# Marketing Factors and Correlates Affecting Website Satisfaction of Hotel Customers

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**Abstract:** Internet users have numerous hotel web sites to choose and evaluate. To design a hotel interface to meet the needs of its prospect visitors, developers must understand what tasks hotel users use a system for and how those tasks will be performed. The scope of this study is to explicitly question the visitors of different A Class hotels in Thrace about how they like or not a website, as customers are surveyed about their satisfaction with a consumer good or service. The selection of A Class hotels is, mainly, based on commonality factors, as all hotel services must be equally measured and on the same standards. Research findings show problems with the clarity of the text, overdose of advertisement, excessive amounts of text on one page, colors five venerable appearance and the usage of frames is not very advantageous.

**Key words:** Marketing information technology, web usability, usability testing, marketing of travel and leisure, measurement instruments

## INTRODUCTION

The services related to tourism have been proved to be a leading category of products promoted and distributed via the Internet (Connolly *et al.*, 1998; Sussman and Baker, 1996; Archdale *et al.*, 1992; Millman, 1998; Underwood, 1996). The nature of information searching, which includes the possibility to choose among several providers and compare facilities, prices and availability, is facilitated through browsing on the Internet. Increasingly more, the information offered by intermediaries can develop the consumers' profile and provide options based on their needs.

Many agencies offering tourist destinations have developed websites on the Internet with several levels of interaction. An interactive website provides a good opportunity to the multiple providers of tourist destinations to present in a unique way the constitutive elements of a destination, which are individually sought by visitors (Palmer and McCole, 2000).

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ON THE EVALUATION OF WEBSITES

According to Brajnik (2001) the quality of websites depends on factors three category: task, performance and development. Task-related factors include presentation, content and function adequacy and navigability. Performance-related factors include response time, transaction throughput and reliability. Development-related factors include code complexity, code readability, code flexibility, portability, page coupling and modifiability. Numerous researchers have discussed similar performance-related factors (Yarden, 1997; Zhi, 2001), while others have focused their interest on task-related factors that also affect end-users.

The research regarding those factors can be divided into two groups: One focuses on the usability of the website and the other on evaluation categories. The research dealing with the usability of a website is based on the idea that there is a dependent relation between the quality of a website and its usability. According to Preece *et al.* (1994) quoted in Osterbauer *et al.* (1999), usability is defined as «a measure of the ease with which a system can be learnt or used, its safety, effectiveness and efficiency and attitude of its users towards it». Usability testing serves to incorporate human factors, such as navigation, screen design and layout, terminology and consistency, into the design of the website and matching those factors with users' tasks (Osterbauer *et al.*, 1999). Ho evaluated 1.800 commercial websites over 40 industries using two categories, business purpose and value creation. He measured business purpose by promotion, provision and processing (throughput) and value creation by timeliness, custom, logistic and sensational measures. Alpar (1999)

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developed an instrument for the evaluation of websites by using the assumption that websites should provide information required by users. He found that user satisfaction of a website had a direct impact to their selection of websites and that users were more interested in the websites' content and ease of use.

Even though a standard for website evaluation criteria does not exist, the main stream of selected evaluation criteria relates to user satisfaction. Kim *et al.* (2003) selected 6 criteria for the evaluation of websites by integrating criteria used in previous researches, like Business function, Corporation credibility, Content reliability, Website attractiveness, Systematic structure and Navigation. Bekker and Merwe (2003) in their research regarding the development of a framework for evaluating e-commerce websites, suggest a framework that addresses three different levels of detail. For the development of the aforementioned framework, Bekker and Merwe (2003) use the customer buying cycle of 4 distinct phases: Need recognition, gather information, evaluate information make purchase.

Iwaarden *et al.* (2003) in their research conducted a correlation between the dimensions of SERVQUAL and the companies on the Internet. SERVQUAL is a model measuring the differences in customer perceptions and expectations proposing the following five key dimensions (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990) which the authors try to correlate with the quality offered on the Internet: Tangibles (It refers to the physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel), Reliability (It is the ability to perform the promised service with accuracy), Responsiveness (Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service), Assurance (Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence) and Empathy (Care and individualised attention provided by the company to its customers). Webb and Webb (2001) developed a model of factors that affect the consumers' perceptions regarding sites. The main suggestion is that the quality of the site is determined by two important elements based on information quality (Quality of accessibility, Related quality, Indicative quality, Substantial quality) and on procedures quality (Reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy).

