DIGITALIZATION OF THE CITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF CITY MUNICIPALITY WEB SITES AS A PART OF CITY BRAND

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Abstract
The topics explicated in this abstract are communication strategies, online branding, city promotion and branding studies of municipalities, the usage of internet and web sites in creating and developing a city brand. Within the paper, the websites of Sydney, London, Paris, Rome and New York (respectively -2006) are compared with the websites of Paris, London, Rome and New York (respectively -2009) by website analysis method. The aim of this study is to identify if there occurs a positive relation between the websites of the cities and The Anholt-GMI City Brands Index. The official web sites of municipalities of the first best 5 cities under The Anholt-GMI City Brands Index are also analyzed within the abstract.

Key words: Internet, Online Branding, Municipalities, Web Site Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION
Leading the most important elements which influence the success of tourism activities are the establishment of correct communication strategies and effective adoption of improvements in information technologies into any kind of activity. The scope, speed and effectiveness of these improvements are vital in sense of presenting the products and services which constitute the tourism supply because knowledge is the core of traveling and accommodation concepts which stand at the focal point of tourism activities. “While visiting a place, a tourist stays in hotels, eats at restaurants, goes shopping, uses public transportation, contacts local people and visits different localities (Jafari, 1983: 71-77)”. Therefore, a tourist who rapidly obtains information about where to stay for what charge under what conditions will also make a rapid decision. Efficiency in communication technologies can be achieved through the constitution of strategies structured in accordance with target audiences’ specifications and with the facts of competition atmosphere where each player needs to differentiate from others. Medias used in communicating with target audience have different advantages and disadvantages of their own. The duplex nature of communication is an important element that can increase its influence over the target audience as it will help knowing the details about them. This process of knowing helps organizations gain the ability to acutely respond to consumer needs and requests similar to the closeness lived in face to face communication. The most important benefit internet provides is its nature that allows private enterprises and public institutions to establish duplex, interactive and symmetrical communication. (Jo, Jung, 2005: 24) The facilities internet grants turn it into a unique tool in the application of marketing communication strategies (Doren, Fechner, Green, Adelsberger, 2000: 27).

With many facilities it provides to its users, internet has a major potential in the process of publicizing cities and turning them into destination brands. All points of attraction in a city that wants to become a brand can be gathered and presented to target audience through internet technologies creating a chance for regional competition. Considering the fact that people planning a trip surf the websites of tourism locations, internet grants following facilities (Passman, Pipperger, Schertler, 1997: 208-220): Access to detailed information about the tourism products and services of the location, reduction in the dependence to agents, ability to compare alternative products and services during decision making phase, making reservations directly and buying the product or service individually.

Within the context of this paper, the usage of internet in communication strategies executed by municipalities which are qualified as the authorities in branding process of cities and responsible for determining the tourism strategies will be comparatively analyzed through the official web sites of 5 best cities of 2006 (Sydney, London, Paris, Roma, New York) according to The Anholt-GMI City Brands Index.
2. METHODOLOGY:
2.1. Research Draft: The approaches to web analysis are classified in two groups as qualitative and quantitative. The main question that must be answered at this point is the highlighting of a web site’s goal and its design though it may be different from one discipline to another. In this research, the usage of internet by cities in promotion communication is studied in municipality basis as the top unit that plans and executes the civic promotion and tourism activities. Moving from the thesis about “the effect of municipal web sites and their designs on brand recognition, brand establishment processes and communication activities within tourism goals”, the usage of internet by municipalities as a communication tool or communication media in expressing their cities to target audiences in international area is analyzed within this paper. The paper includes the analysis on the usage of internet and web sites by municipalities in tourism communications strategies, online branding and publicity activities and the comparative analysis of the official web sites of 5 best cities of 2006 and 2009 (Sydney, London, Paris, Roma, New York) according to The Anholt-GMI City Brands Index(Anholt,2006:13-18).

2.2. Data analysis: The basis to the methodological part of this research is the article “Election Campaigning on the WWW in the USA and UK: A Comparative Analysis” by Gibson, Ward, Margolis, Resnick and Ward(Gibson,2001). The web sites of the cities included in this research have been graded according to their capacity of the function part consisting of information flow, resource gathering, communication web, participation index and presentation part consisting of visual, accessibility, currency and visibility index. The specifications of horizontal and interactive information communication flow have also been analyzed downwards and upwards.

3. FINDINGS:
Each municipality whose web site is analyzed within the research is considered in sense of its web site’s functions and presentation facilities, the ability of its ingredients to establish a brand, the accordance of web site with the communication activities about publicity and tourism and the its activity in presenting the ingredients. In this context, their targets and the level of target achievement about internet usage in online branding activities are determined. The research was executed between the dates July 27, 2007 - August 28, 2007 and May 13, 2009 - June 15, 2009

3.1. The Whole Functions of the Web Sites of Analyzed Municipalities: Considering the web sites of municipalities analyzed in the research, it is detected that all 5 web sites adopts a vertically structured communication process from top to down. However municipal web sites establish other different communication channels from bottom to top which means from target audience to the management. The chat and forum facilities support the flow of information at this point.

