suppliers at particularly no cost (Strachan, 2012).

As a fledging African tourist destination, Ghana is marketed as the gateway to Africa. Tourism is a fast growing industry in Ghana and today it has become the fourth highest foreign exchange earner after gold, cocoa and inward remittances. It is also growing at 12% per annum and is set to outpace the other foreign exchange earners in the near future (GTA, 2010). Arrivals in Ghana rose from 85, 332 in 1985 to about 286,000 in 1995 and by 2010 the arrival figures stood at 931,224 (GTA 2009). The most popular tourist attractions in Ghana include historical and heritage castles which span the length of the country's coastline from East to West as well as her colourful annual cultural festivals.

The marketing of Ghana as a tourist destination has been part of the roles played by the tour operators as traditional tourism marketing intermediaries. The advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) in the 1990's has presented both opportunities and challenges to the tour operators as traditional intermediaries. Poon (2001) observes that as a consequence of the online travel developments, business competition for traditional intermediaries such as tour operators has increased. The Internet is a useful marketing tool in its ability to facilitate a two-way-communication. Ghana has become a part of the global Internet since the late 1990's. It is however not clear as to the extent of use of the Internet in tour operation practices in Ghana.

The purpose of this survey is to explore the prevalence of Internet and the relative maturity of websites used among the tour operators in Ghana at the current stage of development from a non-computer based system towards a wholly computerised one. Specifically, the objective is to assess the perceptions of tour operators about the effectiveness of the various marketing communication channels they use in their operations.

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Internet use in travel operations

The direct fit between Internet and travel and tourism products has been articulated by various studies (Christian, 2001; Poon, 2001; Buhalis & Licata, 2002). In the view of Law, Leung and Wong (2004) argue that the Internet is said to have effective ways to develop a single and sustainable electronic infrastructure for gathering information and business transactions for both travellers and suppliers. It enables suppliers to carry out one-to-one marketing and mass customisation. They went on to explain that travel suppliers, through the Internet, can now understand each customer's needs and therefore target each customer individually and deliver tailor-made products. Morgan, Pritchard and Abott (2001) maintain that the international tourism system is dependent on information technology for its future growth, competitiveness and long-term survival, particularly, in terms of tourism marketing and distribution.

When applied within internal contexts, empirical evidence suggests that technologies such as blogs and wikis have the potential, for example, to support internal communication (Kosonen et al, 2007) and knowledge sharing (Hester, 2010). Additionally, it has been suggested that the use of web 2.0 tools can be employed to sustain the process of organisational learning (Bexter et al, 2010; Boateng et al, 2010). The advancement of information and communications technology (ICT), particularly the world wide web (WWW) has made e-commerce spread very quickly, creating a revolution in business. According to Sushil et al (2006), e-commerce will no longer be a choice for organisations; rather it will be a competitive necessity to ensure business prosperity. Greenberg (2009) also observed that web emerging technology (web 2.0) drives social change that affects all businesses. He went further to say that the web triggers a revolution in how people communicate by facilitating intensive peer-to-peer collaborations and easy access to real time communication.

Information can be provided through the Internet to potential customers anywhere in the world. The customer today, plays a more active role in the search for information. The information-based nature of tourism according to Walle (1996) means that the Internet which offered global reach and multi-media capability is an increasingly important means of promoting and distributing tourism services. Prior studies have indicated that modern travellers demand more high quality travel services, products, information and value for their money (Christian, 2001; Labetken, 1999; Samenfink, 1999). Marketing on the Internet, however, is not only limited to information distribution but also it has a direct selling potential. Arguably, the direct selling is developing more slowly than the information distribution of the web, nonetheless, the potential for electronic governance is voluminous. Even though accurate estimate of Internet site and users is not available, there is a clear trend for all the major firms in the tourism industry to go online (Oconnor, 1999), cited in Ozturan and Roney (2004). The fact is that customer expectations in service's industry high pose a serious challenge to business organisations including tour operation as they have to meet customers' requirements and make an exceptional impression on every customer (Anshari et al, 2012a,b).