Finally, Morrison *et al.* (2004) made quite an important contribution, as they developed a model for the evaluation of websites concerning tourism and accommodation. Based on the Balanced Scorecard (BSC), that had been developed a decade earlier by Kaplan and Norton (1992) they differentiated it in order to adjust it to the sectors at which the evaluation of hotel websites was orientated. Thus, they identified 4 axes on which the evaluation of hotel websites was based: The technical side, the customer's side, the marketing side and the internal side.

## RESEARCH SCOPE: DEVELOPMENT OF AN EVALUATION TABLE

In the present study, we attempt to evaluate hotel websites in the Region of Thrace. The selected hotels are all first-class hotels. This was deemed necessary as the evaluation would be based on provided services of the same level and therefore, it would not be proper to compare first-class hotel websites with lower-class hotel websites. Additionally, the thought of evaluating all hotel websites by classifying them in different categories was also not proper, since the lower-class hotels that own a website are quite few, thus the sample would be very small indeed.

By selecting the 4 criteria that have been developed in previous studies in the literature and adapting them for the needs of the current study.

According to the Table 1-4 criteria evaluation we conclude to the following classification Table 5 of the websites of the 6 hotels.

Further remarks based on the results should, also, be made in each of examined criteria.

**Technical characteristics:** In relation to the technical characteristics of the websites, it was observed that most websites lack certain necessary elements. More specifically, the certification of security systems, as well as, the use of as secure payment system (with the exception of Grand Hotel Egnatia) was not observed. This was due to the fact that in most sites the possibility of reservations via the Internet was not available. Regarding the loading time of the home page, most of the sites were very quick and the home page appeared in about 15 sec. The exception in that area were the websites of Alexander Beach and Filia hotels, as in the former the subpages delayed a lot while the home page appeared in less than 10 sec and in the latter the time was extended due to the loading of certain images. Problems with the browser did not occur in four out of the 6 sites, as it was possible to visit both through Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator. In the websites of Alexander Beach and Thraki Palace, it was not possible to access them through Netscape Navigator. Regarding the systematic update of the websites, no information was provided as to when the last update was made. In the website of Thraki Palace, one could determine the latest update according to the offers provided on the website, while in the website of Alexander Beach there was a link named Summer 2002 that might indicated the last update, while at the same time there were a few subpages that were under construction, suggesting that these would be updated upon completion (Table 1).

Table 1: Technical characteristics

| | Alexander Beach | Thraki Palace | Grand Hotel egnatia | Arcadia Hotel | Filia Hotel | Z-Palace |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Loading speed of the home-page and the subpages | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Certification of security systems | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Use of a secure payment system | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Browser compatibility | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| Systematic update | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Availability of global access to products/services | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| HTML control | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Total score of 1st category:/28 | 13 | 13 | 21 | 16 | 14 | 16 |

Table 2: Navigation

| | Alexander Beach | Thraki Palace | Grand Hotel egnatia | Arcadia Hotel | Filia Hotel | Z-Palace |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Comprehensive and simple menus | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Navigation map | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Lack of broken links | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| Ease of finding the site | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 |
| Ease of returning to the home-page | 3 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Ease of finding specific information | 3 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Availability of a search engine | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total score of 2nd category:/28 | 17 | 15 | 22 | 15 | 12 | 17 |

**Navigation:** The results in this category were found very satisfying with the exception of the navigation map and the search engine that were not available. In relation to the search engine, the exception was Grand Hotel Egnatia, but this fact was due to the loading of the website via the corporate website in which a search engine was actually present.

Finding the websites of the hotels was relatively easy, as they were registered in different lists and their URLs were related to their names. Relative difficulty occurred regarding Arcadia and Filia hotels, as there are a number of hotels with the same name in other areas of Greece. Problems regarding broken links were limited and where they existed, they involved one link. More specifically, in Filia's website the link to the English page was broken as this page did not load, while in Thraki Palace the link offers in the English page was broken. The Greek website of Alexander's Beach was under construction and although this does not constitute a broken link, it was nevertheless rated 3 due to that reason. Regarding the ease of returning to the home page, it was found that all the hotels' websites offered that possibility, with the exception of Thraki Palace and Filia, while specifically in the case of Z-Palace, there was the option Home page at a certain area in each subpage and that is the reason why it scored the highest rating. The structure of the menus was appropriate and accommodated the needs of the website of each hotel, despite the fact that in the process of finding certain information one would discover that there was a difficulty that had to do with the content of the website (Table 2).

