

EFFECTIVENESS OF DMO WEBSITES AS AN ESSENTIAL MARKETING TOOL

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Abstract: In the contemporary travel landscape, destination management organizations (DMOs) have significant influence in shaping visitors' perceptions and experiences. Recognizing the critical role of DMO websites as vital marketing tools and components in the creation of destination images, this research seeks to evaluate the quality of regional DMO websites and establish a methodology for future analysis. The research also includes identifying strengths and areas for improvement within these digital platforms. The effectiveness of DMO websites as essential online marketing tools is clarified through a detailed content analysis, offering insights that go beyond mere observations. Content analysis of 30 criteria is categorized into three groups, which are attractiveness and user functionality, information value, and website management. Our examination focusses on destination websites of 54 certified regional DMOs in the Czech Republic. The results emphasize significant strengths and areas for improvement, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach, especially concerning language mutations. The unified design across regional DMOs indicates a consistent online approach, while identified gaps in contact information, details on travel accessibility, and sustainable practices represent concrete opportunities for enhancement. As the tourism landscape continues to evolve, the insights gained provide actionable guidance for DMOs seeking to improve user experience, promote inclusivity, and ensure a captivating online presence in the evolving tourism landscape.

Keywords: destination management organization (DMO), destination management, destination website, website evaluation, content analysis

JEL Classification: Z33

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary travel environment, destination management organizations (DMOs) play a pivotal role in shaping the perception and experience of a destination for potential visitors (Chen et al., 2023). Destination websites are a key marketing tool for DMOs and a key element of destination image creation (Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019). The website offers a digital platform where prospective guests may learn about the location, have a taste of what's available there, and, ideally, make bookings, among other things (Moza, 2021).

The main objective of the research is to evaluate the quality of the websites of the regional DMOs and to develop a methodology according to which it will be possible to evaluate the quality of the websites of newly created DMOs in the future. An understanding of the DMO website's effectiveness as an online marketing tool can be gained from the content analysis of the website. The content analysis includes 30 criteria, that are divided into three categories: the attractiveness and user functionality of the website, the information value it offers, and the effectiveness of website management.

Our examination focuses on 54 websites belonging to certified DMOs in the Czech Republic. The findings of this evaluation promise to evaluate the current state of DMO websites. In addition, they also aim to establish the groundwork for future evaluation and to ensure that emerging DMOs can continue to use their online presence effectively.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

DMO websites are an important marketing tool for destinations to communicate directly with their visitors (Rafetzeder, 2019). The website is used to inform visitors about the activities and attractions available in the destination and can thus serve to inspire travellers about their next holiday destination (Mele & Lobinger, 2020). There are many factors that appear to be important elements on the website and should not be missing from any DMO website. (Jeon et al., 2018). Therefore, the authors of the article focused on these elements and the overall evaluation of the DMO websites in the Czech Republic from the perspective of content analysis.

Several papers have already been published on the topic of evaluating destination websites (whether cities or entire countries). Luna-Nevarez and Hyman (2012) conducted a content analysis of the websites of the most visited cities in the world. They divided them into clusters according to similar characteristics. It was found that the websites are increasingly simpler to create and are more focused on visual appeal. Websites are trying to move information from text to images or videos, which is also easier for the user to consume (videos etc.). Potential visitors aim to get information about the destination quickly and in sufficient quality. Therefore, the website should provide information clearly to save the user's time. Thus, the efficiency of the website is improved using videos, daily updates, but also by the integration of social networks into the website.

Chek and Lei (2020) focused their study on four Asian destinations (countries). Each website was examined carefully based on five groups of criteria - technical merit, communication, information, relationship, and transaction. Based on the results obtained, the functionalities that are missing from the websites were summarized and should be included there to improve the visitor's utility. An interesting fact is that, for example, Hong Kong collaborates with other destinations to provide more benefits to the visitor.

