

eFitness of DMO Websites – Still more to go

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Abstract

Website evaluation has been examined by researchers for many years resulting in various suggestions concerning which key success factors to consider and how to proceed. However, due to advances in technology there is a need to continuously reconsider dimensions and criteria. This study evaluates the performance of 40 DMO websites from Austria and Switzerland applying an updated catalogue of criteria called *eFitness Check-Update*. Results show that DMOs have room for improvements regarding *Interactivity* and *Legal Aspects*. Furthermore, Common State-, Competitive Advantage-, and Future Potential Dimensions are revealed, and Austrian and Swiss results are compared.

Keywords: Website evaluation, key success factors, DMO websites, Austria, Switzerland

1 Introduction

Since the late 1990s there has been a trend towards supplementing traditional ways of marketing and communication of destination marketing organisations (DMOs) with websites offering services via the Internet (Burgess et al., 2001). In order to assist DMOs in providing high quality and visually appealing websites, tourism research has been dealing with website evaluation for many years (Zeithaml et al., 2000; McKinney et al., 2002; Lin et al., 2005; Parasuraman et al., 2005; Park & Gretzel, 2007). Due to technological development website evaluation frameworks such as the *eFitness® Check* (Fritsch, Schneider, Liebrich & Schegg, 2012) must be updated regularly to account for new features and marketing approaches. This is what the current research aims at.

2 Methodology

The present study used the *eFitness® Check* developed by several universities in Switzerland and Austria as a basis (Fritsch, Schneider, Liebrich & Schegg, 2012) to generate an up-to-date list of website evaluation criteria accounting for recent developments regarding website standards. The dimensions suggested by the *eFitness® Check* were compared with the dimensions identified as website key success factors in a meta-analysis by Park and Gretzel (2007). Based on this comparison, the dimen-

sions of *eFitness*[®]-*Check* were extended by the two dimensions *Interactivity* and *Trust*. The catalogue of the *eFitness Check-Update* finally consists of eleven dimensions comprising 148 evaluation criteria. The dimensions as well as three examples of criteria are given in Table 1; the actual amount of criteria of each dimension is given in brackets in the first column of the table.

Table 1. Dimensions and related criteria of the *eFitness Check-Update*

Dimension	Examples of Criteria
Customer Relationship Management (12)	E-mail within two clicks starting from homepage, contact details, contact form
Prices & Offer (10)	Overview/list of prices, payment options, special offers
Design, Text & Illustrations (21)	Text structured by headlines, clear-cut design of website, seasonal photographs
Legal Aspects (3)	Site notice of operator, availability of general business terms, information on data protection
Navigation & Usability (19)	Consistent menu bar, recognizable links, downloads: indication of file type
Quality of E-Mail-Response (20)	Address customer with correct name, alternative offers if offer not available, link to website
Booking Procedure (11)	Search engine for accommodations, online booking, sale of gift vouchers
SEO & Access (11)	Optimised for several browsers, meaningful title tag, Google page-rank higher than three
Services, Useful Information & Infrastructure (22)	Links leisure activity provider, tours in destination, weather forecast
Interactivity (14)	Forum/chat, customised newsletter for target groups, multimedia apps (videos, virtual tours, interactive panorama view)
Trust (5)	information about DMO, no contradictory information, links solely to trustful partners

In order to empirically test the *eFitness Check-Update* catalogue of criteria, a sample of 40 DMO websites from Alpine tourism regions in Austria and Switzerland (in order to achieve a representative sample at least one DMO in every holiday region mentioned in the list published by BAK Basel Economics, 2011) has been chosen randomly resulting in 19 destinations located in Austria and 21 in Switzerland. Each website has been accessed and looked at if a certain criteria is fulfilled/available (= coded with 1) or not (= coded with 0). *Quality of E-Mail-Response* has been examined using data collected through a mystery-check e-mail sent to all DMOs.

