

The Use of the Internet to Attract Tourists to Zimbabwe. An Analysis of the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority Website

¹W.D Govere, ²T.Tsokota, ²O. Chikuta, ²A Mukwembi, ²P Chinofunga

¹Harare Institute of Technology, Dept. of Information Security and Assurance

²Midlands State University, Dept. of Computer Science and Information Systems

Abstract

The continuing rise of the internet as a communications tool for organizations in this informational era presents greater opportunities for marketing activities for tourism enterprises. In other words, the internet serves as a new communication and distribution channel for relevant and necessary tourism information. It is therefore Zimbabwe Tourism Authority's mandate to lure tourists to Zimbabwe using this communication and distribution channel.

Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) has since employed various marketing techniques to try and lure back the tourists. Among the different and most interesting strategies being used by ZTA, a sound web presence in the form of a good and informative website

This paper looks at the potentials inherent in internet technology and highlights how it can be useful in promoting tourism. The research will give Zimbabwe Government, Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) and other Organizations involved in promoting Zimbabwe insight on the current situation regarding tourism and the internet in Zimbabwe. To achieve this we assessed the ZTA webpage to determine whether it gives adequate and relevant information to attract tourists.

Keywords

Internet, Tourism, Tourists, Website, Zimbabwe Tourism Authority

I. Introduction and Background

Information Technology is one of the most important technological developments of the 20th century and due to its pervasive nature it is poised to impact tourism significantly. The internet has been described as a rich, multi-layered, complex and ever-changing textual environment [5]. Due to its information richness and reachness, it can be seen as an important means to propel tourism promotion to greater heights as the world moves further into the knowledge economy in this 21st century. The power of the internet lies in the unprecedented growth of its network world wide and its ability to connect computers and several individuals without the barrier of geographic space.

This is complemented by globalisation which has resulted in the gradual integration of national economies into the global market. The result is a closer integration of countries and the people of the world that makes communication networks like the internet crucial in breaking of barrier to the flow of services, capital, knowledge and people across borders faster and cheaper [13]. In this regard the revolution in services driven by rapid advances in digital and communication technologies coupled by liberalisation of international trade have rendered the obstacles of time and space less relevant and open the way for a new global service economy. According to the Director General of World Trade services are the fast speed highways for trade [6].

[11] postulates that ICTs can cause a total revolution in tourism development as a result the use of devices and technology in marketing a country as a safe tourist destination. It is against

this background that Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) should use ICT to market the country to the global market. Tourism, if well planned, regulated and implemented, has the potential to contribute more than 15% of Zimbabwe's GDP and one of the prerequisites of the critical turn is the use of ICT [12]. Since Zimbabwe has the basic infrastructure and superstructure required to resuscitate the industry, tourism should be one of the pillars for economic turnaround. Fig. 1 below shows tourists' attractions of Zimbabwe.



Fig. 1: Tourists' Attractions of Zimbabwe

Since the 1980s there has been a remarkable adoption of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). The tourism and hospitality industry only adopted the use of the web in 1995, [4] and [9] were the first to investigate on the usefulness of the web in enhancing tourism business performance. Since then, more researchers have devoted time and published on different themes of website usage [3]

This ICT movement has revolutionised the operations of organizations in the tourism and hospitality industry to the extent that global tourism businesses was made very easy [1] and [15]. Lately, the number of internet users has dramatically increased and this is evidence of the increased popularity of this technology [7]. This has driven many hospitality and tourism organizations to devote much time and resources to ensure that their websites are more attractive than their rivals, especially making sure that new and existing customers are taken care of. It is important to note that the internet and the web have become important instruments in aiding tourists decision making. This is supported by a research conducted by Ypartnership which revealed that 66 percent of US leisure tourists depended on the internet for their travel planning in 2009. This is way higher than only 35 percent who used the web for decision making in 2000 [14].

Despite the fact that the web has become the major source of information for tourists' decision making, most websites have not been able to contribute significantly to visitor arrivals to their respective destinations. Most National Tourism Organizations (NTOs) fail to fully utilize their websites especially in terms of marketing. This was evidenced by [10] whose research discovered that NTOs in East Asia were not contributing much to arrivals because they were not used to their full potential.

