

Full Length Research Paper

An evaluation of thermal hotel websites and the use/non-use of the Internet as a marketing tool by thermal hotels in Turkey

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Although a number of studies regarding internet sites relating to the tourism industry and Turkey's thermal sources have been conducted worldwide, none have been found that deal specifically with thermal hotels and their usage of Internet as a marketing tool. The purpose of this study was to evaluate thermal hotels websites and determine the use or non use of the Internet as a marketing tool by thermal hotels in Turkey. This study outlines that the thermal hotels in Turkey do not currently use the Internet as a productive marketing tool. This study also suggests some solutions to thermal hotel managers for successful cyber tourism marketing, including the establishment of a website, on-line booking, customer support and general cyber marketing on the Web. Limitations and further research are also explored.

Key words: Marketing, Internet, thermal tourism, thermal hotel, Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey is rich with thermal sources. According to the Turkish Health Tourism Association, there are more than one thousand eight-hundred hot springs in Turkey. And Only 6% of these are used for touristic purposes (Sayılı et al., 2007: 625). Despite the richness of Turkey's thermal sources, thermal tourism is not adequately developed in Turkey. According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's statistics (2006: 40), the majority of demand for health tourism in Turkey is inbound. On the other hand, outbound demand for health tourism exceeds ten thousand customers every year. Also, those thermal destinations which are known by foreign visitors are contained in a limited region in Turkey. The most popular thermal destinations are Pamukkale, Afyonkarahisar, Balıkesir and Kizilcahamam (Sayılı et al., 2006: 625).

Developing thermal tourism, in order to expand overall tourism—is essential to Turkey (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2006: 39). Not only are thermal hotels vital to Turkey, but the services and qualifications of such hotels

are also very important. The characteristics listed below make thermal hotels different from other hospitality establishments and increase the importance of thermal hotels.

1. Average length of stay is longer than other types of hotels.
2. Thermal hotels include cure and therapy centers.
3. Elderly customers, disabled customers or therapy purposed customers generally stay at thermal hotels.
4. Thermal hotels can only be built near thermal sources.
5. Demand for thermal hotels increases generally in winter and thermal hotels are giving service the whole year.

These make the usage of Internet in thermal hotels as a marketing tool more important. The importance of information technology in the travel and tourism industry, especially the World Wide Web, has increased tremendously in the past decade. As information is the lifeblood of the travel industry, effective use of information technology is pivotal for marketing and promotion-related activities (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2006: 239). From the perspective of consumers, the Internet allows them to

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communicate directly with hotels, to request information and to purchase services and products without any geographical and time constraints. For thermal hotel managers, in particular sales and marketing managers, the successful factors for hotel websites are lower distribution costs, higher revenues, and a larger market share (O'Connor 2003). So, the Internet is an important communication tool and is very important for thermal hotels to use it as an effective marketing tool.

Consequently, it is possible to state that tourism increasingly needs to adopt innovative methods to enhance their competitiveness. It is also necessary to stress the importance of improved advertising and marketing of Turkey's thermal sources. This can be provided by increasing the usage of the Internet by thermal hotels with their website and as the Internet has proven to be an effective means of advertising, marketing, distributing goods, and information services.

With the use of the Internet, thermal hotels can advertise and market their businesses to both domestic and international markets. In addition to this, the Internet is an important channel of distribution for consumers. Increasingly, consumers can undertake their entire tourism product search and booking online and, therefore, they require flexible, specialized, accessible, interactive products and communication with tourism organizations, this increase the importance of internet use and the content of thermal hotel websites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies focusing on the Internet have been conducted in recent years, particularly as it relates to advertising and marketing (Wan 2002: 155). According to recent studies, the Internet is the most effective when used as an advertising and marketing tool (Cai et al., 2004; Garces et al., 2004; Law and Hsu, 2005; Lee et al., 2006; Bui et al., 2006; Buhalis and Law, 2008). Poel and Leunis (1999) believe that the Internet is an important channel of distribution for consumers.