3 Analysis

To analyse the data, the performance of each DMO website was looked at on three levels: single criteria, dimensions, and overall performance. A criterion could either have a value of 1 (= fulfilled/available) or 0 (= not fulfilled/available). To get insights into the various dimensions, the scores of the criteria related to the respective dimension were summed up; higher scores indicate better performance. For instance, the dimension *Customer Relationship Management* comprises 12 criteria, consequently the highest score that can be achieved by a DMO website is 12 (see Table 1 for the amount of criteria each dimension comprises). In a next step, the overall performance

of the websites was calculated by summing up the scores of all dimensions (maximum score = 148). To get more aggregated insights, dimensions were categorised into Group 1, *Common State Dimensions*, Group 2, *Competitive Advantage Dimensions*, and Group 3, *Future Potential Dimensions*. If all DMO websites fulfilled at least 80% of all criteria of a certain dimension, these criteria are determined as “must-have” criteria; thus, respective dimensions belong to Group 1. If all DMO websites achieve between 60% and 79% of the maximum score, the dimension belongs to Group 2 allowing DMOs to gain a competitive advantage. Group 3 contains dimensions succeeding at a level of less than 60% of points achievable. Group 3 dimensions comprise underutilized criteria providing future potential to position a destination and gain competitive advantage. To reveal the performance of Austrian and Swiss DMO websites, the average scores pertaining to each dimension of all DMOs for the respective country were calculated.

4 Results

4.1 Criteria- and Dimension-based Performance

The overall scores of the 40 DMOs range from 81 points to 121 points. Looking at the criteria level, 24 criteria (e.g., provision of e-mail-contact, accommodation search engine, booking tool) were fulfilled by all DMOs while seven criteria (i.e., toll-free hotline, toll-free booking hotline, not more than 50 external links, forum/ chat, customised newsletter, infotainment offers such as games, e-cards, and screensavers, raffles or sweepstakes) were not fulfilled by any DMO. Only 25 destinations (i.e., more than half!) do not provide a basic contact form. 28 do not offer rates in form of a price list and only six provide prices in foreign currencies.

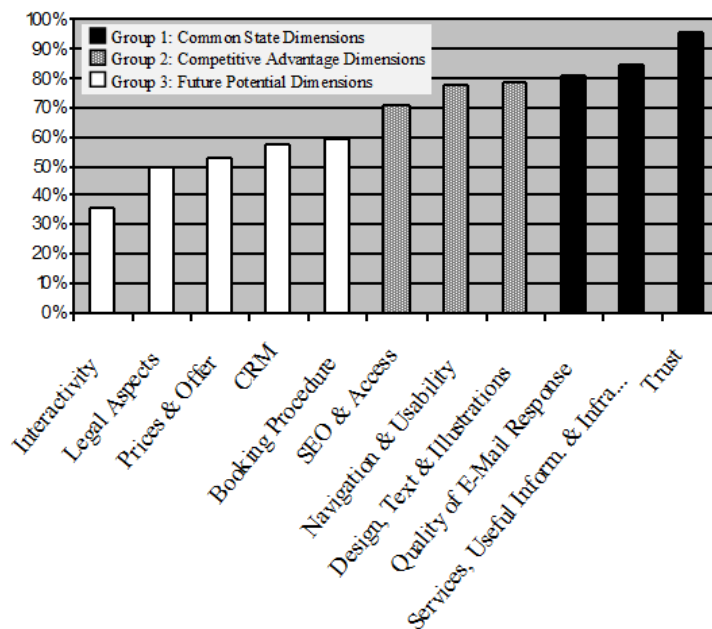


Fig. 1. Classification of Dimensions of the *eFitness Check Updated*

Considering the average performance of DMOs in the various dimensions, Fig. 1 shows that the dimension *Trust* is fulfilled at 95.0% level, followed by *Services, Useful Information & Infrastructure* (84.6%), and *Quality of E-Mail Response* (80.8%). The weakest dimensions are *Interactivity* (35.9%), *Legal Aspects* (50.0%) and *Prices & Offer* (52.8%). Fig. 1 also shows the assignment of the dimensions to the three groups, viz. Common State Dimensions, Competitive Advantage Dimensions, and Future Potential Dimensions.

4.2 Benchmarking Austrian and Swiss DMO Websites

A comparison of the website performance of DMOs from Austria and Switzerland shows that Swiss DMOs are doing quite well. They perform better in all dimensions except *Legal Aspects*, *Navigation & Usability*, and *Trust*. Especially in terms of *Price & Offer*, Swiss DMOs fulfil far more criteria than Austrian DMOs: 84.3% and 51.6% respectively. For further comparisons please see Fig. 2 which also shows the classification into the three groups (i.e., Group 1 = Common State Dimensions, Group 2 = Competitive Advantage Dimensions, Group 3 = Future Potential Dimensions).

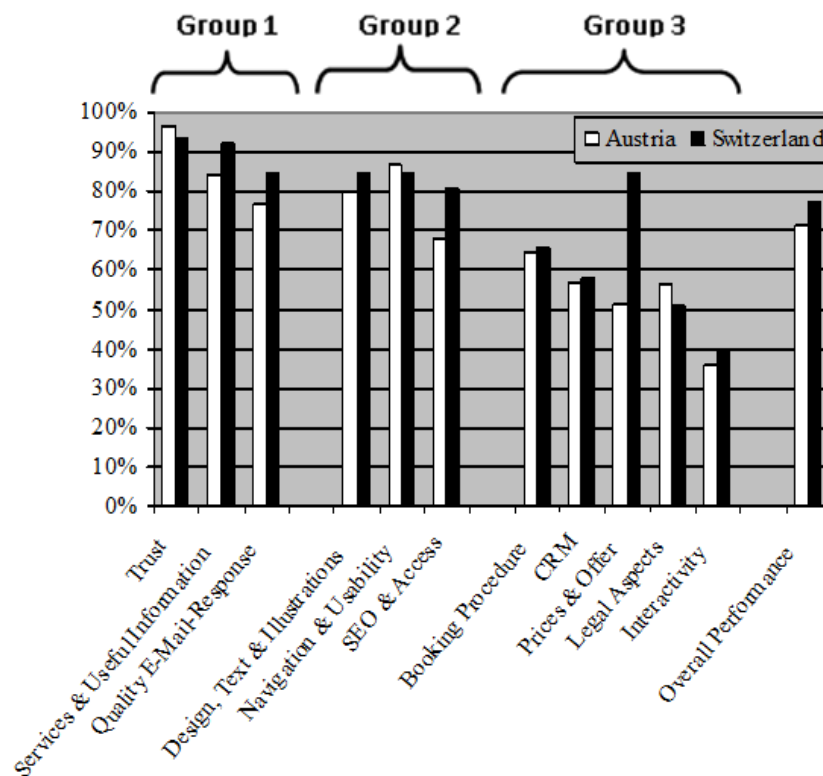


Fig. 2. Benchmarking of Austrian and Swiss DMO-Websites

5 Conclusions

In summary, it can be stated that there is a need to update existing website evaluation frameworks continuously to account for new features available. Results show that the analysed DMO websites overall perform quite well. In seven of the eleven dimensions evaluated, more than 65% of the available points were achieved. This is in line with results by Burgess, Parish, and Alcock (2001) who found that RTO sites in Australia have progressed from basic web presence (analysis in 2000) to higher levels of development in 2008 characterised by greater sophistication and functionality. However, criteria related to the *Future Potential Dimensions* offer opportunities to position a destination and to differentiate from competitors. Especially, the dimension *Interactivity* provides room for gaining competitive advantage in the future. Actually, the reluctant usage of *Interactivity* features is quite alarming because literature has been stressing its ever increasing relevance in the web 2.0 era for many years (Chen & Chen, 2004). Features like panorama-views and virtual tours give the customer a first insight into the destination and its surroundings and such features foster emotional stimulation (Burgess et al., 2001; Spaulding et al., 2006). Whereas the hotel industry has long since recognised the importance of such tools (Wei et al., 2001) only few DMOs currently profit from these technological innovations. Research should provide DMOs with importance scores for each dimension to stress its business relevance.

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