**Website attractiveness:** In the majority of hotel websites the results were found very good regarding the layout and visual attractiveness, as well as, the home pages. The icons included were rated extremely highly in the three hotels, while in the rest, Alexander Beach, Thraki Palace, Filia, they were rated 2 because they were not widely used and there could have been more. It is worth mentioning that all sites included not only the Greek but, also, the English language, with the exception of Grand Hotel Egnatia, whose website could be displayed in 4 languages. This is due to the fact that in order to visit the website of the hotel one must first enter the website of the company Grecotel, which is available in four languages. Additionally, it has to be noted that in the website of Alexander Beach the Greek language was under construction and therefore unavailable, while in the case of the website of Filia the link to the English language was broken.

As far as spelling or grammatical mistakes or any other language-related mistake is concerned, all websites, except Thraki Palace, fully met the expectations. In the case of Thraki Palace, letters were missing in certain words in English. It is worth mentioning that in the website of Z-Palace the corresponding term for events in English is organisation, not a very correct translation we think, since it can misdirect to information for the company. Additionally, Alexander Beach and Z-Palace were not using their website space effectively, as there was a photograph, a small text and quite a lot of empty space. The remaining websites scored high rates in that particular area (Table 3).

**Website content:** The results of the evaluation of the websites regarding that aspect, i.e., their content, did not satisfy the expectations of a visitor of a luxurious hotel. Many deficiencies were observed in certain basic areas.

Table 3: Website attractiveness

|  | Alexander Beach | Thraki Palace | Grand Hotel egnatia | Arcadia Hotel | Filia Hotel | Z-Palace |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Visually attractive site with effective and proper use of colours, background and text | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| Comprehensive icons, without excessive use | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| Comprehensive and distinctive home-page | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Availability of a foreign language | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Webpage short scrolling commands | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| Proper spelling and grammar | 4 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| Effective use of the space of the website | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| Total score of 3rd category:/28 | 21 | 23 | 25 | 24 | 19 | 22 |

Table 4: Website content

|  | Alexander Beach | Thraki Palace | Grand Hotel egnatia | Arcadia Hotel | Filia Hotel | Z-Palace |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Presentation of service |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Availability of extensive information on products/services | 3 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Publication of information on prices | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Photographic material-virtual tour | 4 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Effective payment options | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Availability of comprehensive information on the company | 1 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Information on the surrounding area | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Access instructions and map | 1 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Adaptation to the client, special packages for different categories |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Communication-site friendliness |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Availability of a postal address | 0 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| Availability of telephone and fax numbers | 0 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Straightforward and easy reservation process | 1 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Ease of accessing terms and conditions | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Availability of e-mail communication | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Swift reply on questions via an e-mail | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 4 |
| FAQ  0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |  |
| Guest book | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total score of 4th category:/64 | 23 | 35 | 55 | 24 | 18 | 26 |
| Total score:/148 | 72 | 86 | 123 | 79 | 63 | 81 |

More analytically, the results regarding the publication of the prices were disappointing. With the exception of Grand Hotel Egnatia, the websites of the other hotels did not mention the room prices at any point. Only Thraki Palace published an offer, but this was not indicative. Taking into consideration that one of the reasons that visitors of the website use the Internet is to save time finding a hotel, it becomes obvious that if the prices are not published, the client will be forced to contact the hotel, thus wasting more time. The same is also true for every kind of information the customer needs. If that information is not mentioned in the website, then communication with the hotel is necessary. This fact however, does not make a right impression at any point, while on the contrary it is very useful to provide as much information as possible through the Internet. That suggestion also applies in the case of information on products and services, despite the fact that in this area things were better for certain hotels. In particular, the websites of Alexander Beach and Thraki Palace had satisfying information for the offered products and services, while in the same area the website of Grand Hotel Egnatia was excellent, offering extensive information. On the contrary, the websites of the

Table 5: Classification table of the hotels based on their scores

| Classification | Hotel | Percentage of correspondence to the evaluation criteria of websites |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Grand Hotel Egnatia | 83% |
| 2 | Thraki Palace | 58% |
| 3 | Z-Palace | 55% |
| 4 | Arcadia | 53% |
| 5 | Alexander Beach | 50% |
| 6 | Filia | 43% |

remaining hotels (Arcadia, Filia, Z-Palace) gave the impression that only basic information was included in relation to products and services (Table 4).