Marchi et al. (2023) examined the official websites of two regions – Tuscany Region (Italy) and Istria County (Croatia). They focused mainly on their textual and visual content. To analyse the textual data, the authors applied the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model and then analysed the images to see if the images corresponded with the text. The results showed that each destination focuses on a different offering, making the destination unique to visitors. At the same time, the destinations have different communication strategies between them, which also support their uniqueness. However, this methodology is very specific for evaluating websites and therefore will not be used in the research.

Cervi et al. (2023) evaluated the websites of the 26 most visited cities in the world. The evaluated parameters were divided into several groups (usability, interactivity and relationship with users, information offered, content typology and updating, social networks and transmedia content, accessibility). The authors also focused on the information provided in the context of COVID-19, as it has significantly influenced the way cities communicate with visitors.

The mentioned authors dealt with the evaluation of the content part of the website. Due to the constant development of technology, websites are also evolving (Fernández-Cavia et al., 2017), and it is necessary to update the evaluation that has been done in the past. In the most recent study by Cervi et al. (2023), the analysis of the websites was very comprehensive, however, it included many parameters that the websites of the DMOs studied do not have and so it was not necessary to include them in the analysis. For the evaluation of DMO websites, it was necessary to use other parameters that are relevant to them.

2. METHODOLOGY

Utilizing content analysis, the website's quality was evaluated in accordance with the research methods outlined by Luna Nevarez and Hyman (2012), Chek and Lei (2020), and Cervi et al. (2023). The foundation of the website rating system were these studies, which outline the essential components of DMO websites. However, the final form of the rating system was formed in collaboration with the DMO Categorization and Certification Secretariat. Based on the articles and subsequent collaboration with the Secretariat, 30 evaluation criteria were established. According to these criteria, all 54 websites of the certified regional DMOs in the Czech Republic were evaluated. When one of the criteria was satisfied, each DMO was consecutively awarded one or two points. The DMOs were arranged in order of highest score attained. Additionally, a percentage was assigned to each of the criteria based on how well each DMO fulfilled the requirements.

The assessed website's components were categorized into three sections based on its informational value, user-friendliness, and general management as a marketing tool. A website was assigned a score in the overall sum if it satisfied a given requirement. Each website gained points in this way which were then added to the total score. With certain elements graded as high as two points, a total of 33 points might have been obtained for the 29 elements that were seen. Furthermore, the examination encompassed the language variations of the websites which are vital for international presentation. In the final assessment the website gained one additional point for every language change. Language changes are the thirtieth and last component under observation.

2.1. Attractiveness and user functionality of the website

The first category of elements evaluated pertains to the website's attractiveness and usability, encompassing characteristics like visual design, layout, and general aesthetics. It emphasizes the use of captivating images and videos, attention-grabbing designs, and simple navigation. These components must be able to draw in enough visitors to the website. A DMO's website can entice visitors to stay longer and learn more about the destination by including components that improve visual appeal and provide a good first impression. Potential tourists may become so enthused about the location and feel compelled to visit if they stick around on the website and find the content interesting. In terms of user functionality, the website needs to include a search feature, a menu that is both clear and well-organized, and a mobile version—which has become imperative important. The entire user experience is enhanced by each of these components. The inclusion of a logo on the website is crucial for developing a destination's brand, as it represents the destination's identity visually and can contribute significantly to the development of a powerful and recognizable brand image.

All of the evaluated components that fall into the group of user functioning and attractiveness are displayed in Table 1 below. Except for the component for high-quality photos and videos, which the website might receive up to two points for, each of these components received only a single point.

