The Applications of the WebQual Model in the Management of Hotel Websites

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Abstract. Growing competitiveness in the marketplace pushes hoteliers to fully take advantages of their websites as a marketing tool. This study attempted to use the research results of the WebQual serial models and the WebQualTM model for reference to discuss their revelation for the management of hotel websites in China, thus to guide the online direct-selling of them.

Introduction

The reservation behaviors of hotel consumers in China are gradually changing along with the increasing popularity of the Internet as well as the lower threshold and easier use of network technologies. Nowadays, an increasing number of Chinese consumers are more inclined to book their rooms online than on-site or over the phone. According to China's Online Travel Market Trend Prediction, 2014–2017 published by EnfoDesk in 2015, the online travel market deals in China over the next few years will maintain steady growth and reach 352.4 billion by 2015—a figure that is 25.9% larger than that in 2014. By 2017, the market size is estimated to reach 498.3 billion. These figures indicate that the online travel market in China has a bright future. However, the hotel industry in China is facing several challenges at present. Given the delays in the construction of hotel websites, the hotel industry heavily relies on online travel agencies (OTAs), such as Ctrip and Elong. During the preliminary stage, the hotel requires network intermediaries for advertising and sales to compensate for their inadequate distribution power. However, the rise of network intermediaries has inevitably led to high commissions and a channel monopoly, which have threatened the hotel industry. Therefore, online direct selling has become a common trend in the development of the Chinese hotel industry, with the constantly increasing investments in hotel websites.

However, developing a website that is liked by customers can be challenging. While there have been an increasing number of approaches toward developing websites in various industries, there have been no reported uniform industrial standards in the area of evaluating the development of tourism websites (Law and Bai, 2006)[1]. The current study attempts to use the research results of the WebQual serial models (Barnes and Vidgen, 2000, 2001 a, 2001 b, 2002)[2,3,4,5] and the WebQualTM model (Loiacono et al., 2002)[6] for reference to discuss their revelation for the management of hotel websites in China, thus to guide the online direct-selling of them.

Researches about the WebQual Model

Both of the WebQual serial models and the WebQualTM model are from e-commerce. Barnes and Vidgen (2000, 2001 a, 2001 b, 2002) introduced the WebQual serial models from WebQual 1.0 to 4.0. Specifically, WebQual 1.0 examined the information quality of websites by incorporating the dimensions of ease of use, experience, information, and communication [2]. WebQual 2.0 focused on website interaction, including tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, supportability, and empathy [3]. WebQual 3.0 added design quality in addition to information quality and interaction quality [4]. WebQual 4.0 replaced usability with design quality, because the perceptions of users were more significant than those of website designers [5]. Based on previous research and interviews with web designers and users, Loiacono et al. (2002) developed the WebQualTM model, which evaluated
websites with four dimensions (usability, ease of use, entertainment value, and complementary relationship) and 12 related core targets. Specifically, usability refers to whether the hotel website can provide sufficient information about its products and services, ease of use, and entertainment value indicate the extent to which the website is easy to use and pleasant for customers, and complementarity represents the complementary relationship between the hotel website and other sales channels [6].

As the application scope of the Internet expands, numerous studies have been conducted on hotel websites in tourism and hospitality management. Most of these studies focused on two aspects, namely, the key elements for hotel websites to succeed as online marketing tools (Murphy et al., 1996; Morrison et al., 1999; Gilbert et al., 1999; Frey et al., 2002; Schegg et al., 2002; Wöber et al., 2002; Huang & Law, 2003; Bai, Hu & Jang, 2006; Baloglu & Pekcan, 2006; Schmidt, Cantallops & Santos, 2008)[7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16]and evaluating one aspect or the entire performance of hotel websites (Wan, 2002; Chung & Law, 2003; Scharl, Wöber & Bauer, 2003; Morrison, Taylor & Douglas, 2004; Law , 2005, 2007; Zafiropoulos & Vrana, 2006; Lee & Morrison, 2010; Akincilar & Dagdeviren, 2014)[17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24]. However, the primary deficiency of these articles lies in the fact that they do not form a unified standardized tool by which to measure the performance of hotel websites.

Applications of the WebQual Model in Hotel Websites

The WebQual serial models and the WebQual™ model are very mature models in e-commerce, which can provide some revelations for the management of hotel websites in China.

Improving the Usability of Hotel Websites

Usability refers to whether hotel websites can provide sufficient information about the products and services to users, which could be improved from the following aspects. First, improve the applicability of information on the website. Hotel website is a major channel for consumers to get reservation information and will lose a potential customer when the needs of the consumer are not met. According the research of Ma, Law & Ye (2008), information on hotel websites should include facilities information, customer contact information, reservation information, surrounding area information, and website management. Absolutely, the applicability of information not only refers to the content of information, but also the quality of information. Then, improve the interactivity of the website. Information on the hotel website can just meet the basic needs of users and cannot meet specific needs. In this case, the hotel website should have online service to answer questions from consumers at any time. Third, improve the reliability of information on the website.

Improving the Ease of Use of Hotel Websites

Ease of use refers to whether the website is easy to use for users, which includes ease of understanding and ease of operation. Performing well in usability does not directly imply that the hotel website is useful to users as usefulness also depends on ease of use. The ultimate goal of ease of use is to make a hotel website more efficient and enjoyable for users to experience.

Improving the Entertainment Value of Hotel Websites

Entertainment value best reflects how users perceive the design of websites, including their visual effects, innovation, and emotional appeal. An excellent, creative, and emotional design not only makes consumers feel happy when browsing websites but also reduces the distance between the service provider and its consumers, as well as increases the positive perception of the former.

Promoting the Complementarity of Hotel Websites

Complementarity is embodied in the consistency in the website image and that of the hotel, the integrity of the businesses featured on the website, and the advantages of official websites over other booking channels. The hotel chains in China all have high profiles and favorable brand images
in the minds of their consumers. Therefore, the implied image of these hotels must be reflected in the logos, high-resolution pictures, videos, and overall design of their websites to improve the brand memory of their consumers. These hotels must also ensure that all of their businesses are featured on their official websites to encourage brand loyalty. Furthermore, hotel websites must offer a simple booking process and increased loading speed to guarantee that their users will have a great experience while using the website, especially because official websites are known for their convenience and efficiency.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study has provided relevant and interesting insights into website management and online marketing in the hotel industry, additional research could be conducted to advance the results of this study as the applications of the WebQual serial models and the WebQual™ model in the management of hotel websites are just analyzed qualitatively in this study. The impact of the four dimensions in the models on the behaviors of consumers could be tested by an empirical study in the future.

References