Marketers should understand that the content of any website has a great bearing on the visitors' perception of the organization or destination and its product offering as a whole [16]. This is largely because the web creates an interface between the destination and both existing and potential customers. What it therefore means is that the webpage can be the first 'moments of truth' for the customer and the old saying goes 'first impressions are lasting impressions' will most definitely apply. [8] argued that most websites for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) concentrate of providing basic information and thus are not effective marketing tools.

Research has shown that poor websites are likely to result in a loss of 50 percent of potential customers and 40 percent of repeat visitors [2]. The former are lost due to the fact that they fail to get what they want while the later due to negative experiences in the first instance.

A. Theoretical Frame Work 1

Table 1: Website Attributes

Information Dimension
Activities information Accommodation information Attraction information Events calendar Entertainment information Maps and directions Restaurant information Travel packages Travel guides/brochures Transportation information Photo gallery Links to regional/city/area pages Shopping information Information by market segment (business, family, etc) Visitor center information Travel tips State facts Local weather information Virtual tours
Communication Dimension
Search function Contact information (email, phone, mailing address, etc) Brochure request capabilities Destination image communication (logo, slogan, etc) Multiple language versions Email newsletter Links to social media (YouTube, blog, etc) Feedback forms Surveys Frequently asked questions
Transaction Dimension
Online reservation Events tickets Attraction tickets Shopping carts Web seal certification
Transaction Dimension
Online reservation Events tickets Attraction tickets Shopping carts Web seal certification
Relationship Dimension
Privacy policy Deals and discounts Personalization Cross-selling opportunities

B. Theoretical Framework 2

Table 2: Website E-Services that are Particularly Important for Tourism Website Users

	Tourism E-Services	Description
1	Company info	Detailed information related to the company and its activity
2	Product info	Ability to gather in-depth information about tourism products/services
3	Chat/customer forum/guestbook	Opportunity to communicate with other customers via the website and learn about previous customer experiences
4	Tourism info	Ability to obtain other relevant tourism information on the website
5	Direct links	Direct links to other websites providing the relevant tourism information
6	Online order tracking	A website feature that allows customers to monitor their order's status
7	Product personalization	Ability to tailor tourism product/service to the customer's specific needs
8	Website interaction	Ability to interact with the company through the website
9	Online reservation & payment	Ability to book the product/service and choose to pay for it directly on the website
10	Website map	Hierarchical diagram of the pages on the website
11	Location features	Website's ability to show customer's current location within the website
12	Local search engine	Search engine located on the website that enables visitors to search on keywords in order to quickly locate specific information and pages on the website
13	User-friendly interface	Visually pleasing and entertaining appearance of the website, its graphical interface (choice of layout, fonts, colours, etc)
14	Personal info storage	Opportunity for customers to store personal information and history of their previous transactions with the company
15	Website customization	Ability to filter the website content according to customers' preferences and interests
16	Mailing list subscription	Subscription to the company's mailing list to receive personalized information about offers, campaigns, news, etc
17	Browser efficiency/friendliness	Ability to open and operate the website without any problems in browsers, other than Internet Explorer, for example, in Opera, Mozilla, or Safari
18	Safety & security information	Information related to safety and security on the website
19	Multimedia	Multimedia features
20	Customized product	Ability to search for a product/service based on the pre-selected features

II. Methodology

The survey looked at the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority website. The choice of the selected organization was based on its mandate of "to develop, manage and market Zimbabwe as a tourist destination of first choice and to be to be an ICT-driven organisation" (ZTA Annual Report 2010).

Observations of the website were used and the website was rated against the given checklist as propounded by the questionnaire. The checklist consists of the key attributes and content analysis to evaluate a tourism website. Respondents were drawn from various backgrounds which include Information systems, Tourism, Computer science, Mathematics, just to mention a few.

A total of 100 questionnaires were answered online across the continents. Of these 71% were males while 29% were females. More than half of the respondents were aged between 26 -35 years (66.67%) followed by those aged between 36 -45 years. The remainder was aged below 25 years of age. Of greater importance was the representation of continents from responses where Africa dominated (78.43%). Europe followed then Asia, North America and Australia in that order. A larger percentage (79.54) of the respondents had visited Zimbabwe at least once.