In terms of technological resources, travel agents and tour operators need to appropriately respond to the recent advances in Internet and mobile technologies. For instance, there are increasing demands for ubiquitous access to tourist information systems for service co-ordination and process integration. Competitive advantage is increasingly driven by the advancement of information technology and innovation (Chiu, Yueh, Leung and Hung, 2009). Contributing to this discourse, Hinchcliffe (2006) observes that the web technology in particular, is an important resource to create more efficient business processes. He also noted that the web also is a powerful channel for organisations to develop or enhance interactions with customers to strengthen business-customer relationships.

The role of tour operators and travel agents as information providers is expected to be changed by the Internet. Arguments for and against the disintermediation of tour operators and travel agents have been noted in the literature. Buhalis (1998) contends that the development of the Internet and the www in the 1990s as a means for the global sharing of information and resources has made the traditional marketing practices obsolete. He maintains that in order to satisfy the demand of tourism and service in the long run, there is no other alternative but to use information technology (IT) and to interact with the market. Block, Rignour and Steiner (1996) on their part, maintain that the traveller is gaining self-service mentality. In their view, travellers gather travel services on their own and form their own customized holiday packages.

Bailey and Bakos (1997), however, hold the contrary view that markets do not necessarily become disintermediated in the electronic market place. This view is further shared by Rachman and Richins (1997) when they argue that complete elimination of traditional intermediaries by an electronic market is unlikely to occur in the tourism industry in the immediate future. Rastrollo and Alarcon (2000) also share the view that mass disintermediation in the tourism industry is highly unlikely. Pedersen and Methlie (2000) hold the view that instead of disintermediation, it is almost certain that new virtual intermediaries will develop.

Conceptual framework

The Response Dependence Theory (RDT) and Transaction Cost Economics (TCE) seem to provide some answers to the question as to how tour operators can continue to survive in the wake of competition from the internet. The theory postulates that the external environment influences the performance of the organization. It maintains that the advent of Web 2.0 as one of critical resources in the organization affects tour operators in the environmental uncertainty. The RDT has become one of the most influential theories in organisational theory and strategic management. It is believed that organisations that depend on the environment can and do enact multiple strategies to combat these contingencies (Hillman et al, 2009).

In general, the theory opines that tour operators need at least three domains of resources: human resources, technological resources, and business process re-engineering (government policies, rules and regulations) (see Figure 1). While human resource plays critical role in sustaining competitive advantage technological resources are needed by tour operators to appropriately respond to the recent advances in Internet and mobile technologies. The Web technology in particular, is an important resource to create more efficient business processes. It is also a powerful channel for organisations to develop or enhance interactions with customers to strengthen business-customer relationships (Hinchcliffe, 2006).