The Internet provides opportunities for an organization to enhance its' business in a cost-effective and practical manner. That is, the Internet can be used to conduct marketing research, reach new markets, better serve customers, distribute products faster, solve customer problems, and communicate more efficiently with business partners. The Internet is also a useful tool for gathering intelligence on consumers, competitors, and potential markets, as well as communicating information about companies and/or products (Honeycutt et al., 1998: 63). For consumers, Internet can reduce clutter, which could mean that content will more closely match their interests; while for sellers it facilitates a one-to-one marketing approach, allowing them to target each individual with a specific message (O'Connor, 2007: 183).

With the development of the Internet increasing dramatically in recent years, the tourism industry has begun to use Internet as part of their marketing effort (Wan, 2002: 155). At the present day, an increasing number of lodging customers make reservations directly with hotels by bypassing traditional distribution channels (Jeong et al., 2003: 161).

The importance of Internet applications in the hospitality industry has been emphasized by academic researchers and industry practitioners. To hospitality practitioners, the Internet offers a means for them to sell their products to global customers without any geographical or time constraints (Law and Hsu, 2005: 493).

In the existing hospitality literature, prior studies have been conducted to measure how information through hotel websites is. These studies have also tried to classify the website features (Zafiroopoulos and Vrana, 2006: 242).

A study conducted by Murphy, Forrest, Wotring and Brymer (1996), recorded-thirty-two different services and placed them into four nonexclusive categories: promotion and marketing, service and information, interactivity, and technology and management. They claimed that cyber-hoteliars should continuously analyze how these features effect or enhance the mission, margin, mechanics, marketing and maintenance of their websites.

Hanna and Millar's study (1997: 469) presents the lessons learnt from the development of a prototype tourist information service developed for a tourist board using the world-wide web. This study focused on three main categories, namely: page design; managerial issues; and information content.

In Buhalis's study (1998), it was found that information technologies, especially the Internet, can be used as an effective business tool in the tourism industry. Chiang (2001) examines the marketing strategies adopted by local hotel establishments in the competitive hospitality industry in Singapore. He found that, although most of Singapore's hotels appeared to have successfully incorporated technology into their marketing campaigns, the level of commitment seemed to be insignificant.

Wan (2002) evaluates the websites of international tourist hotels and tour wholesalers in Taiwan. The evaluation system consists of three general user criteria: user interface, variety of information and online reservations. Results show that 50% of the total sample of hotels and tour wholesalers has already established websites. Results also indicate that the use of the Internet in Taiwan's tourism/hospitality industry is primarily for advertising, not marketing.

Chiang (2003) examined the effectiveness of business-to-business Internet marketing in the hotel industry in Singapore through analyzing the differences between the travel agents expectations of service and the hotels' understanding of those expectations. In this study it was found that, 95.45 to 98.48% of the hotels in Singapore have basic information on their websites. Under

e-Commerce, 95.45% offer reservations online, however, only 83.33% of them have this service functioning. Among the more important features in the eyes of the inbound travel agents, e-mail seemed like a "must-have" feature with 83.0% agreeing that it should be included on the website. Reservation payment, hotel search capability and a list of all other hotels were features that appeared to be desired by the inbound travel agents.

Murphy, Olaru, Schegg and Frey's study (2003) of 200 Swiss hotels takes a small step toward examining existing Internet use and ways to improve on it. This study found that hotel characteristics- size, category, linguistic region, and geographic location-were significantly related to the adoption of technology. Also, they indicate that effective e-mail use would give hotels an immediate competitive advantage.

Yeung and Law's article (2006) presents an exploratory study in which a modified heuristic technique for evaluation was developed to measure the usability of hotel websites. The research evaluated the websites of all members of the Hong Kong Hotels Association. Empirical evidence showed that minor problems of usability existed on the websites of Hong Kong hotels, and no significant difference was found among luxury, mid-priced, and economy hotels.

Zafiroopoulos and Vrana (2006) evaluated the framework for hotel websites, which categorizes web information services into six information dimensions and also uses managers' and users' views. They claimed that a website must deliver several essential features to foster a better online experience and argued that "poor web design will result in a loss of 50% of potential sales due to users being unable to find what they want, and a loss of 40% of potential repeat visits due to initial negative experience."