Table 1: Website evaluation: attractiveness and user functionality of the website

| Does the website contain the evaluated parameter? | YES | NO |
|--|----------|----------|
| The website contains high quality images | 2 points | 0 points |
| Images change automatically (slide show on the main page) | 1 point | 0 points |
| Effects on the buttons when you hover the mouse | 1 point | 0 points |
| Website contains videos | 2 points | 0 points |
| Website layout is balanced (elements on both sides are balanced) | 1 point | 0 points |
| DMO destination logo is featured on the website | 1 point | 0 points |
| The website is attractive, modern, imaginative | 1 point | 0 points |
| The website has a mobile version | 1 point | 0 points |
| The menu on the website is clear | 1 point | 0 points |
| The website is searchable | 1 point | 0 points |

Source: Own elaboration

In the instance that the home page featured more than five superb photographs, the website received two points for meeting this requirement. Website was awarded one point when a minimum of two high-quality photographs were included. Photographs are considered high-quality photographs when they are clear and free of blur or low pixel quality. Furthermore, a website was awarded two points for having at least one video on the front page. It's a great feature to have a video directly on the home page because this also helps to draw visitors in and keep them on the page. In the case where videos were present on the website but not on the home page, it was awarded one point for satisfying the criteria.

If a website had a clean design, it is considered attractive, modern or imaginative. A clean design means that the website does not contain any extraneous graphic elements that would confuse the users or diffuse their attention, contain contrasting colours and has creative aspects - for example, a small map with links to the different attractions within the DMO area. Clear menus are defined in such a way that recommendations on excursions, attractions, dining and accommodation facilities, and events taking place in the destination may be found fast. In the best-case scenario, each type of information has its own menu tab.

2.2. Information value of websites

The second group of elements is devoted to information presented on the web. This set contains the main tourist destinations, attractions, natural and cultural monuments that make the destination unique. This information is very important for the user when visiting the destination. In addition to information on sights and tourist destinations, it is also advisable to have events taking place in the destination listed on the website. These can attract tourists to the destination for a certain period of time and the DMO can thus support to some extent the visitation during that period. It is essential to create a platform that allows users to access current events and local news; one way to do this is through an events calendar. Other crucial elements for the tourist can be information on accommodation, dining options and ways to get to and from the location. The DMO website can be a reliable resource for tourists wishing to plan an itinerary that includes booking accommodation, as it provides them with a wide range of up-to-date and varied information.

The website should also include information on accessible travel, the importance of which is increasingly being addressed. People with disabilities also want to travel and the destination offer should be adapted to this (Moura et al., 2023; Nigg & Eichelberger, 2021). Furthermore, accessible travel contains information on other accessibility needs that may not be obvious at first glance, such as for those with visual or hearing impairments. The website should also provide information on the sustainability elements of the destination, as this encourages responsible travel and highlights the area's commitment to socio-cultural and environmental protection (Richardson, 2021). Moreover, it is also related to tourist satisfaction and mobility, which are important for successful tourism development, which is important for further DMO activities (Tan & Ismail, 2020). Table 2 lists the different aspects together with their respective assessment.

Table 2: Website evaluation: information value of websites

| Does the website contain the evaluated parameter? | YES | NO |
|---|----------|----------|
| Information about accommodation options in the destination | 2 points | 0 points |
| There are links to accommodation providers' websites where people can make accommodation reservations | 1 point | 0 points |
| Information about dining options in the destination | 2 points | 0 points |
| Information on transport options in the destination | 1 point | 0 points |
| Information on how to get to the destination | 1 point | 0 points |
| The website includes an interactive map | 1 point | 0 points |
| Information on cultural activities and attractions in the destination | 1 point | 0 points |
| Information on sports activities and attractions in the destination | 1 point | 0 points |
| Information on recreational activities and attractions in the destination (relaxation, wellness, spa, etc.) | 1 point | 0 points |
| Information about natural attractions in the destination | 1 point | 0 points |
| Information about tourist information centres in the destination | 1 point | 0 points |
| The website includes a calendar of events | 1 point | 0 points |
| Information about accessible tourism | 1 point | 0 points |
| Information about sustainable tourism | 1 point | 0 points |