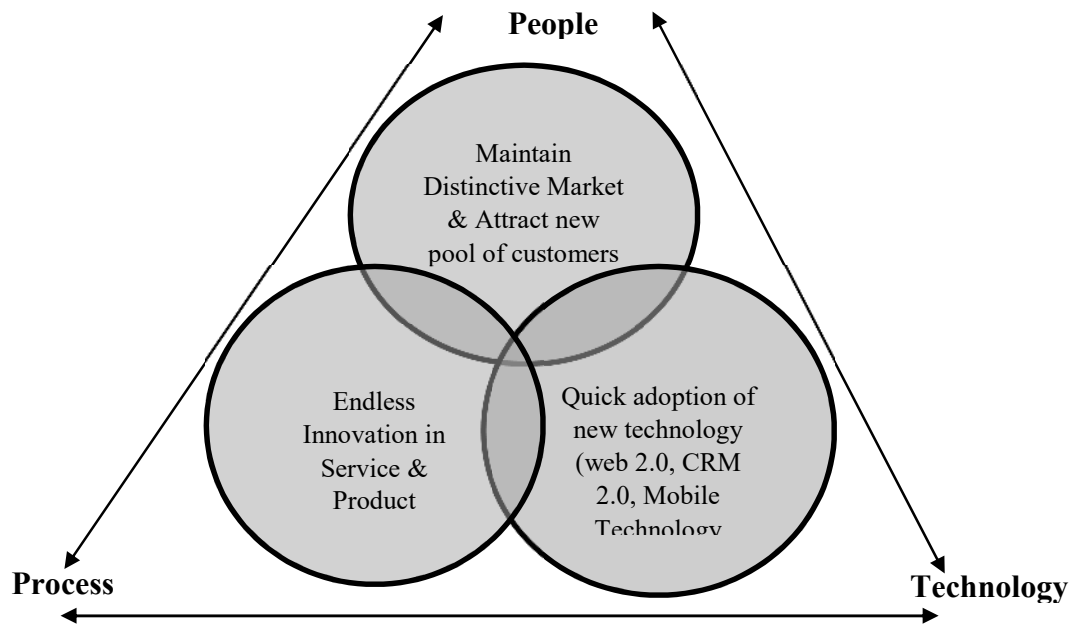


Figure 1: Reference model of strategy

Source: Almunawor et al (2012)

With the advancement of web technology, especially Web 2.0, customers are becoming aware and empowered in a way that they have an ability to communicate and relay information through their personal networks on the Internet with their colleagues on any issue instantly, including information about products or services that they purchased (Anshari & Almunawar, 2011). Finally, business process re-engineering encourages innovation to improve the functioning and effectiveness of tour operators. Re-engineering, according to the RDT conceives of organisations as mechanisms that can be redesigned to be more efficient (Robey et al, 1995).

The framework suggests that tour operators in Ghana maintain distinctive markets and attract new pool of customers. They need to quickly adopt new technologies (Web 2.0, CRM 2.0 mobile technology) to reverse the negative effects of e-commerce competition. They also need to embark on the process of endless innovation in service and product delivery. These measures could provide a recipe to cope with the threat of disintermediation in the country's travel industry.

Methodology

The research was undertaken between September and October, 2012. The quantitative method of data collection was employed to obtain the primary data. A structured questionnaire was, therefore, used as the survey instrument. The questionnaire had been subjected to relevant modifications as informed by pilot testing in July the same year. The instrument was segmented into five sections: Section A sought information on description of the tour operation firms; Section B investigated the different marketing communication channels employed by the respondents; Section C dealt with internet applications of the tour operators; Section D solicited opinions of respondents on advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet as a marketing communication channel in the tourism sector in Ghana, and finally, Section E elicited basic socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Secondary data was obtained from relevant literature made up of books, journals and the Internet.

According to Ghana Tourism Authority (GTA), formerly (Ghana Tourist Board, GTB) publications (2008), there is relatively small number of travel intermediaries in Ghana who fall into the category of tour operation. Invariably, the tour operation business is concentrated in the national capital of Accra with a few scattered over some regional capitals in the country. In order to collect cross-sectional data from the country and ensure a fair distribution according to concentration of firms, 80% questionnaires out of a total of 220 were distributed in the nation's capital (Accra) with the remaining 20% distributed in the regions where they were located.

The accidental sampling method was used in securing the sample population since the total target population was not large. In addition to that majority of tour operators in Ghana, as acknowledged by Akyeampong (2009) and Ghana Tourist Authority (2010), were found in the nation's capital (Accra). This was done with the help of students during the long vacation of the academic year which ended in June 2012. Out of the 220 questionnaires 183 usable ones were returned making a response rate of 85%.

The Chief Executive Officers (CEO's), also referred as managers of the sampled tour operation organisations were used as unit of analysis. In analyzing data for the study statistical methods such as frequency tables, percentages and cross-tabulations were used to obtain quantifiable and measurable results.

Findings

Majority of the tour operators (44%) were made up of sole proprietorship, 32.3% were limited liability companies and the rest were either partnership enterprises (14.3%) or joint stock companies (1.8%). On the average, the companies have been operating in the sector for six years. In spite of the fact that no classification in terms of transfer of employees was applied in the survey, (90.8%) of the tour operators defined themselves as small (20.4%) and medium (70.4%) enterprises.

Table 1: Respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	96	52.5
Female	87	47.5
Age		
Less than 30 years	70	57.4
30-40	48	26.2
50+	30	16.4
Education		
Elementary / middle	3	1.6
High school graduate	120	65.6
University graduate	21	11.5
Masters / doctorate	39	21.3
Elementary / middle	3	1.6

Source: Fieldwork, 2012

Most of the respondents were either general managers (33.3%) or middle level managers (46.3%) and the rest (20.4%) were the people working in offices at various positions. Among the middle level, managers were 48 marketing and sales managers, 15 finance managers and 12 information technology managers. Of the 183 respondents, 162 were using computers for 2 years or more, and the rest had computer usage experience for less than 2 years.

From the findings, 52.5% of the respondents were male as against their female counterparts 47.5% (see Table 1). The age distribution of respondents showed that 57.4% were less than 30 years of age while 26.2% were between the ages of 30-40 years. The rest, 16.4% were above 50 years of age. In relation to educational attainment, the findings revealed that majority 65.6% of tour operators in the country had attained high school qualification while few 32.8% had attained graduate and post graduate qualification. Very few (1.6%) of the respondents were holders of basic education qualification.

Information from respondents about how often they used various marketing communication channels brought out the responses depicted in Table 2. Marketer-dominated categories of personal and non-personal communication channels were provided. In addition, word-of-mouth was also provided as a non-marketer-dominated source of information, since many buyers, according to Kotler (1997) seek the recommendations of their friends and relatives, especially when products are expensive, risky or purchased infrequently.

Responses provided by respondents show that channels such as broadcast (TV and radio), display media (billboards), newspapers and catalogue (print media) are never used by respondents. Conversely, brochure is the basic print media used by most (38%) of the tour operators. In the case of the Internet e-mail is used more than the web site. While 66% use the e-mail, 61% use the website. Generally, 85.3% of the operators use the e-mail either frequently or always, while 69% were either frequent or regular users of the website.

Table 2: Use of various marketing communication channels by tour operators

Marketing communication channel	Never % (n)	Seldom % (n)	Frequently % (n)	Always% (n)	Total % (N)
TV	55.7 (102)	23.0 (42)	8.2 (15)	13.1 (24)	100.0 (183)
Radio	32.8 (60)	31.1 (57)	19.7 (36)	16.4 (30)	100.0 (183)
Newspaper	29.5 (54)	36.1 (66)	23.0 (42)	11.5 (21)	100.0 (183)
Magazines	19.7 (36)	47.5 (87)	21.3 (39)	11.5 (21)	100.0 (183)
Catalogues	27.9 (51)	26.2 (48)	24.6 (45)	21.3 (39)	100.0 (183)
Brochures	19.7 (36)	19.7 (36)	23.0 (42)	37.7 (69)	100.0 (183)
Billboards	29.5 (54)	24.6 (45)	18.0 (33)	27.9 (51)	100.0 (183)
Telephone	13.1 (24)	6.6(12)	14.8 (27)	65.6 (120)	100.0 (183)
Website	19.7 (36)	11.5 (21)	8.2(15)	60.7 (111)	100.0 (183)
Email	9.8(18)	4.9 (9)	19.7 (36)	65.6 (120)	100.0 (183)
Other tour operators	13.1 (24)	19.7 (36)	21.3(39)	45.9 (84)	100.0 (183)
Other travel agencies	16.4 (30)	16.4 (30)	19.7(36)	47.5 (87)	100.0 (183)
Word of mouth by previous customers	8.2 (15)	11.5 (21)	18.0 (55)	62.3 (114)	100.0 (183)

Source: Fieldwork, 2012

One remarkable observation is that word-of-mouth recommendation is used as one of the most powerful marketing communication tools: 80.3% of the tour operators rely on it either frequently or always. This compares favourably with the work of Ozturan and Roney (2004) who did a similar survey in Turkey. Finally, the telephone as a personal communication channel appears to be still highly utilized by respondents.

The opinion of the tour operators about the degree of effectiveness of these marketing communication channels are shown in Table 3. The percentage of the tour operators that consider the telephone as a highly effective marketing communication channel is the same as those who regard the E-mail (65.6%). Word-of-mouth and the web site appear to be the next highly regarded marketing communication channels by the tour operators, (114%) and (111%) respectively. Neither brochures (169%) nor billboards (51%) were considered to be as highly effective as other tour operators (84%) and travel agents (87%) with quite significant margins.

The findings in connection with web site ownership indicate that out of 183 tour operators, 153 (approximately 86.4%) indicated that they owe a web site. Of the web sites, 68.8% have been functioning for more than two years, 14.6% between 1 and two years, and the rest for less than a year. The marketing communication channels are shown in Table 2. Responses provided to a question as to how often they updated their web sites indicated that 16% of tour operators updated their websites weekly; 34.7% monthly, 40.8% every 3 months and 8.2% of them never updated their sites.

Table 3: Tour operator’s perception of the effectiveness of the various marketing communication channels used

Marketing communication channel	No Effect % (n)	Little Effect % (n)	Moderate Effect % (n)	High Effect % (n)	Total % (n)
TV	55.7 (102)	23.0 (42)	13.1 (24)	8.2 (15)	100.0 (183)
Radio	32.8 (60)	31.1 (57)	19.7 (36)	16.4 (30)	100.0 (183)
Newspaper	29.5 (54)	36.1 (66)	23.0 (42)	11.5 (21)	100.0 (183)
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Word of mouth by previous customers	8.2 (15)	11.5 (21)	18.0 (55)	62.3 (114)	100.0 (183)

Source: Fieldwork, 2012

Table 4: Contents of the websites of travel agencies

Content	Frequency	Percentage
Information about tours offered for sale	90	54.5
Information about the different tourist destinations	36	21.8
Contact information of your tour operation	15	9.1
Visual information such as photographs, maps	6	3.6
Reservation information	15	9.1
Surveys to collect information on different issues	3	1.8

Source: Fieldwork, 2012

In response to a question which required respondents to list three most important reasons why they used the website, majority, in order of importance, mentioned ‘marketing’, followed by ‘provision of information about different tourist attractions’ and lastly, ‘collection of customer information’. Tour operators were asked through multiple choice responses to indicate the most important advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet as a marketing communication channel. Of the 183 respondents, 55.7% indicated that it provided the convenience of 24-hour accessibility to customers, 42.6% said it offered the opportunity to reach the global market without any geographical barriers. Decrease in cost of advertisement was the response of 33.9% as an advantage.

Discussion

The dominance of sole proprietorship business in tour operation in the country conforms to the claim by Buhalis (1994) that small and medium enterprises tend to dominate the global economy and that the composition of the tourism sector is consistent with this pattern. The larger number of male operators than females suggests that more males than females of the sampled respondents were into tour operations. This picture is rather at variance with the general situation in the services sector in Ghana where there is female dominance in this sector of the economy (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012).

The findings further suggest that majority of tour operators in the country are less than 30 years of age while the rest are above 30 years. Also, the findings that majority of tour operators in the country have acquired higher education suggest that the business of tour operation requires CEOs or managers to acquire

higher level of education. This is consistent with the requirement of the GTA on tour operator qualifications in the country.

The popularity of word-of-mouth as a marketing communication channel as captured by the study confirms the observation by Kotler that “Companies are consequently becoming aware of the importance of ‘word-of-mouth’ upon the communication process and trying to stimulate personal influence channels to work on their behalf” (Kotler, 1997, pp. 616 – 620, cited in Ozturan and Roney, 2004). The findings from Table 4 are evaluated by the use of hypothesis of tourism information developed by Sheldon (1997), cited in Ozturan and Roney (2004).

The study is adapting the procedure followed by Ozturan and Roney (2004) to the Ghanaian situation, as a fledgling tourist destination in Africa. In their work, they quoted Sheldon as saying that, some tourism information (such as maps and location information, transportation routes, product description) does not change very frequently and hence is relatively static. Using online electronic media to distribute this sort of information is not considered essential. On the other hand, “most tourism information (such as product availability, scheduling, forces and rates) is dynamic and need electronic media for frequent updates and rapid distribution from supplier to customer (Sheldon, 1997, p.8).

It can therefore, be said that majority of the sampled tour operators own web site. However, these sites are not interactive since they contain mostly static information, such as pre-trip information about the tours offered and visual information. It can be concluded that tour operators in Ghana use their websites for “push marketing” which implies promoting their products to many people, with the hope that significant numbers will buy them. Security concerns by consumers were a source of disadvantage as opined by 40.4% respondents. Stated differently consumers were apprehensive to write down their credit card numbers and provide their personal data.

Documentation by various researchers (Bjork and Guss, 1999; O’connor, 1999), cited in Ozturan and Roney (2004) showed that the issue of security was one of the well-known barriers to marketing over the Internet. The inefficiency of the Internet infrastructure in Ghana was captured as one disadvantage as noted by seventy respondents. The use of the Internet is a recent phenomenon in Ghana and as such present facilities do not allow for utilizing this medium to its full advantage. This may also explain the reason why, according to Akyeampong (2009), Ghanaians do not feel comfortable with the new developments in computer technologies which is seen as another factor which inhibits efficient Internet use by some tour operators. High cost associated with the necessary hardware investment was one other disadvantage observed by some respondents. While some respondents who are internet users thought the Internet was expensive, other respondents felt that the Internet did not allow customers to speak and bargain face-to-face. This indicates the crucial need for social interaction to take place. As observed by Lang, (2000) cited in Ozturan and Roney (2004), “one of the widely documented disadvantages of the Internet for customers is the lack of a human interface” (p.270).

Prominent marketing communication channels used by respondents are the telephone, Website, e-mail and word-of-mouth. Such level of usage could be justified by the fact that the progress of technology brings in a number of issues for travel agents and tour operators to deal with, especially those related to the distribution of the tourism products and services. The distribution revolution which occurred a few years ago impacts the travel supplier sector, creating a new reality that companies in the field must face. Today, the Internet has the most significant role in distribution channel in the way it changes the pattern of traditional distribution, shocking the market by the rapid transformation which it generates across the whole industry.

As illustrated by the framework for this study, the external environment (market) influences the performance of the organization. Tour operators reacting to modern needs of customers adopt quickly to new technology such as the Internet. Today, tour operators, who are the traditional intermediaries in the travel industry have developed into the ‘brick-and-click’ organisations. This implies that they have expanded into the e-commerce area. Also there are new Internet-based intermediaries in the market place known as cybermediaries. This is an intermediary offering its services on the Web. After adoption of the new technology tour operators engage in a process of endless innovation in service and product (see Fig. 1).

Due to increase in Internet technologies, more traditional travel intermediaries are adopting IT to provide added value to travel consumers. "IT has thus become a vital competitive advantage for tour operators, as they use e-commerce development strategies to retain performance advantages. Therefore, e-commerce creates opportunities for the re-intermediation of the on-line tour operator (Chiu, 2006). Right now, traditional tour operators are being threatened by the expansion of alternative distribution channels such as the Internet, Teletext, call centers, and even travel TV channels (PROEINVEST, 2004).

Conclusion and recommendations

The Internet provides useful tools and functions for the promotion and marketing of tourism products, nonetheless, the current study shows that for tour operators in Ghana, it is simply an additional mode of communication that supplements the existing modes. The current emphasis is still on traditional marketing communication channels such as the print media and telephone. Even though there is an increase in the use of the Internet, tour operators generally cannot use it effectively. It appears that more often the Internet is used for e-mail.

More than half of the tour operators have websites, yet their sites do not possess the interactive features for successful Internet marketing. This is to suggest that these operators are not seeking out customers through their websites, instead, they want to provide information for current and potential customers about their company and the tours they offer. Word-of-mouth is also perceived as an important source of information. Contact between the participants in the Internet is not face-to-face, however social interaction is still possible by creating virtual communities in the view of Hagel and Armstrong (1997) as cited in Ozturan and Roney (2004). Tour operators however, do not use their websites for this purpose.

The study recommends that tour operators who own websites should include interactive features that can afford them the opportunity to interact with their customers. They must also employ their websites to seek out potential customers.

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