Baloglu and Pekcan (2006) analyzed the websites of a select group (4 and 5 star) of hotels in Turkey in terms of site design characteristics (interactivity, navigation, and functionality) and site marketing practices on the Internet. The findings showed that the hotels in Turkey are not utilizing the Internet to its full potential and effectively e-marketing their hotels regardless of the hotel type.

However, there are some researchers that formulated site design characteristics in the categories of 'functionality' (Doolin et al., 2002; Lees et al., 2005, Baloglu ve Pekcan, 2006), 'customization' (Muyille et al., 2004; Baloglu and Pekcan, 2006; Fang and Holsapple, 2007), 'globalisation' (Muyille et al., 2004; Lees et al., 2005) and 'communication' (Wan, 2002; Karamustafa et al., 2002, Baloglu and Pekcan, 2006).

Schmidt, Cantallops and Santos (2008) highlighted that hotels are increasingly taking advantage of the Internet as a marketing tool able to provide direct contact with customers. They found that small and medium size hotels in the Balearic Islands in Spain, a developed tourist destination, and in the South of Brazil, a developing destination, are using their websites as mass media tools; ignoring the potential for interactivity and one-to-

one communication.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to evaluate thermal hotels websites and determine the use or non use of the Internet as a marketing tool by thermal hotels in Turkey. Although a number of studies regarding Internet sites relating to the tourism industry have been conducted worldwide (Buhalis, 1998; Cano and Prentice, 1998; Connolly et al., 1998; Sellz and Shubert, 1998; Standind and Vasudavan, 1999; Law and Leung, 2000; Sigala, 2003; Chu, 2001; Hudson and Lang, 2002; Wan, 2002; Carrol and Siguaw, 2003; Chiang, 2003; Cai et al., 2004; Garcés et al., 2004; Litvin et al., 2005; Baloglu and Pekcan, 2006; Bui et al., 2006; Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2006; Sayılı et al., 2007; O'Connor, 2007; Buhalis and Law, 2008), none have been found that deal specifically with thermal hotels and their usage of the Internet as a marketing tool.

With the increasing popularity of the Internet, many studies have been stating numerous competitive advantages for setting up websites in order to increase marketing and advertising. The usage of Internet as a marketing tool of thermal hotels and the contents of thermal hotels' websites are investigated in this study. This study also proposes ways in which such hotels can design websites with content for different regions of world.

This is an exploratory study in which information is collected using survey technique supported with interview technique. The survey instrument was originally designed and used by Özturan and Roney (2004), Law and Hsu (2005), Zafiroopoulos and Vrana (2006) for a similar survey, then adapted to thermal hotel marketing strategies and also the use of the Internet. A pilot test was first carried out in January 2009 by 10 thermal hotels in Turkey. Respondents in the pilot test did not have any problem with the questionnaire and they suggested a few minor changes on wordings. The administration of the survey spanned a period of three months from February 2009 to April 2009. A total of ninety-eight survey forms were applied to thermal hotels using survey technique supported with interview technique. Some of them were eliminated because of contradictory data and half done expressions. Because of these reasons seventy-one were taken into consideration.

This study analyzes results from an interview survey to Turkish Thermal Hotels. According to The Ministry of Culture and Tourism's data, there are one hundred sixty-eight thermal hotels in Turkey. As a result it was found that ninety-eight (58.3%) of these hotels have web sites. For that reason ninety eight thermal hotel's websites are the limitations of this study. The questionnaires were given to the top executives of those hotels (One top executive from each hotel) which have websites while, the decisions about Internet usage as a marketing tool and the content of website are given by the hotel managers'. Also thermal hotel managers have detailed information about the usage of internet as a marketing tool and the websites content as well. The response rate of fill in the questionnaires was 72.4%.