Source: Own elaboration

In the case websites had information about accommodation or dining they could get up to two points for listing more than 10 options of each component. This is due to the fact that a significant number of options should be listed, as the location targets to a wide range of segments that should be able to choose accommodation or dining facilities based on their demands. The other requirements in this group were scored one point each. Every information element was assessed based on whether it is available on the website in any manner, since information is located differently on every page. For instance, a website gained points for recreational activities if it included a tab specifically for this kind of activity or even if it just included a minimum of three wellness-related options for accommodation. If the website had at least three distinct suggestions for trips, events, and/or websites, it received points for providing information on cultural, sports, recreational, and natural activities. Websites that included contact information for the tourist information centres in their area were also awarded points.

A website gained one point if it offered accessibility-related information in any manner. For example, wheelchair accessibility information can be used as a filter for facilities, attractions, or even an interactive map. Information about sustainability received one point if the website highlighted an accommodation or dining establishment with a sustainable policy in place and if it made clear the destination's sustainability strategy. For instance, encouraging cleanup campaigns or coordinating stakeholder efforts for sustainability are examples of sustainable approaches.

2.3. Website management

The final set of components dealt with maintaining the website as a marketing tool, which included updating it frequently to keep it current and appealing to travellers. Regular updates show that the destination is active, evolving and organising events that may interest potential travellers. In addition, tourism information is often time sensitive as events, accommodation and attractions can change. Keeping the website up to date ensures that the information presented is accurate, relevant, and reliable, avoiding any confusion or dissatisfaction for visitors. A minimum of three news or articles published each month is considered "regular updating."

Additionally, the websites must be connected to other channels, including social media, so that users can interact and explore material from other online platforms in real-time. This guarantees the DMO's web presence is integrated and unified. By integrating social media with the DMO website, the organization can

also tap into a broader audience and improves their competitiveness by interacting with clients and learning about their requirements and habits (Roque & Raposo, 2021).

Connecting the website to partners facilitates cooperation, promotes reciprocal assistance, and showcases the range of experiences and amenities offered at the location. This is related to, for example, the offer of accommodation, dining, and other things to do in the destination. By providing links to partners' websites, the DMO will make it easier for the visitor to find them and they will have a better experience. Another point examined was the inclusion of contact information for the DMO on their website. In essence, putting contact details on the DMO website is not only a practical necessity but also a strategic step that facilitates communication, encourages partnerships and promotes transparency and credibility within the tourism industry.

The overall quality and relevancy of the website are vital, even though the language versions of the website are an additional important factor. It is preferable to concentrate on the quality of translation for relevant languages if a location does not receive a significant number of visitors from a particular foreign region. There is no need to create a new language version for them. However, each DMO should have at least one language version on its website. Indeed, the language version of a DMO's website can influence tourist flows by affecting the amount of information that reaches the visitor (Niu et al., 2016). All criteria from the third group with their points are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Website evaluation: website management

| Does the website contain the evaluated parameter? | YES | NO |
|--|-----------------|----------|
| The website is regularly updated | 1 point | 0 points |
| The website is linked to other own channels (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, other websites, etc.) | 1 point | 0 points |
| The website is linked to partners in the destination, including contacts and links to their websites | 1 point | 0 points |
| Contact details for the DMO are listed on the website | 1 point | 0 points |
| The website contains language mutations, if applicable, how many | 1 point or more | 0 points |

Source: Own elaboration

3. RESULTS

The study evaluated the websites of all regional DMOs in the Czech Republic that had a valid certificate as of April 27, 2023. For the evaluation of the websites, it was important to distinguish which website was important to the visitor. Some DMOs have only one website that serves as a corporate website but also as a destination one. However, some DMOs have two different websites, corporate and destination one. The DMO displays its own activities on the corporate web. Destination websites, on the other hand, are targeted at travellers and seek to convey the destination to visitors. As a result, destination websites were evaluated because they contain important information about the place that visitors need to know.