In 2006, Sydney municipality web site was granted 22 points by covering all requirements between the municipal web sites graded between 0-22 points under the subtitle of information flow within functionality basis. An important facility attracting the visitor in Sydney municipality’s web site is the presentation of 2030 goals through a direction button placed in the main page. All the information is also presented to users with different frame buttons in the main page to establish efficient information flow. Sydney was elected to be the best city brand of 2006 within The Anholt-GMI City Brands Index. Accordingly, the facility of “effective transmission of brand information to target audiences” which is one of the most important phases of brand establishment was achieved in the web site designed by Sydney municipality. Sydney was followed by Rome, New York, London and Paris respectively. Though the municipality of Rome also succeeded to get a high score in information flow means, it could not cover some facilities within the index. The web site of Paris municipality establishes information flow with the directions from its main page to related institutions’ web sites. Evaluating the research results, it can be stated that all municipalities received an average grade of 18.8 on information flow basis which allows saying that all web sites provide an information flow higher than average level to its users.

When the websites’ functions were analysed in 2009, it has been found out that Sydney again gets a 22 points score (0-22 range) as it did in the 2006 analysis with regards information provision index. Paris: getting 17 points score in 2006 for the same index got 21 points score in 2009 which is mainly based on the improvements in its website.
Especially with the concept of social responsibility which is recently underlined has increased its importance for the products and services which want to become brands parallel with the intensity of competition. Target audiences have started to be interested in the social side of products and services and to evaluate their social benefits. For this reason, the facility of “resource collection over the internet for social campaigns in the city” was also included in the index. In 2006, none of the web sites analyzed has proved a finding about resource collection for campaigns. This index has not been found in 2009, neither. Hence the relevant index isn’t a part of this study.

Communication process plays a vital role in the marketing of services which are abstract products. Becoming a brand in a service sector like tourism is only possible through the effective and accurate structuring of communication. In 2006, under the inner and outer communication index of the research, New York municipality has the highest score within a point range of 0-40. The municipality provides many directions to various institutions in inner and outer communication means through the buttons in its main page. New York municipality is followed by Paris and Rome respectively however Sydney could not achieve success in inner and outer communication despite of its success in information flow. London is on the 5th place in communication index. In 2009 analysis, it is found that Paris has increased its score in networking-int.ext. index forestalling New York and becoming the first runner. Paris is followed by New York and Rome in this index. London and Sydney increased their score by one point in this index.

Sharing common values, ideas and opinions with the target audience is one of the opportunities granted to marketing world by technological developments. Products and services which attach importance to opinions of target audience and shape themselves in accordance with them will always be one step ahead in competition atmosphere. In 2006, the highest grade in the research was received by New York municipality with 4 points in a range of 0-5 with its facilities of chat, e-mail, forum, membership and site search. New York is followed by Roma, Sidney, London and Paris respectively. New York again got the highest score in 2009 for participation index. Paris is the only city which increased its score in the relevant index.

Considering the functionality of web sites, in 2006, Sydney municipality stands out in information flow index whereas New York municipality is better in other facilities. It’s clearly seen that Sydney municipality’s web site more effectively covers the requirements demanded by international tourism facts and by the internet users. Rome, Paris and London municipalities follow New York and Sydney. Paris, however, has increased its score in functional index and forestalled Sydney 4 points in the information provision index compared to 2006. In the other components of the functional index it is also concluded that Paris stood out. Paris website is concluded to supply the needed information especially for the international visitors. New York, Sydney, Rome and London followed Paris.

3.2. Presentation of Analyzed Web Sites: One of the opportunities granted by internet and web sites is the 3 dimension presentation of product or services with visual, audio and textual materials. Unlike he products of other sectors, products presented by tourism business can be tested only after purchasing and the ideas can be shaped afterwards. Web sites enable tourism enterprises to furnish their products on virtual atmosphere to target audiences at any place all over the world. Hence, the formation of opinions about product is closely related to the presentation of products on the web sites and the presentation is of utmost importance in brand establishment process.

In 2006, municipality web sites analyzed in the research are considered to fail in presentation means based on the average points in all indexes despite of their success in functional index. This detection proves that web sites could not achieve supporting the functionality they provide to their users with an effective presentation. Especially London municipality fails in effective presentation of...
its website although it reaches at the highest visibility percentage in Google, one of the most popular
search engines all over the world, with a number of 1,900,000 and the web site receives the lowest
point in the index. London is again found to be the most visible website in 2009. However its visibility
has been supported with the its website’s functional features. Paris has increased its visibility in 2009
compared to 2006 from 23,800 to 1,170,000.

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<td>New York</td>
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In 2006, New York has 7 full points in visual index. However comparing the textual elements
with visual ones, it can be said that the web site is unable to cover what is expected. The highest points
in accessibility and navigability index are received by Sydney and London municipalities. The web
site of Paris municipality has a plain presentation. The directions and information providing is made
through directions to other institutions’ web sites. Consequently, the presentation does not prove the
success expected from the city brand. All municipalities are successful in freshness index. Sydney,
Rome and New York municipalities update their web sites daily while London and Paris do it less
frequently. In Rome and New York municipalities’ web sites, there is no direction to foreign
languages which is a missing point in reaching at international target audiences. On the other hand, the
other languages button in London municipality’s web site only translates certain parts of the site.