The questionnaire consists of eight sections. In the first section of the survey questionnaire, data on the characteristics of the top executives (gender, age, education level, working area) were gathered. The second section covered the region and classification of thermal hotels. The third and fourth sections included questions to find out the duration of stay of the guests in thermal hotels and the services offered by thermal hotels. The fifth section focused on the aims of thermal hotels to make investment in the Internet as a marketing tool and the reasons the Internet is not being used as an effective marketing tool. The sixth section-highlighted the various marketing channels chosen by thermal hotels. The next section explored how long these websites had been in operation and how frequently the websites are updated. The last section sought dimensions and attributes of thermal hotels websites.

Table 1. The profile of the top executives participating in the survey.

| Characteristic | n | % |
|--------------------------|----|------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 48 | 67.6 |
| Female | 23 | 32.4 |
| Total | 71 | 100 |
| Age | | |
| Less than 25 | 8 | 11.3 |
| Between 25 and 34 | 28 | 39.4 |
| Between 35 and 44 | 27 | 38.0 |
| Between 45 and 54 | 8 | 11.3 |
| 55 and over | - | - |
| Total | 71 | 100 |
| Educational Level | | |
| Primary School Education | - | - |
| High School Education | 16 | 23.2 |
| Two-Year Degree | 18 | 26.1 |
| College | 29 | 42.0 |
| Post Graduate | 6 | 8.7 |
| Total | 69 | 100 |
| Working Area | | |
| General Manager | 19 | 26.8 |
| Deputy General Manager | 18 | 25.4 |
| Marketing Manager | 17 | 23.9 |
| Others | 17 | 23.9 |
| Total | 69 | 100 |

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaires were distributed to the top executives of a total of 98 thermal hotels. Survey data were obtained from 71 properties because of contradictory and half done expressions. This represented a response rate of 72.4 %.

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic features of the top executives participating in the survey. The majority of the top executives are male (67.6%). The majority of the respondents are aged between 25 and 44 (77.4%). Nearly, half of the respondents had some college education (42%). 26,8% of the respondents are working as General Manager, 25,4% are working as Deputy General Manager, 23,9% are working as Marketing Manager and rest (23,9%) as Front Office Manager, Public Relations Manager and Accounting Manager.

Table 2 presents the region and classification of thermal hotels participating in the survey. Nearly half of the hotels participating in the survey are located in Aegean Region (44.4%) and the majority of the hotels have 4 stars (35.2%).

Table 3 presents the duration of stay of the guests in

thermal hotels participating in the survey. The majority of the guests stay at thermal hotels between 1-6 days (69 %). Although thermal tourism is one of the longest overnight stay tourism types, this finding shows us that thermal hotels in Turkey do not currently maximizing their potential.

The services offered by thermal hotels are presented in Table 4. Easy access to rooms (66.2%) and separate pools for families and individuals (66.2%) are one of the most important services offered by thermal hotels. Conference services (63.4%) and smoking and non-smoking areas (60.6%) are the other important services offered by thermal hotels to the customers. Special diet programs for guests (26.8%) and general health centers (30%) are the least offered amenities. Whereas, there is no doubt that people, who come to thermal hotels to recover, would need a special diet program and health center at most. So this finding shows us that thermal hotels in Turkey do not give enough importance to the most required needs for customers.

Table 5 presents the aims of thermal hotels to make investments in the Internet as a marketing tool. Advertisement (73.2%), increase sales (71.8%) and the

Table 2. The region and classification of thermal hotels.

| Content | n | % |
|---|----------|----------|
| The region of thermal hotels | | |
| Marmara Region | 25 | 34.7 |
| Aegean Region | 32 | 44.4 |
| Central Anatolia Region | 8 | 11.1 |
| East Anatolia Region | 3 | 4.2 |
| Southeast Anatolia Region | - | - |
| Mediterranean Region | 2 | 2.8 |
| Black Sea Region | 1 | 1.4 |
| Total | 71 | 100 |
| Classification of thermal hotels | | |
| 5 Star | 18 | 25.4 |
| 4 Star | 25 | 35.2 |
| 3 Star | 11 | 15.5 |
| 2 or 1 Star | 12 | 16.9 |
| Others | 5 | 7.0 |
| Total | 71 | 100 |