Taking language versions into account, the average score for the website was 25, with the highest score in this group being 34. The average was still 23 points even if the points for language mutations were excluded. The top performing DMOs in the evaluation with regard to language versions are listed in the Table 4. In contrast, Table 5 is ranked according to the highest score, not including points for language mutations. It is clear that the ranking will change and other DMOs that have performed better in terms of website management, content and attractiveness will come out on top. The websites of Vsetín, Koruna Vysočiny, Českomoravské pomezí, and Hradec Králové, which are tied for third place, had the highest ratings. DMO with the name Sdružení obcí Mikroregionu Vsetínsko achieved the highest number of points, namely 34 including language mutations.

Table 4: Top-ranked destination websites of the respective DMOs with regard to language versions

| DMO | DMO websites | Points with languages | Points without languages |
|--|--|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Sdružení obcí Mikroregionu Vsetínsko | www.mikroregion-vsetinsko.cz | 34 | 26 |
| Koruna Vysočiny, z.s. | www.korunavysociny.cz | 33 | 26 |
| Českomoravské pomezí | www.ceskomoravskepomezi.cz | 32 | 28 |
| Hradecká kulturní a vzdělávací společnost s.r.o. | www.hradecko.eu | 32 | 26 |
| Berounsko, z. s. | www.berounsko.net | 31 | 28 |
| Kladské pomezí, o.p.s. | www.kladskepomezi.cz | 31 | 28 |
| DMO Český Krumlov Region, z. s. | www.ckrumlov.info | 30 | 28 |

Source: Own elaboration

Nevertheless, it is evident that certain locations do not require several language versions, unless they are border destinations or other significant locations that attract a lot of foreign visitors. The findings indicate that not all of them have an English translation, despite the fact that they should all have at least one as was mentioned in the chapter 2.3. According to the authors, it is unexpected and troubling that 21 out of 54 destination websites do not have even an English language version. That is a quite high percentage of 39 %. Conversely, several websites underwent multiple needless language modifications, and the points acquired as a result frequently supplanted points that were absent. Those pertaining were for instance to the website's diversity of information.

It is essential to bring out that online pages with a lot of language variations were frequently translated simply by Google Translate. The quality of the linguistic alterations on these websites is also called into question by this. Some of the better websites without counting the points from the language mutations include the DMO Broumovsko and Jizerské hory. At the same time, both of these DMOs have no language mutation as they have identical scores in both columns. Upon comparing Table 4 and Table 5, it can be inferred that, whether or not linguistic mutations were taken into consideration, the websites of Českomoravské pomezí, Berounsko, Český Krumlov, and Kladské pomezí performed the best in the evaluation.

Table 5: Ranking of websites without counting points from language versions

| DMO | DMO websites | Points without languages | Points with languages |
|---|--|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Společnost pro destinační management Broumovska o.p.s. | www.broumovsko.cz | 29 | 29 |
| Berounsko, z. s. | www.berounsko.net | 28 | 31 |
| Českomoravské pomezí | www.ceskomoravskepomezi.cz | 28 | 32 |
| DMO Český Krumlov Region, z. s. | www.ckrumlov.info | 28 | 30 |
| Jizerské hory – Turistický region Liberecko, Jablonecko, Frýdlantsko a Tanvaldsko | www.jizerky.cz | 28 | 28 |
| Kladské pomezí, o.p.s. | www.kladskepomezi.cz | 28 | 31 |

Source: Own elaboration

4. DISCUSSION

The following findings were reached after the chosen websites were evaluated. We can draw an inference that while some sort of information is available everywhere, some things are absent everywhere. It can be inferred that the websites of the regional DMOs in the Czech Republic are comparable in terms of design since over 90 % of the destination websites received points for the following categories.

Web pages almost always have sharp, high-quality images without too small or blurry pixels, and the items on the left and right sides of the page are balanced. Furthermore, every webpage features a hover effect for the buttons. Although most websites include a mobile version and a destination logo on most pages, not all websites have these features, although all websites should have them.