When the websites’ presentations are analysed in 2009 it is found that the highest score is
obtained by New York and Rome. Paris and Sydney has only increased their score by one point. New
York and Rome websites weren’t up to the expectations in visual and textual context. In accessibility
and navigability indexes the highest scores were obtained by Paris different from 2006 results. In
freshness index all cities are found to be successful. Hence it can be stated that municipalities pay
more attention to websites since the websites are being updated daily.

In 2006, the highest data capacity is held by Rome municipality’s web site with a volume of
528 KB. Rome municipality is followed by New York with 240 KB, Sydney with 192 KB, London
with 144 KB and Paris with 124 KB. The data capacity of all the websites has increased mainly Paris’s
depending on the changes. (Paris-585KB, Roma 560 KB, New York 320 KB, London 260 KB,
Sydney 250 KB) A website with high data volume may mean that it includes more elements such as
graphs, animations, audio and visual elements that enable effective expression compared to the others.
On the other hand, in the countries or centers where the internet connection is slow, high data volume
may cause some problems such as viewing the sites slowly or not being able to view some elements
that affect the users negatively.

In 2006, as a result of the research made in Google as one of the most popular search engines
for users all around the world, there is a direction of 1,900,000 links to London Municipalit, 948,000
links to New York, 896,000 links to Rome, 223,000 links to Sydney and 23,800 links to Paris within
the context of visibility index. In 2009 London links were 2,430,000: Paris links were 1,170,000,
New York links were 1,110,000, Rome links were 1,050,000, Sydney links were 334,000. In visitability
index all cities improved compared to 2006.

CONCLUSION
Within the paper the usage ways and percentages of internet and web sites by the cities which
want to become brands in tourism business as a service sector is tried to be determined and the
municipal web sites of best 5 cities in 2006 all over the world are analyzed depending on determined
criteria. Evaluating the web sites of 5 municipalities in visual and textual basis, it can be stated that
there are differences between each web site about succeeding in basic duties of directing users,
contributing to city image and increasing the tourism potential. On the basis of established research
criteria, Sydney municipality’s web site can be considered successful in sense of reflecting the brand
establishment activities to the internet media. Unlike other municipalities’ web sites, Sydney
municipality’s web site displays the city logo and the goals of city for 2030. The website is also more
successful than others in locating the direction buttons and in directing the users. Sydney municipality website which received the highest grade on functionality basis fails in presenting this functionality according to research results. Information provided in the web site is not adequately supported with 3 dimension animation elements. Media membership facility positioned in direction buttons is an important plus for establishing interaction with media. New York municipality’s web site is the second one that attracts attention after Sydney’s however this site also does not succeed in supporting its data with enough visual elements. Looking at the main page of the site, it can be said that online services are more qualified than others but the structure of directions and visual positioning is weak. Paris, which was took a back seat in functional and presentation indexes in 2006, got higher points compared to other cities in 2009 with the improvements in its website. This supports the Andholt City Brand Index’s results in 2009- Paris was found to be the most admired city brand. Sydney’s website got close points in 2009 compared to 2006. The web sites of Paris and London municipalities prove not to present visual glitz that can impress target audiences and let them surf joyously. Research data shows that London municipality’s web site has the lowest performance both in functionality and presentation index. The foreign language option can only be used in some pages, not in all direction buttons in the page. Animations and visual elements take place in Paris municipality’s web site in the pop ups opened from the main page and in the web sites of organizations; this situation constitutes a negative result in online branding process. The web site of Rome municipality shows a performance close to those of New York and Sydney however it there is not a direction button for foreign languages for international users. During the research period, it was also detected that the site includes a city map button but it does not function. All the web sites analyzed in the research include assistance information that can support tourism activities and direct target audiences such as foreign currency, weather forecast, emergency contact information and other basic information about the region as well as information about regional public institutions, festivals and regional publicity activities.

In conclusion, it is determined that the web sites of 5 best cities of 2006 are not as successful as they are expected to be compared to their brand recognition. In 2009 the same foundings were reached. For this reason, it can be considered that municipality web site does not have a direct influence over tourism demand and city brand. However the increasing usage of internet by tourists and their demand about arranging all activities through internet is an important matter to be discussed in brand establishment means since tourists provide information from web sites and get more interested in regional web sites while planning their trips. The Andholt City Brand Index’s results matches with the website analysis index (functional and presentation) scores in both 2006 and 2009 (the most popular cities are same as the most successful websites) showing that websites are very important communication mediums. In this context, municipalities which are authorized to establish a city brand should arrange their web sites considering international target audiences. Detailed information about city and region should be transmitted to target audience in a plain but effective way with the support of visual elements to enrich the ingredients. The services provided are also of utmost importance in the process of online branding. City municipalities should compose electronic service possibilities in their web sites in order to cover more needs of tourists.

REFERENCES:


