ONLINE TRENDS FOR SMES IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to emphasize the role of the internet and especially of modern online instruments for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in tourism. First, the literature review reveals the most important trends concerning the implications generated by the rise of the internet as a business tool for tourism SMEs. SMEs in the tourism market confront themselves with fierce competition from large companies. However, the advent of online marketing generates important opportunities to be seized by SMEs and often a level-playing field. The material is developed around the adoption and usage of the internet and ICT by tourism SMEs. The up-to-date online instruments available to tourism SMEs are explored and investigated in detail, revealing thus interesting findings about the benefits SMEs can reap when they approach the online environment. The paper ends with some conclusions concerning the possibilities opened up by online instruments for tourism SMEs. Finally, a specific set of measures is suggested for improving the online presence of SMEs.

Key words: SMEs, tourism, internet, ICT, online

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1. Introduction and literature review

The tourism industry of the European Union (EU) comprises approximately 2 million enterprises. The sector is clearly dominated by SMEs, which represent more than 99% of the total number of enterprises and provide work for 5.2% of the total EU workforce (Juul, 2015). As Wanhill (2002) suggests, the position of SMEs is of critical importance to the progress of tourism. They reflect the operational aspects of the industry and can act as promoters or barriers to the sustainable development of tourism.

Europe's tourism market as a whole is valued according to the World Tourism Organization at about 420bn euro, making it the largest in the world, with roughly 50% of worldwide tourist arrivals (UNWTO, 2015). The online share represents more than 35% of it and is growing steadily, whilst approximately 25% of bookings from European consumers take place online and more than half of tourists use the internet for research purposes (Eurostat, 2016).

The phenomenal impact of the internet on tourism didn't go unnoticed by researchers. The literature abounds of contributions emphasizing the role of the internet in profoundly changing the entire tourism industry.

- As a seminal paper in the area suggests, the internet is changing the tourism industry structure by altering barriers to entry, minimising switching costs, revolutionising distribution channels, and facilitating price transparency, while enhancing efficiency (Buhalis and Law, 2008);
- The internet has reshaped the tourism industry in a comprehensive manner; there is hardly a business that can escape its influence (Marinescu and Toma, 2012);
- A comprehensive study of the European Commission on the need for tourism SMEs to go digital, shows that the internet has had a significant impact on the tourism industry and this has led to an increase in business due to consumer e-commerce. Even travellers who do not otherwise purchase online utilise the internet as a source of information (European Commission, 2017);

- The internet brought a lot of innovative techniques used in tourism, such as comparison sites, online booking and payment systems, mobile applications etc. The mentioned technologies have been providing (and still provide) quite significant potential to improve the quality of current business models in the tourism and hospitality sector (Buhalis, 2005);
- Finally, the tourism industry and information technology cannot be separated and businesses in the tourism sector need to make continuous and effective use of the available technology (Imhanwa, Greenhill and Owrak, 2015).

Given these premises, more and more authors studied the link between tourism and information technology, to reveal the most important trends. Some of these trends are analysed in detail below.

As younger generations of consumers embrace the use of mobile media to seek information, destinations intend to incorporate technology with information provision to enhance the visitor's experience. The current wave of tourists prefers to feel independent and enjoy the trip without having to interact with others. Therefore the local supply side must make the most of their access to customer data and high technology (web portals, social networks, etc...) to serve travellers in a digital way (Pranicevic and Zovko, 2016).

According to Visa Global Travel Intentions Study (2015) mobile devices are the most important gadget for travellers. The same study indicates that 64% of travellers use their mobile devices to access destination information before their travel and 75% of them use the mobile phone after travel to share experiences recorded as text, pictures, and videos.

While making decisions regarding vacation planning, potential tourists search for information of tourism products and services in order to reduce uncertainty and perceived risks. Except reading information from the internet during their choice process, prospective tourists also post information on the internet. Bronner and de Hoog (2011) describe this posted information as electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM).

Generally speaking, e-WOM communication refers to any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet (Jalilvand, Esfahani and Samiei, 2011).

For an SME active in tourism, e-WOM means an objective presentation of products and services at minimum cost, often with a larger effect on sales and competitiveness in comparison to other forms of advertising. A study by Loncaric, Ribaric and Farkas (2016) shows that the effects of e-WOM are actually the only real indicator of the value of products or services offered, taking into account their independence and objectivity, and the fact that they are not paid or purchased, fabricated or falsified.