Information about the destination's sporting and cultural attractions, as well as current events and natural features, is usually available on the websites. Additionally, the websites featured news or updates about the location, which is crucial for website visitors as it shows that the web is updated and increases the likelihood that they will find accurate and pertinent information there. The ability to link to other DMO channels was another element that was seen on over 90 % of the websites. This is crucial because, in order to maintain a consistent online presence, all online communication channels must be connected. The DMO can reach more target audiences by, among other things, interacting with and connecting various channels. Only one criterion was thus extensively expanded in terms of website management. This was the contact to the DMO. Surprisingly, though, not every DMO had a contact listed on their website.

Information about accessible travel was available on just 8% of the websites, while no information was provided about sustainable travel. Information about accessible and sustainable tourism should be included on DMO websites these days since this would connect DMOs to the topics that are frequently discussed in society, namely the environment and inclusion as was mentioned in the chapter 2.2.

Based on our research it was found, that some regional DMOs have a destination website as part of their superior DMO's¹ website, which has lost some points to several of them in one NUTS 3 region. The website is designed specifically for the needs of the superior regional DMO. As a result, the regional DMO cannot tailor the website to its needs and cannot include information that it would logically include on its own website. This fact, however, is not always negative. This presentation is appropriate for some destinations. These are destinations that are less well-known among visitors. However, the NUTS 3 region in which they belong to is more well-known, so visitors will still find the information needed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evaluation of DMO websites emerges as a critical endeavour in the field of destination marketing and communication. The significance of these digital platforms in projecting a destination's identity, attracting visitors, and fostering engagement cannot be understated. In this article, we explored the DMOs websites, developing a content analysis methodology including 30 evaluation criteria to assess the quality of their websites. The criteria were divided into three groups attractiveness and user functionality of the website, information value of websites and website management.

Our study focused on the evaluation of 54 websites belonging to certified DMOs in the Czech Republic. The dual-ranking approach, with and without considering language mutations, revealed intriguing insights. Notably, the presence of language mutations emerged as a factor influencing the overall evaluation, sometimes leading to higher scores even though the websites didn't meet the rest of the criteria. These criteria were often even more important than other language mutations for the quality of information provided to visitors. While language mutations contribute to broadening accessibility and audience reach, it becomes imperative to strike a balance between linguistic diversity and the fulfilment of other crucial evaluation criteria.

¹ This superior DMO to the regional DMO is operating in the official administrative regions of the Czech Republic (NUTS 3 regions).

In addition to the comprehensive evaluation of DMO websites in the Czech Republic, it is noteworthy that our findings suggest a degree of uniformity in certain design aspects among regional DMOs. Over 90% of the destination websites received positive assessments for categories such as providing information about attractions, highlighting current events, and featuring natural features. The prevalence of these elements indicates a consistent approach to presenting key destination highlights, fostering a rich online experience for potential visitors. Furthermore, majority of websites incorporated the link to other DMO channels.

However, our evaluation also shed light on areas that deserve attention and improvement. It is notable that not every DMO website included contact information, a crucial element for user interaction, inquiries, and partnerships. This highlights a potential gap in accessibility and communication that could be addressed to enhance the overall user experience. Moreover, the findings revealed a limited presence of information about accessible travel, with only 8 % of the websites offering such details. Additionally, no information was provided about sustainable travel practices across the evaluated websites. These gaps present opportunities for DMOs to prioritize inclusivity and sustainability in their online content, aligning with global trends and traveller preferences.

In conclusion, while DMO websites in the Czech Republic exhibit commendable strengths, the evaluation has illuminated both shared successes and areas for refinement. As the tourism landscape continues to evolve, DMOs can leverage these insights to not only enhance the accessibility and user-friendliness of their digital platforms but also to champion inclusivity and sustainable practices, ensuring appealing online presence for global audiences.

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