A difference in the results, also, occurred in relation to the photographic material, which was excellent in the websites of Alexander Beach, Thraki Palace and Grand Hotel Egnatia hotels, as the first had a video displayed on the home page with a virtual tour in the interior of the hotel and related photographs in the subpages, the second also had a variety of photos and a link to a video with parallel narration and the latter had a link to a collection of photographic material. The websites of Filia and Z-Palace hotels had a few photos that were displayed in each subpage, while the site of Arcadia did not have sufficient photographic material. It is worth mentioning

that in the case of Arcadia, there was a photograph of the suite, but none of the standard room, a fact that constitutes an important shortcoming in a website of a hotel. In relation to the information regarding the company, the website of Grand Hotel Egnatia came on top, as there was a link for the company with extensive information. In the website of Thraki Palace there was also a point where the visitor could read the latest news of the company, while in the remaining websites there was not sufficient information.

In relation to the information on the area, it is worth mentioning that the websites of Thraki Palace and Grand Hotel Egnatia offered the best information, not only for the City of Alexandoupolis where they are situated, but also for the Prefecture of Evros, as well as, for some other areas in the Prefectures of Rodopi and Xanthi and for interesting areas inside those areas. The website of Alexander Beach, despite having very good photographic material for the area, did not provide any information whatsoever about the area. The sites of Arcadia and Filia hotels did not mention anything, while the site of Z-Palace only had a bit of information at the beginning. Furthermore, access instructions and map of the area existed only in the website of Thraki Palace, while the rest of the websites did not such information.

Finally, with the exception of Grand Hotel Egnatia, the hotel websites provided was no reference on the ways of payment. As far as communications and friendliness is concerned, the results showed that all the websites included communication via e-mail and actually in the case of Z-Palace that was possible in every part of the website, as there was an e-mail icon in each subpage. Regarding the rest (postal address, telephone and fax numbers), it was observed that they were not present in the websites of all the remaining hotels. More specific, the website of Alexander beach did not include the postal address as well as the telephone and fax numbers, while the website of Filia hotel did not include the postal address.

Regarding the responsiveness of the hotels in different questions on information via e-mail, it is noted that all of them replied within a day (24 h after receiving the e-mail), with the exception of Filia. The fact that the hotels gave extensive information in their replies is of particular importance. It is also noted that only the websites of Grand Hotel Egnatia and Alexander Beach included the possibility of an online reservation, although in the case of the latter the page for online reservations was under construction, while in relation to access to the terms and the conditions, that was provided on the website of Grand Hotel Egnatia. In addition, it is noted

that there was no area within any of the hotel websites the websites where the visitor could read the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), with the exception of Grand Hotel Egnatia, where the FAQs could be read during the reservation process. Finally, none of the hotels has a guest book in their websites.

## CONCLUSION

Following the process of evaluating the websites of luxurious and first-class hotels and the analysis of the results, we came to the following conclusions: Overall, the technical characteristics were good. In that sector, both the systematic update of the websites and the certification that the user is visiting a safe environment are important. It is necessary for a website to provide an easy access back to the homepage at any point. The website of Z-Palace provided that possibility directly through the option home page. As in the majority of the websites both Greek and English were available, the link to each language should not be broken. Pages under construction should be avoided during the summer period, as in the case of Alexander Beach, where the Greek page, the customer satisfaction survey, the summer offers and the online reservations were under construction. On the contrary, this procedure should be scheduled for that period of time where the company's loss would be minimal. There should be information offered on prices and possible offers. It is important for the visitor who is not familiar with the area to be provided with access directions, even if a map does not accompany them. The website should include the postal address and the telephone and fax numbers in addition to the e-mail address. Despite the fact that the majority of the hotels included these details, the process of including them in the website is so simple that there is no justification for their omission. Thraki Palace offers very good information on its conference center. The video of Alexander Beach was quite good. The website also included a satisfaction survey that made a very positive impression, but unfortunately the web page was under construction. The photographs that were included had a few problems, as sometimes one had to open these pages twice in order for the photograph to appear. During the reservation process in Grand Hotel Egnatia, the web page was available only in English. In the case of Z-Palace, while nothing was mentioned in the website on the events and the area, in the e-mail reply extensive information and suggestions were provided. The video of Thraki Palace did not start automatically; on the contrary, it had to be downloaded first and the proper software to be installed to play it.

Comparing the factors mentioned in the literature that provide quality to the websites and render them effective (technical characteristics, navigation, reliability and website content) the evaluation of the websites of the 4 and 5-star hotels in the area of Thrace showed that the technical characteristics and the easy navigation were generally on a satisfying level with the possibility of further development. With regard to the attractiveness of the websites the results were very good, in comparison to the results on the content of the websites, which seemed to be quite limited.

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