Table 3. Duration of stay of the guests in thermal hotels.

| Content | n | % |
|------------------------|----------|----------|
| Between 1 and 6 days | 49 | 69.0 |
| Between 7 and 14 days | 14 | 19.7 |
| Between 15 and 20 days | 1 | 1.4 |
| 21 days and over | 7 | 9.9 |
| Total | 71 | 100 |

ability to reach more markets (67.6%) are the most important aims of thermal hotels to make investment in Internet as a marketing tool. These findings show that thermal hotels are aware of the importance of Internet and use it as an effective marketing tool. This finding was in line with results of Law and Hsu (2005); Wan (2002); Cai et al. (2004) studies, in which they stated that the Internet provides an unparalleled way of developing a single and sustainable infrastructure for information gathering and business transaction. Jeong and Lambert (2001) indicated that business suppliers in general and hotel managers in particular, can effectively perform direct marketing and mass customerisation through the Internet. Also Baloglu and Pekcan (2006) stated that Internet marketing is an inexpensive and effective platform for marketing and advertising, which potentially increase their competitiveness in the marketplace.

The hotels participating in the survey were asked to identify the reasons the Internet is not being used as an effective marketing tool by thermal hotels and the results are presented in Table 6. The Internet is not seen as a safe purchasing tool by 62% of respondents. This finding

is similar to Özturan and Rooney's (2004) study, which states that customers are afraid to enter their personal data and credit card number, and this is one of the well known barriers to marketing over the Internet. Not being accustomed to buy from Internet (60.6%) is the second important reason. On the other hand, customers' need to speak and bargain face-to-face is the third reason; that is to say, there is a need for social interaction in order for a transaction to take place. In particular, this finding is similar to Lang's (2000) study which states that lack of a human interface is also one of the widely documented disadvantages of the Internet for customers.

Marketing strategies which are used by thermal hotels and the percentage of Internet among these marketing strategies are presented in Table 7. Answers given in Table 7 indicate that neither broadcast (TV and radio) nor display media (billboards) are used much. On the other hand, brochures and catalogues are the basic print media used by the thermal hotels: 72.5% of them always use brochures. One interesting observation is that word-of-mouth recommendation is used as one of the most powerful marketing communication tools: 69.0% of the

Table 4. The services offered by thermal hotels.

| Content | n | % |
|---|----|------|
| General health center | 21 | 30.0 |
| Special diet programs for guests | 19 | 26.8 |
| Special menus for guests with health problems | 32 | 45.1 |
| Special services for disabled guests | 32 | 45.1 |
| Easy access to rooms | 47 | 66.2 |
| Easy to read signage | 42 | 59.2 |
| Pools for families or individuals | 47 | 66.2 |
| Assistance for special care services | 26 | 36.6 |
| Smoking and non-smoking areas | 43 | 60.6 |
| Special playing areas for children | 34 | 47.9 |
| Rooms with special equipment | 32 | 45.1 |
| Walking tracks/gardens | 39 | 54.9 |
| Conference services | 45 | 63.4 |

Table 5. The aims of hotels to make an investment in the internet as a marketing tool.

| Reason of investment | n | % |
|-------------------------------------|----|------|
| Increase sales | 51 | 71.8 |
| To stay Competitive in the industry | 39 | 54.9 |
| Decrease costs | 25 | 35.2 |
| Facilitate services | 26 | 36.6 |
| Reduce labor hours | 36 | 50.7 |
| Find new and far markets | 44 | 62.0 |
| To maintain present customers | 15 | 21.1 |
| Effective marketing | 41 | 57.7 |
| Increase the image of the hotel | 47 | 66.2 |
| Advertisement | 52 | 73.2 |
| Reach more markets | 48 | 67.6 |
| Others | - | - |

hotels count on it either frequently or always. According to Özturan and Rooney (2004), companies are becoming aware of the importance of word of mouth. Finally, it appears that the phone as a personal communication channel is still very much used (55.7%). So it is possible to indicate that thermal hotels use traditional marketing tools like brochures, word of mouth and phone more than modern Internet marketing tools like e-mail (53.6%) and websites (45.7%).