III. Results and Discussion

In this paper, we evaluated the ZTA website (www.zimbabwetourism.net), by criticizing and highlighting the advantages of the website, and lastly, make sound recommendations that can help leverage the website with its marketing goal.

Regarding information provided in the web site almost all did indicated that the information provided in all areas assessed was at least normal (adequate). This include information on travel advices, accommodation in Zimbabwe, places to visit, local transport systems, food and dinning, local products, history of Zimbabwe, festivals and other local cultural activities just to mention a few. However there were of different opinions regarding online facilities. More than 46% disagree to completely disagree

that the website provides online facilities. These include facilities for online reservations, information about pricing of products and online purchase facilities.

All (100%) respondents were in agreement to strongly agree that they are satisfied on the benefits they get from the website. That is searching within the website, provided with links to other relevant websites, getting clear guidelines to use resources in the website. About the information content all were of the same mind that the information provided is complete, information can be trusted, language used understandable as well as retrieving information has been faster. Generally all respondents had to agree that the website is very interactive and hence gives an appeal to visit Zimbabwe. The following were observed

A. Advantages of the Website from the Analysis

1. Search Engine Positioning

The website is ranked highly on most popular search engines. As an example, if you search using "tourism in Zimbabwe", if you use the Google search engine, the site is placed at number one, using Bing, it is on number 2 and with yahoo search, it is also on number 2. This means that the site has been optimized for most major search engines.

2. Site Can Track Visitors Site Navigation on Site

The website can track a users navigational patterns whilst they are accessing the site. They therefore are able to collect information regarding say the pages visited most and what the general tastes are with regards to tourist areas they would most likely want to visit in Zimbabwe.

3. Website is a Dynamic Website

It contains web pages that are generated in real time. It accesses information from a database for example the news feeds; therefore it is easy to update the page simply by updating the database. This is an advantage as opposed to using a static website that does not have any form of interactivity and is rarely updated.

4. Font

The size and type of font used by the website is appropriate and visitors do not have a problem reading the content on the website. This is an advantage in that users can read through the website and not have any problems interpreting the pictures as everything is well labeled.

5. User Comments

There is provision for users to leave comments with regards to any subject of their choice that concerns Zimbabwe Tourism. This helps the organization get feedback from the visitors and can help them in making necessary changes both with regards to the website and also on how they market or package their tourism material.

6. Social Networking Tools

One of the sites greatest strength is that it incorporates social networking tools such as Twitter, Facebook and You Tube. These can be used to get visitors to come to the site. For example, they is a Facebook account dedicated to the various awareness campaigns and functions that are hold by Zimbabwe Tourism Authority. The page can be found on <http://en-gb.facebook.com/zimbabwetourism.functions>

This makes it easier for visitors and users of the site to make a social bookmark in a community-based website to the page. Besides the social networking tools, the bar at the bottom also has other links to other important pages within the website such as "contact us" and "Top Pages".

7. Translation

For visitors that cannot read the English language, there is a facility for them to translate from English to any language such as French, Spanish or Japanese. This therefore means that the site breaks the language barrier and because of that the site attracts tourists from any part of the world regardless of the language they speak.

8. Directory

The website has a directory link on the home page that offers information about the various hotels, tour operators etc. This is valuable information especially to interested visitors to the site as it makes it easier for a tourist to plan their visit to Zimbabwe. The site acts as a web portal as it directs visitors to other websites that are related to Zimbabwe tourism.

9. Login and Registration

Users have an option to log on to the website or to register online. This helps them to keep information about users that have been to the websites and this is also one way to collect demographic information about the visitors of the site.

10. Site Map

A site map is a visual model of a website's content that allows the user to navigate through a site to find the information they are looking for. The website has a site map and this is a helpful tool especially to visitors so that they know the structure of the website and how best to navigate around it.

On the contrary slightly closer to 50% of the respondents noted that there is room for improvement on the website.

B. Areas Which Need Attention

1. Domain-Name Conflict

One of the Universal Resource Locators provided from the search through the search-engine does not open i.e [www. Zta.co.zw](http://www.Zta.co.zw)

2. Time to load

When the bandwidth is low, the website takes a long time to load. This is a disadvantage because the longer a website takes to load, the higher the chances that that it people will leave the site without even looking at its contents. The reason why the website takes long to load is because it has too much graphics, such as the main slideshow wonders of Zimbabwe that have to be loaded on the home page.

3. E-Commerce

The website is an Information site that only delivers information about the various places of interest that are found in Zimbabwe and also other necessary information with regards to the Zimbabwean tourism sector. It can also be placed under a corporate type of website because it is owned by the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority. The fact that it does not support e-commerce is a disadvantage for an official site that is trying to "sell" Zimbabwe to tourists all over the world. Probably we need to define what we mean by supporting e-commerce and why we say it does not support e-commerce.

4. Too Much Content on the Home Page

The home page has too much information, pictures and graphics. This tends to distract the visitor and one may find it difficult to browse through the whole page when looking for a particular area with regards to where or what they would want to do if they are to come to Zimbabwe. There is too much content on the home page and one has to scroll down to get to the bottom of the page. Compared with the official South African Tourism website (www.southafrica.net), where the page is less cluttered and it is easier to find information on this page. (are we allowed to compare the two websites in our publication?)

5. Specialization of Content by Visitors Not Possible

Unlike the official South African website (www.southafrica.net), where, if one is interested in sports only, he can specify his area of interest and the website will provide the required information making ones search for areas of interest quicker and easier, ZTA website does not allow for that kind of flexibility. The South Africa website is clearly illustrated by Figure 2 below where by users can choose what they want to do and the various places across South Africa where their areas of interest can be found are shown:



Fig. 2: South Africa Tourism website

6. Some Links do Not Work

Links found at the bottom, specifically the national museums, national parks, art gallery etc all do not work. It is important that if a visitor should be able to link to other websites that are related to Zimbabwe Tourism. Their role is to improve the sites visibility and increase cross promotion.

7. Contact Information

There is no physical contact information as compared to the South Africa website site. This information can be helpful to say tourists that may be in Zimbabwe and want to visit the physical address of ZTA.

8. Map

It is especially useful for tourists who have never visited the country. It will give people a good and simple idea of all the tourist destinations within the country, their distances apart and how to get there which is essential for a tourism site, which is present on other tourism web-sites such as www.visitbritain.com which contains destination and maps on the home page. On the ZTA tourism website, a map of the country is not present.

9. Hotel Reviews

An honest review of all the hotels near the tourist websites will allow the tourist to plan ahead and according to their pockets. On the ZTA tourism website, there is no map of the country either on the home-page or anywhere to allow for this.

10. Interaction Forum

Forums such as a Question and answer forum has the following advantages: It answers the most basic questions that will be asked most frequently. It guides the web-developers according to the type of content that should most likely be included. This is not included on the ZTA website.

11. Informative

A quick scan of the website should be able to determine what you offer and how you can benefit them. The website should have headlines, pictures, animations and text that speaks to the target audience's needs and wants.

12. Graphical content

There is a lot of graphical content featured on this website. This causes the download time to be significantly longer.

13. Encouraging the Visitor

The visitors can be encouraged to take further action either by submitting a contact form, signing up for a newsletter or buy a product. The website does not allow for buying the product through making online bookings with local traveling agencies for traveling arrangements and accommodation

14. Navigation

Some sections on the page are not user friendly, specifically the login and register links. The web-site does not tell the visitor the purpose or benefits of logging in.

15. Reciprocal Links

Some reciprocal links on the page are dead links. Examples are the link to Sanganai- Hlanganani, the link to Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, National Parks and National Museums.

16. Domain Name

The name of the website is not linked to the domain name hence this proves to be a weak strategy since other parties can use that name

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

- Because of too much graphical content especially on the home page, we recommend that they reduce the amount of pictures so that the page can be loaded quickly.
- There is need also to reduce the amount of content found on the homepage so as to reduce the clutter that currently exists on the homepage. The site can reduce the number of pictures and make use of correctly labeled links.
- The site should be able to support e-commerce so that users can make payments online for packages they want to take up. This removes the hassles of having to look for other sites that can provide them with tour packages.
- For one to view the directory, there are many steps involved for one to finally get to the actually information, we therefore suggest that the site can make use of a drop-down-menu box that shows the various areas such as hotels, tour operators etc, and then group them into alphabetical classes.

References

- [1] Buhalis, D., Law, R."Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20years on and 10 years after the Internet—the state of eTourism research", *Tourism Management*, 29(4), 609-623, 2008.

- [2] Cunliffe D., "Developing usable websites — are view and model", *Internet Research: Electronic Networking Applications and Policy* 10(2), pp. 295–397, 2000.
- [3] Frew A.J., "Information and communication technology research in the travel and tourism domain: perspective and direction", *Journal of Travel Research* 39(2), pp. 136–145, 2000.
- [4] Han, J. H., Mills, J. E., "Zero acquaintance benchmarking at travel destination websites: What is the first impression that national tourism organizations try to make?", *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 8(6), pp. 405-430, 2006.
- [5] Jagboro K.O., "A Case study of internet usage in Nigerian universities: a case study of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife Nigeria. [Online] Available: http://www.firstmonday.org/issues8_2/
- [6] Lamy, Pascal, "The Australian Services Roundtable", *The Australian Services Roundtable. European Services Forum and the London School of Economics conference*. October 15, 2007. [Online] Available: <http://www.servicesaustralia.org.au/pdfFilesResearch/Pascal-Lamy-Speech-LSE.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2009).
- [7] Law, R., Qi, S., Buhalis, D., "Progress in tourism management: A review of website evaluation in tourism research", *Tourism Management*, 31, pp. 297-313, 2009.
- [8] Li, X., Wang, Y., "Evaluating the effectiveness of destination marketing organizations' websites: Evidence from China", *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 12(5), 536-549, 2010.
- [9] Lu, M.T., Yeung, W.L., "A Framework for Effective Commercial Web Application Development", *Internet Research: Electronic Networking Applications and Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 166-173, 1998.
- [10] Morrison, A. M., Taylor, J. S., Douglas, A., "Web site evaluation in hospitality and tourism: The art is not yet stated. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*", 17(2/3), pp. 233-251, 2004.
- [11] Milne S., Mason D., Hasse J., "Tourism, Information, Technology and development: revolution or reinforcement?", In. Hall A., Lew A., Williams A., (Ed.) *A companion to tourism geography*. England: Routledge, pp.184-195, 2004.
- [12] Mwaruta R., "Tourism: vehicle to get Zim working again", *Newsday* 07 March 2011, [Online] Available: <http://www.newsday.co.zw/article/2011-03-07-tourism-vehicle-to-get-zim-working-again> (accessed 07 March 2011)
- [13] Van Den Bossche, Peter, "The law and policy of the World Trade Organisation", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- [14] Wilgen, J.V., "66% of US leisure travelers use internet to plan some aspect of their travel. Feb.27, 2010, [Online] Available: <http://www.tourismroi.com/InteriorTemplate.aspx?ID=32418>
- [15] Yuan, Y. L., Gretzel, U., Fesenmaier, D. R., "Internet technology use by American convention and visitors bureaus", *Journal of Travel Research*, 41(3), pp. 240-255, 2003.
- [16] Zafropoulos C, Vrana V, Paschaloudis D. (2005), "An evaluation of the performance of hotel websites using the managers' views about online information services", *European Conference on Information Systems in a Rapidly Changing Economy*, Regensburg, Germany. [Online] Available <http://is2.lse.ac.uk/asp/asppecis/20050010.pdf>



Weston Darlington Govere holds a Bachelor of Science (Honours) degree in Mathematics from the Midlands State University and a Master of Science degree in Information Theory, Coding and Cryptography from Mzuzu University, Malawi. He is a lecturer at the Harare Institute of Technology, in the Department of Information Security and Assurance.



Theo Tsokota holds a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Information Systems from the Midlands State University and a Master of Business Administration -Management Information System from Maastricht School of Management and is currently a Doctoral Student at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa. He is a lecturer at the Midlands, State University, in the Department of Computer Science and Information Systems.



Oliver Chikuta is a holds a Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) in Tourism and Hospitality Management and a Master of Commerce degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management from Midlands State University. He is a lecturer at the Midlands State University, in the Department Tourism and Hospitality Management.



Alex Mukwembi is a lecturer at the Midlands State University, in the Department of Computer Science and Information Systems.



Peter Chinofunga is a lecturer at the Midlands State University, in the Department of Mathematics.