The internet in fact is an instrument proper for the tourism industry as the latter offers services based on information. All tourism oriented companies, such as tour operators, travel agencies, rental agencies, cruisers and hotels experience the growing impact of what is commonly known as information and communication technology (ICT). The tourism sector represents an information-intensive industry characterized by a significantly long value chain influenced, to a great extent, by information (Januszewska, Jaremen and Nawrocka, 2015).

This is one important reason why more and more SMEs in tourism embrace online marketing. Online marketing represents a set of processes developed over the internet, by means of which customers are encouraged to take a buying decision. Even if its roots are in traditional marketing, online marketing stands out as being more interactive (Radbata, 2012).

Even if online sales still take the minor share in overall sales in tourism, they are increasing at a fast pace. Empirical evidence shows that the share of online sales is however higher than the average for other sectors.

The internet is indeed one of the means that have profoundly challenged and also facilitated the restructuring SMEs' operations in tourism. Rapid advances in technology as well as the increasing demands of customers, who look forward to flexible, specialized, accessible and interactive products and services, influenced the adoption of new information technology by tourism SMEs, leading to an improvement in operating efficiency and customer service levels desired by the customers (Mwai, 2016).

The advent of the internet has diminished many of the asymmetries between larger and smaller actors in tourism through the simultaneous explosion of global customer reach as well as access to and sharing of

rich information (Paraskevas, 2005). In general, the expansion of ICT in the tourism industry has created a more competitive environment, and it has become an indispensable element of business development (Berne et al., 2015).

ICT provides unique opportunities for innovative SMEs to redesign tourism products to address individual needs and to satisfy consumer wants (Bethapudi, 2013). However, the introduction of ICTs in SMEs is normally considered the start of a transition that is full of risks and of uncertain final results (Caruso and Marchiori, 2003). After the initial steps, taken with caution, the strategic significance of ICT begins to be more appreciated, and the use of ICT to upgrade quality, improve customer service, and also enhance integration with suppliers becomes the order of the day (Laudon and Laudon, 2009).

Through the internet, SMEs can build closer relationships with suppliers or business partners and customers. They are able to receive immediate customer feedback which allows a fast reaction to changing client demands and recognizing new market niches (Miraz and Habib, 2016).

Studying the factors that influence ICT adoption and usage by SMEs, Alam and Noor (2009), found a positive relationship in the case of perceived benefits, ICT knowledge and governmental support, while perceived costs and external pressure were not deemed significant.

There are also important barriers to the adoption of ICT by tourism SMEs. These often lack the resources and expertise to become ICT innovators, specifically, their management often lacks the expertise to effectively make use of the thousands of local ICT innovators. Furthermore, there seems to be a lack of mutual understanding because of cultural differences in management styles and knowledge. While some (especially technical) companies take a creative, innovative approach, others (especially traditional tourism businesses) remain conservative and compete mostly on price (European Parliament, 2015).

Various authors point out that by strategically positioning their ICT, SMEs can tap into the enormous potential advantages offered by ICT to gain a competitive advantage. SMEs can make use of their flexibility and relatively small size to their advantage, because these are perfect conditions for the diffusion and application of ICT (Ndiege, Herselman and Flowerday, 2012).

Managers should aim for digitization to enable the swift and accurate retrieval of information from financial and management information systems, a system that would, in turn, allow for greater operational control (Baltescu, 2009).

Nevertheless, evidence shows that the uptake of e-commerce in its complete and advanced form (e.g. online transactions) by EU SMEs is still low, standing at 19% in the year 2015. However there is a much higher percentage of enterprises in the accommodation sector that make use of e-commerce (63%) and whose 27% of income in the same year was generated from e-commerce (European Commission, 2017).

Most SMEs in tourism have access to internet thanks to the rapid development of communication infrastructure and they usually own a webpage.

Besides the webpage, empirical findings show that the most used advertisement instruments to date are email marketing campaigns and search engines (see figure 1). Social media is also gaining pace rapidly as more and more users register and expect SMEs to join the trend. Traditional, offline types of communication such as banners and printed advertisements lag behind, while radio and TV are less used by SMEs due to cost reasons.
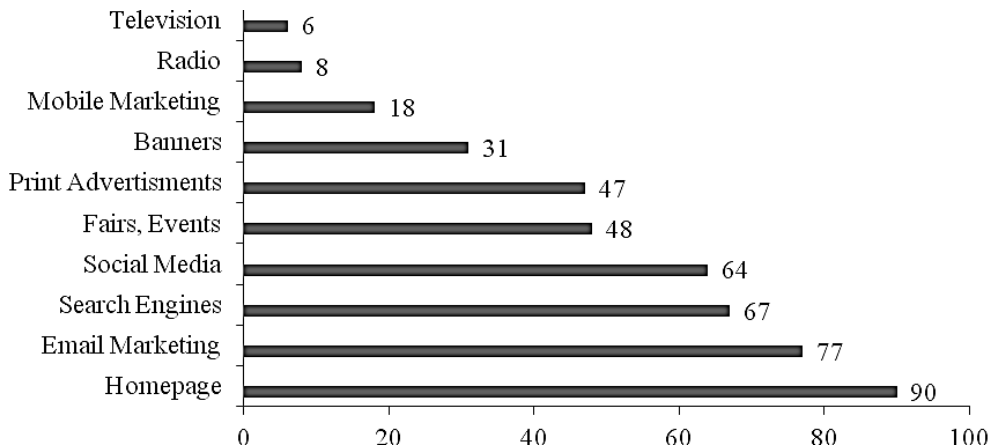

Fig. 1. Types of communication channels used

Source: Schwarz, 2013

When studying the impact of ICT on the tourism sector the most noticeable effect has been on distribution as it involves crossover exchanges between suppliers, intermediaries and customers which can be dematerialized. The internet is used during different phases of the sale and thus radically changes customer relationship management (CRM). For suppliers and intermediaries, the internet offers three main advantages; it gives them easier access to customers, it allows them to create customized offers and to reduce distribution costs. For customers, the internet is a means of reducing the cost of purchase (cost of looking for information and the price of sale) by making comparisons between and having access to a greater number of offers. These two combined effects explain the importance of the price variable on this channel (Sahut, 2009).

Despite the fact that ICT provides innovative and advanced potential to significantly increase the competitiveness of tourism goods and services, it is still insufficiently recognized and accordingly not enough used. On the other side, the ICT potential, if ignored, may bring negative results with serious consequences for the quality of tourism processes on the supply side and demand side as well (Pranicevic and Zovko, 2016).

Therefore, this paper tries to highlight the major online instruments available to SMEs in order to turn ICT potential into a competitive weapon destined to enhance their financial performance and expand the business.

2. Material and method

The paper is structured as follows. The first section comprised an introduction of the overall context of tourism SMEs, followed by a description of the fundamental concepts based on previously carried out research. Some of the most important contributions in the literature were surveyed on the impact of the internet and ICT on the tourism industry, revealing the current trends. In the second section, the methodology employed for the present research as well as the purpose of this study and its contribution to the literature are detailed. The third

section comprises the main results of the research on the up-to-date online instruments that SMEs can employ. A comprehensive analysis shows why these modern instruments matter, so that an SME may achieve a higher number of customers and, ultimately, reach a better financial performance. In the fourth section some conclusions are drawn considering the extent to which the widespread use of the internet has put its mark on the operation of SMEs in tourism and how SMEs can act in a proactive way to improve their online presence.

The paper finishes with the limitations of this analysis and recommendations for future research.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate, by means of a qualitative study, the changes brought by the internet and ICT in tourism and to explore the positive impact that modern online instruments can have on the operation of tourism SMEs. It also proposes a micro-plan for SMEs as a starting kit to help them develop a more consistent online profile.

The material provided for this paper comes from a vast number of theoretical and empirical studies in three different areas: tourism, internet / ICT and SMEs. Desk research and qualitative methods of analysis were employed in the study. More than 90 sources and bibliographic references have been consulted on various linkages between tourism SMEs and the influence of internet and ICT, from academic papers, official publications of public institutions and think-tanks as well as from private companies.

The research undertaken in this paper is an exploratory study and, as such, contributes to the literature on the impact of the internet on tourism SMEs, with all its opportunities and shortcomings. The paper enriches the insights of other recent studies that deal with the involvement of tourism SMEs in online marketing. It offers valuable insights into the most up-to-date online instruments that tourism SMEs can adopt to gain a better position in the market.

Contributions are considered from three standpoints: firstly from the theoretical view the contribution is related to the role of the internet and ICT in tourism SMEs. Secondly, from the research view the modern online instruments are investigated in detail, to provide an insight on how tourism SMEs can increase their competitiveness.

Finally, the proposal of a micro-plan to SMEs so as to improve their online presence, presents a practical contribution of this exploratory study, useful for SMEs to promote themselves better on the tourism market.

3.   Results and discussions

At present, SMEs active in the tourism sector still don't fully comprehend the essential parts of an elaborated online presence and its benefits for the business. The internet facilitates the interaction between enterprises, suppliers and customers, the collection of data from users, the building of a reputation, and promotion on an unprecedented scale.

For SMEs, social media is an excellent method to create visibility and enhance the notoriety of the brand, distribute information to a wider public, get essential knowledge about customers, promote innovation, create a system of relationship with customers and one for operational efficiency, as well as to build marketing strategies with the aim of generating higher revenues (UNWTO, 2014).

The most interesting and appealing aspect of the internet is that it offers hospitality SMEs the possibility to replicate the promotion power of large tourism chains. A small hotel may become an online star, leaving big hotels behind, if the latter have only a meagre online presence.

An essential step for a consistent online development for hospitality SMEs is the creation of an online booking system, incorporated into their own website. This is important for the following reasons (WebReserv.eu, 2017).

- Open to 24/7 bookings. A lot of customers search online for hours to find a good holiday location, and they prefer to complete the booking at once instead of waiting to call on the phone the next day.
- Eliminating commissions. The SME may pay to special booking portals or for online advertisements so as to get a better positioning. Either case, when using its own system, there is no commission, as the intermediary is skipped.

- Usability. The process of registering a guest at the reception can be considerably shortened if all his/her data are automatically transferred by the system.
- Creation of a database. Data can be saved and reused in the future to gain new customers by means of recommendations. The particular SME may also send coupons, discount vouchers, or special offers to previous customers to maintain a solid degree of loyalty.

The objectives of an SME when setting up an online campaign may be measured by the increase in the number of visitors on the webpage, the achievement of a good position on the first page for Google searches, and ultimately by the increase of online bookings concluded in the first year.

Each objective calls for different actions. First, an online campaign may be developed to include link building with social media, pay-per-click marketing and online advertisements. Next, a search engine optimization (SEO) optimization for the content of the website should be carried out, alongside a GoogleAdwords campaign. The third implies positioning of call-to-action buttons on certain elements of the website, and online marketing oriented towards promoting various offers of the SME.

For SMEs, it is highly important to maintain their online presence on most channels, so as to reach and keep their customers close. This also means that they should build a well-designed communication over the internet.

This strategy requires good skills though, and high qualification on part of the employees involved. Unfortunately, employees in tourism are rarely or never trained systematically to use the latest online developments, while most SMEs do not have integrated IT-systems or don't use the internet for business purposes.

The trending online instruments which an SME may use to grow its business are illustrated in figure 2 and will be detailed further.
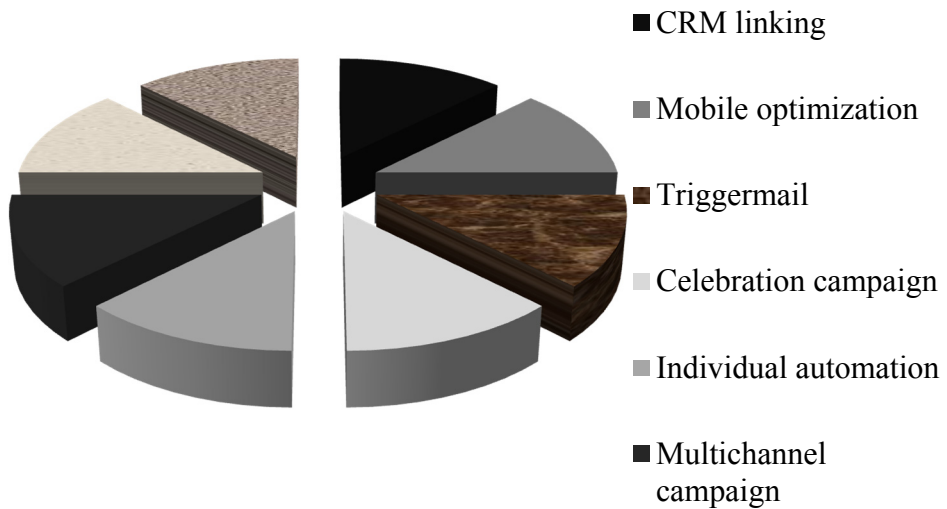
Fig. 2. Online instruments currently in trend

Source: processed by the author from digital commerce data

A lot of people still think of email-marketing as spam. Few know that it is the dialogue-marketing of the future. CRM effectively becomes e-CRM. So as to approach the appropriate target group of customers, SMEs need data. Formerly these were difficult to gather, or needed large expenses. Nowadays, tools for web analysis and the social media supply data for enterprises. This is commonly known as CRM linking. Data from customers who register or de-register for the newsletter can be synchronized automatically with the online offer of the enterprise. Thus, their data will be always up-to-date. The linkage functions in the other direction, too. Several touristic offers from the webpage can be integrated automatically in the newsletter, which saves a lot of time and effort.

More and more customers surf the internet on their mobile phones, especially when they are on holiday. Websites and emails are read different on a mobile phone compared to a PC. The user has little time available. He/she may be in traffic, so the subject of the email is

very important as well as the length of the message. The email should better comprise links, as few scrolling is done on the smartphone. Through a software solution called 'responsive design', websites and emails can be customized for the specific reading device. Thus, tourism SMEs can reach their customers wherever they are. If they read their emails on a PC, there will be more content, smaller script, if they read it on a smartphone, less content and a larger script. When partnerships between SMEs are available, a small hotel or B&B can send to its current guests (on their approval) customized links for restaurants, car hire and other facilities in the respective tourist destination.

The bond between the SME and the customer can become more profoundly if emails are sent comprising useful information or reminders in the preparation phase of the journey. The newsletter sent to former or potential customers is joined by individual trigger mails. If the SME gains access to IT-skills, this process is no longer done manually, but in an automated way. Thus, tourism SMEs can gain insights about their customers according to their country of origin, type of travel preferred, key words most used for search, reading device, or time of the day used for surfing the internet. These customers can be approached afterwards with tourist services recommendations. The efficiency of trigger mails can be monitored by means of the number of visits on the webpage, the clicking rate, and ultimately, the value of the shopping cart. They also need to be tested against filters for spam via a spam-checker.

Only customers that agreed to it will get emails and newsletters. Sending an email to 50,000 people randomly makes no sense anymore. Customization and efficiency seem to work in opposite ways. Nowadays, they can be bound together though by means of some IT-skills. The result means personal, highly relevant emails, sent automatically. A newsletter generates turnover in the online shop in a quite efficient manner. Empirical evidence shows that, while print mailing generates around 7 euro for 1 euro invested, in the case of emailing the result is 40 euro (Schwarz, 2011).

To increase the interaction with customers, an SME can build a celebration email campaign. For automatic customized emails, when the birthday of specific customers is unknown, one solution is to use the name day for a celebration email. The celebration email can comprise,

for more appeal, a gift voucher on a certain purchase. It is demonstrated that these customized celebration emails have a higher opening rates compared to typical newsletters.

A new trend for determining the customer to read emails and newsletters is to incorporate a video which plays automatically upon opening. Evidence shows that people tend to watch the video rather than read the email. For the tourism business, where 'a picture speaks a thousand words', this is a very efficient way to present an attractive offer to internet users.

When the customer visits a website, his clicking behavior can be tracked with the aid of a small software application. Another way is to use eye tracking-software and to generate heat maps which show the most viewed parts of a webpage. These can help a travel SME learn about the features that generate the largest interest for a visitor, which links were followed and entered or which destinations / types of travel were preferred. The time spent for making a booking on the website can be monitored. When visitors of a travel agency website leave the page or abandon the shopping cart without having effectively purchased any service, they are registered and can be addressed again by means of a customized email. This is called retargeting and brings additional revenues. It comprises the sending of emails at a certain pace, including the offer of a gift voucher for tourists who book faster and thus may be determined to make the purchase. Once a booking is completed, the enterprise can approach the customer with cross-selling, i.e. with various associated offers (car hire, entertainment facilities etc.).

Social media can supply an SME with information in two ways. This can happen directly, through an interface shortcut, when the user agrees to allow his data to be processed, or indirectly, through social media monitoring, when the agreement or disagreement of customers on the provided tourist services is read and centralized. Thus, the enterprise can design customer profiles by gaining access to their online behavior and preferences. Emails will follow in a customized manner, with a high probability to be opened and read. Even templates can be configured in terms of colours, pictures, arrangement etc., depending if the newsletters or emails are sent to men or women. They enhance customer loyalty and bring additional revenues.

The most successful social media network to date in terms of registered users is Facebook. A Facebook page is almost a 'must' for a customer-oriented business like an SME in tourism. More important than the own communications are the comments and answers to the visitors' queries. Also, whole emails or messages may be forwarded to one's friends or relatives, especially by tourists who want to share their experience or photos when travelling. Social media may be bound to email-marketing when a SWYN-button (Share with your network) is incorporated into the email, generating thus a viral effect.

The search for potential partners and suppliers is done increasingly via online. Lead generation through the internet is very efficient, as search engines are now the first option for any business with an interest in the tourism sector. SMEs who want to download a certain offer may be encouraged to fill in a simple online form with their own data. Thus they are added to a list of potential or current customers.

4. Conclusions

The intensity of the competition and the progress of information technology have brought profound changes in the tourism industry. Tourism companies try to diversify their activity in order to eliminate intermediaries for various tourist services. Suppliers, such as hotels, restaurants or transport companies get in touch directly with customers via the internet and their own websites. In an attempt to save their market, tour operators make the same move, advertising aggressively on the internet.

Modern online instruments appear on a regular basis. One of the newest capabilities in e-travel is a "dynamic packaging engine", that lets travellers choose between airlines, accommodation units, restaurants, car-hire and other activities on an individual basis, so as to form a vacation according to their desire, with the price of the package smaller than the sum of its parts.

In comparison to other sectors, the tourism industry presents a rather developed online market. Online reservations grow at a fast pace, especially for airline tickets and accommodation. Therefore,

tourism SMEs try to combine a reduction in the cost for various types of reservations with a differentiation focus for the information and organization of the whole trip, or for locally provided services.

Websites and internet usage are more common with tourism SMEs compared to the SME average. They are still far though from using several of the vast possibilities of new online instruments analyzed in detail in the present study.

In order to develop a consistent online presence, a tourism SME needs to employ a micro-plan comprising the following skills:
- Content Writing;
- Search Engine Optimization (SEO);
- Social Media Marketing.

Content writing is necessary for writing travel blogs, impressions, as well as webpages and comments on social networks. Moreover, it should fulfil optimization processes of content through the text.

SEO is meant to ascertain key words and usage of tags inside a website, and also accomplish a good positioning among search engines. SEO is highly relevant for the elements a website should contain, the manner in which these elements should be arranged inside the page, and how an SME presents its image to internet users.

The enterprise needs to be quick to adopt social media. This comprises knowledge about managing the webpage, its promotion tools, how content should be adjusted for a more professional outlook and understanding the correct relationship between the firm's objectives and the posts.

The SME should hire or train an employee to manage the website and the online marketing campaigns. This employee has to possess the three above-mentioned skills. An average wage in Romania for this type of resource, plus the additional fees for the wage amounts to about 11,000 euro yearly. The employee training for online skills is also recommended, but this is an investment cost of about 150 euro for starters and it is paid only once.

The website also needs consistent bandwidth so as to be able to upload pictures, text and videos, and still be quick upon opening. The basic package for a starting kit amounts to about 300 euro per year (in the case of a Romanian SME).

Online promotion campaigns, represented by Facebook and Google Adwords need to be part of the continuous marketing strategy. A minimum of 50 euro should be dedicated to each one of them monthly. This amounts to 1,200 euro for a yearly campaign.

The final amount adds up to 12,500 euro per year. This is a relatively high cost for a Romanian SME in tourism. Nevertheless, this investment generates constant traffic on the webpage and customers for the enterprise. With such a budget, a superior rate of return can be obtained, which will cover the investment. Offline costs would be much higher anyway to achieve the same revenues.

Employing such a micro-plan, any ambitious SME in tourism will learn to understand the relevance of the online strategy. As a result, a well-informed, internet- and technology-savvy SME may generate strong competition for any large enterprise in tourism. This shows the enriching power of the internet. SMEs that familiarize themselves with modern online instruments, will tap into the rich potential of ICT together with its benefits.

The lack of primary data analyzed by using quantitative methods is a certain limitation of the present study and, in accordance, the author, in a next research, intends to extend this qualitative study. Nevertheless, given the phenomenal development of online instruments and their multiple uses in the tourism industry, it is certain that the link between the internet and tourism SMEs will generate several new contributions in this field of research on an international scale.

Acknowledgements

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