Table 8 presents the length of operating websites and frequency of updating those websites. 47.1% of the participants have had a web site for 1 to 3 years and only 1.4% have had web site for 10 years or more. 29.6% of the participants update their web site once a month and 26.8% update the web once a year. So it is possible to state that thermal hotels are becoming aware of the importance of Internet use and updating. According to some studies (Connolly et al. 1998; Baloglu and Pekcan

2006) to use the Internet to its full potential and keep up with new technology, hotel companies continuously redesign their websites for ease and convenience, and upgrade web technology to make their websites more personalized for customers. They also initiate web campaigns, develop brands and integrate branding strategy on the web, gather customer information, improve customer service, and streamline online reservations. Only 7% of the participants indicate that they have never updated their web site since the beginning of their Internet use.

With the aim of to evaluate the content of thermal hotel's websites Table 9 was developed. The content of thermal hotel website dimensions and attributes are presented in Table 9. Contact information (57.5%) is the most used dimension in thermal hotel websites. Surrounding area information (53.8%) is the second, hotel facilities information (49.8%) is the third and reservation

Table 6. The reasons the internet is not being used as an effective marketing tool by thermal hotels.

| Reason of not being an effective marketing tool | n | % |
|--|----|------|
| People do not see the Internet as a safe purchasing tool | 44 | 62.0 |
| People do not see the Internet as an effective purchasing tool | 36 | 50.7 |
| Different usage level in different ages | 19 | 26.8 |
| Negative image of purchasing from the Internet | 31 | 43.7 |
| Differences between men and women in using the Internet | 7 | 9.9 |
| Expensive Internet communications | 5 | 7.0 |
| Difficulty in using the Internet | 7 | 9.9 |
| Difficulty in purchasing from the Internet | 11 | 15.5 |
| Not accustomed to buy from the Internet | 43 | 60.6 |
| Others | 2 | 2.8 |

Table 7. Marketing channels used by thermal hotels.

| Marketing channel | Frequency of usage | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| | Always % (n) | Frequently % (n) | Seldom % (n) | Never % (n) |
| TV | 7.0 (5) | 15.5 (11) | 28.2 (20) | 49.3 (35) |
| Radio | 7.0 (5) | 8.5 (6) | 31.0 (22) | 50.0 (36) |
| Newspaper | 32.4 (23) | 18.3 (13) | 21.1 (15) | 28.2 (20) |
| Magazine | 31.0 (22) | 21.1 (15) | 16.9 (12) | 31.0 (22) |
| Connected common system | 6.1 (4) | 12.1 (8) | 13.6 (9) | 68.2 (45) |
| Brochure | 72.5 (50) | 2.9 (2) | 5.8 (4) | 18.8 (13) |
| SMS | 13.6 (9) | 7.6 (5) | 18.2 (12) | 60.6 (40) |
| Web | 45.7 (32) | 12.9 (9) | 21.4 (15) | 20.0 (14) |
| E-mail | 53.6 (37) | 8.7 (6) | 24.6 (17) | 13.0 (9) |
| Phone | 55.7 (39) | 14.3 (10) | 7.1 (5) | 22.9 (16) |
| Billboard | 14.9 (10) | 13.4 (9) | 22.4 (15) | 49.3 (33) |
| Travel agencies and tour operators | 44.3 (31) | 17.1 (12) | 15.7 (11) | 22.9 (16) |
| Computer reservation system | 31.4 (22) | 20.0 (14) | 11.4 (8) | 37.1 (26) |
| Word of mouth by previous customers | 69.0 (49) | 14.1 (10) | 2.8 (2) | 14.1 (10) |
| Expositions | 32.4 (22) | 23.5 (16) | 13.2 (9) | 30.9 (21) |
| Membership of search engine | 27.1 (19) | 12.9 (9) | 12.9 (9) | 47.1 (33) |

reservation information (38.9%) is the fourth most used dimension in thermal hotels. The website management dimension (29.3%) is the least used dimension in thermal hotels.

Although contact information is the most used dimension, according to Law and Chung (2003) hotel managers perceived facilities information and reservation information as the most and second most important dimension. Also, Law and Hsu (2005) stated that reservation information and facilities information are the most important dimensions that the customers expect from a hotel website. So it is possible to indicate that, thermal hotels in Turkey could not meet the expectations and need of the customer enough.

When the website dimensions are investigated deeply it

is seen that the phone number (90.5%) and postal address (90.5%) are the most used dimensions in the contact information dimension. In the surrounding area information dimension, transportation information (80.3%) and airport information (63.4%) are the most used dimensions. Although it is vital information for customers, information about touristic areas around the hotel is the least used dimension in the surrounding area information dimension. Features of services (77.5%) and info about the thermal water's feature (69%) are the most used dimension in the hotel facilities information dimension. In the reservation information dimension, online reservation (73.2%) and room rates (67.6%) are the most used dimensions. In the website management dimension, foreign language options (49.3%) were rated as the most

Table 8. Length of owning web and frequency of updating the web site.

| Content | n | % |
|--|----------|----------|
| Length of owning website | | |
| 1-3 years | 33 | 47.1 |
| 4-6 years | 21 | 30.0 |
| 7-9 years | 15 | 21.4 |
| 10 years and over | 1 | 1.4 |
| Total | 70 | 100 |
| Frequency of updating the website | | |
| Once a week | 12 | 16.9 |
| Once a month | 21 | 29.6 |
| 1 or 2 times in a month | 4 | 5.6 |
| Quarterly | 10 | 14.1 |
| Once a year | 19 | 26.8 |
| Never | 5 | 7.0 |
| Total | 71 | 100 |

used dimension. Although foreign language options is the most used dimension in the website management, this rate is very low for thermal hotels that aims to meet more and new customers. As a result it is possible to indicate that, thermal hotels in Turkey should give importance to develop well designed websites and give more importance to facilities and reservations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In spite of the increasing popularity of Internet applications to the hotel industry, and the large number of published Internet-related articles in the hospitality and tourism literature, the topic of the usability of websites in thermal hotels has been largely overlooked by hospitality and tourism researchers. In other words, the ease of use of thermal hotel websites remains largely unknown to hotel customers, practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. As part of a growing body of research on hotels and Internet technology, this paper provides benchmarks of website features and Internet marketing by thermal hotels in Turkey. In general, the results showed that thermal hotels are not utilizing the Internet adequately as a marketing tool. Specifically, the results also showed that thermal hotels' websites are inadequate. Based on the findings the following conclusions and recommendations in order to use Internet as an effective marketing tool are made:

1. The findings show us that thermal hotels in Turkey do not use Internet as an effective marketing tool. So, tourism and hospitality researchers should more specifically deal with the usage of Internet as an effective marketing tool by thermal hotels in Turkey.
2. Similar to some other studies, it was found that the Internet could not be used as an effective marketing tool

while the customers do not find the Internet as a safe purchasing tool. So, the managers should develop safe Internet security payment systems and also inform the customers about the security system.

3. The Internet is an effective marketing communication tool, and the findings show us that thermal hotel managers use the Internet to increase the sales and find new markets. So, it can be suggested that managers should also give importance to marketing communication and try to maintain present customers.

4. The findings show that brochures and catalogues are the most used marketing tool by the thermal hotels. Whereas the increasing popularity of Internet, thermal hotels should use Internet more effectively especially in marketing and communication. So, it can be advised that the managers should give more importance to Internet as a more effective communication and marketing channel.

5. People, who come to thermal hotels to recover, need a special diet program and health center at most. So, thermal hotel managers should give more importance to the development of general health centers and special diet programs for customers. On the other hand, the results show us that these services are at least offered to the customers by their hotels and the services offered by thermal hotels should be effectively introduced in the website.

Based on the findings the following conclusions and recommendations about websites are made:

1. Also, half of thermal hotel websites do not provide services in other languages. Multi-language options will enable hotels to reach global markets. For that reason, thermal hotel managers should add multilanguage options to their websites.
2. It can be seen that reservation information, including reservation policies, payment and online communications

Table 9. The contents of thermal hotel websites.

| Dimension | Attribute | n | % |
|-------------------------------------|--|----------|----------|
| Reservation Information | | | 38.9 |
| | Room rates | 48 | 67.6 |
| | Rooms available by date | 25 | 35.2 |
| | Online reservations | 52 | 73.2 |
| | Online room availability | 18 | 25.4 |
| | Online communication with customer representatives | 15 | 21.1 |
| | Safe online payment | 21 | 29.6 |
| | Reservation policies | 14 | 19.7 |
| | Special request form | 28 | 39.4 |
| Hotel facilities information | | | 49.8 |
| | Hotel location map | 45 | 63.4 |
| | Features of services | 55 | 77.5 |
| | Animated photos of the services | 38 | 53.5 |
| | Inactive photos of the services | 45 | 63.4 |
| | Info about the thermal water's feature | 49 | 69.0 |
| | Info about promotion facilities | 38 | 53.5 |
| | Description of services in restaurant | 42 | 59.2 |
| | Info about meeting possibilities | 43 | 60.6 |
| | Online shopping in different hotel departments | 12 | 16.9 |
| | New services and announcements | 36 | 50.7 |
| | Info about special services for children | 21 | 29.6 |
| | Online employment application | 24 | 33.8 |
| | Info about frequent guests programs | 12 | 16.9 |
| Communication | | | 57.5 |
| | Phone number | 64 | 90.5 |
| | Postal address | 64 | 90.5 |
| | E-mail address | 58 | 81.7 |
| | Fax number | 55 | 77.5 |
| | Frequently asked questions | 21 | 30.4 |
| | On-line form | 14 | 19.7 |
| | Feedback form | 9 | 12.7 |
| Surrounding area information | | | 53.8 |
| | Transportation info | 57 | 80.3 |
| | Airport info | 45 | 63.4 |
| | General info about city | 38 | 53.5 |
| | Daily weather info | 26 | 36.6 |
| | Info about touristic areas around the hotel | 25 | 35.2 |
| Website management | | | 29.3 |
| | Update info | 16 | 22.5 |
| | Site map | 23 | 32.4 |
| | Foreign language options | 35 | 49.3 |
| | Online search | 20 | 28.2 |
| | Links to other sites | 18 | 25.4 |
| | Visitor counter | 13 | 18.3 |

with customer representatives is lacking. Most hotels do not have such services and they need to realize the importance of detailed reservation systems and they should offer this kind of services.

3. Hotel facilities information - including online shopping, frequent guest programs, and special services for children are not given in many hotel web sites. So, the managers should develop their websites to include more detailed information and they should add these services.

4. It was found that most of the thermal hotels do not have efficient website management. Attributes such as a visitor counter, date last updated and links to other sites should be improved. The thermal hotel managers should improve these kinds of services.

5. Though nearly half of the thermal hotels in Turkey have websites, thermal hotel managers should give more importance to developing well designed websites. So, a professional team should be created in these hotels in order to design their web pages and also updating this websites often. The thermal hotels, that do not have websites, should build websites in order to find more and new international and national markets and also to make the hotel's advertisement more effectively.

6. Empirical findings will contribute to help hotel managers, in general, and sales and marketing managers, as well as information systems managers, in particular, better understand the usability of their websites and improve the attributes and dimensions that fall behind the industry norm. This will make hotel websites easier to use by customers, which in turn will make the websites more competitive.

This study is limited to Turkish thermal hotels and Turkish thermal hotel—managers. Findings of this study can provide useful insights for thermal hotel managers to determine the needs of their websites and try to develop more effective websites. Future studies can repeat this research in a longitudinal design to examine whether there are any differences in other cultures or not. Another future research possibility is to examine the customers' perceptions as regards to the Internet and websites of thermal hotels.

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