

Full Length Research Paper

Assessing the Efficacy of Digital Marketing Platforms in South Africa's Luxury Lodge Sector

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The information-intensive nature of the tourism industry suggests that the Internet is important in marketing tourism destinations. This article evaluates the marketing related aspects of luxury lodge websites in Mpumalanga, South Africa. Through systematic sampling, 20 luxury lodge websites were selected from a population of 40 rated as four and five star lodges by the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa. The research design is a concurrent mixed method approach where quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently with qualitative data leading the analysis and reporting. Websites were evaluated against criteria developed through a content analysis of existing website evaluation models. The study finds that the websites are generally of a high standard and appealing, but lack originality and uniqueness. The study highlights issues pertaining to the current web marketing approaches of luxury lodges that cater for up-market international tourism, but employs marketing approaches for a local market.

Key words: Websites, luxury lodges, evaluation criteria, marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Would-be tourists look for a wide variety of travel information on a destination's website (Hamer and Connor, 2004). Increasingly, tourists make use of websites to explore destinations they wish to visit for information and to experience a destination to a certain degree beforehand. Buhalis and Law (2008) argue that the information provided on websites should include a lot of pictures so as to present a tangible impression of the destination. Many tourists come to the South African province of Mpumalanga – one of South Africa's top tourist destinations with a wide variety of private game reserves (SA-Venues, 2009). It is therefore important to gauge the effectiveness of Mpumalanga luxury lodges' websites. This article does precisely that, and considers how these websites rate against a predetermined set of usefulness criteria. Since South Africa's emergence from isolation in the 1990s, the country's tourism industry has

grown rapidly. By 2006, tourism grew by nearly 14% per annum; this is three times better than the global growth rate (South Africa info, 2007). In the third quarter of 2008, air markets (tourists who enter the country by aeroplane) spent an estimated R7 billion in South Africa compared with R5.1 billion over the same period in 2007. The per capita expenditure for the air market during this period was R14 200 per visit compared to R9 200 in 2007 (South African Tourism, 2008). Such growth is having a positive effect on South African accommodation suppliers, and is ensuring higher-than-ever occupancy rates (South Africa info, 2007). Statistics South Africa (2009) states that overseas travellers come mostly from Europe – specifically from the UK, Germany, France, the Netherlands – and from the US, Australia, Sweden and Canada. Of these, 89% visit South Africa for leisure purposes, with business travel accounting for the rest (Statistics South Africa, 2009). Many come to Mpumalanga. This province is considered to be one of South Africa's top tourist destinations with highlights such as the Kruger National Park, an array of private game reserves and the Blyde River Canyon (SA-Venues, 2009). The province offers a wide variety of

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accommodation to cater for the needs of tourists (Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency, 2009).

The Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) is the country's tourism industry grading organization. It ensures quality standards across 'all services and facilities offered by the South African Tourism industry'. TGCSA uses a star grading system: one star means 'acceptable/modest', whilst five stars means 'most exceptional quality, matching the best internationally' (Tourism Grading Council of South Africa, 2009). The TGCSA has given 40 lodges in Mpumalanga either four or five stars (Tourism Grading Council of South Africa, 2009). TGCSA defines a lodge as 'an accommodation facility located in natural surroundings. The rates charged are usually inclusive of an experience offered at the lodge, game drives, battlefield tours, etc. In general, food and beverage services are provided for all meals' (Tourism Grading Council of South Africa, 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers concur that the unique characteristics of the Internet (easy access, reduced costs, an overabundance of information) has allowed the Web to become the definitive communication channel for travellers (Han and Mills, 2006: 406). Baloglu and Pekcan (2006: 171) state that the Internet's multimedia capabilities provide great opportunities to market the intangibles of a tourism destination. Paret (2002) shows that Web marketing is not just for big hotel chains: well designed, easy-to-navigate websites offer independent or small hotels a low-cost, valuable marketing tool – which can make such enterprises more competitive. There are more and more academic and trade publications geared towards understanding how to effectively build and evaluate tourism websites. Thus, there exists an array of website evaluation instruments. Han and Mills (2006: 405) report 55 papers using approximately 47 instruments to evaluate websites. With all this information comes confusion especially amongst practitioners about which instrument to use in developing websites.

How to evaluate websites

There is little evaluation of websites in the African travel, hospitality and tourism industries, though this is a common practice in the rest of the world. Han and Mills (2006) show that these studies use, among others the following criteria for evaluation: site planning, design, content and management (Benchendorff and Black, 2000), product, price, promotion, place, customer relations and technical aspects (Blum and Fallon, 2002). Balanced score-card or variations thereof (Douglas and Mills, 2004; Feng et al., 2003; Ismail et al., 2002; Kline et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2004; Myung and Morrison, 2004; So

and Morrison, 2003; St John et al., 2003); critical success factors (technical, marketing, internal, customer) (Kim et al., 2002, 2003; Morrison et al., 1999) and rating systems (Wan, 2002) to name a few. So and Morrison (2004), Kline et al. (2004) and Ham (2005) each uses a set of criteria to evaluate websites on a five-point scale. So and Morrison (2004) used a Modified Balanced Scorecard to evaluate technical aspects of the website, its marketing effectiveness, how a customer might perceive it and what information it gives. Kline et al. (2004) explore bed-and-breakfast websites in Indiana. They use a Modified BSC instrument similar to So and Morrison's. They look at user-friendliness, site attractiveness, marketing effectiveness and technical aspects of the website. Ham (2005) looks at the impression given by the website, the usefulness of its content, the accuracy of its information – as well as ease of navigation on the site, the site's accessibility, whether or not one can make online reservations and whether or not information is up-to-date.

Using the studies mentioned earlier as well as that of Mohammed et al. (2002), the present study settled upon the following criteria for use in evaluating the websites: the attractiveness of the website, the information given on it, and its marketing effectiveness.

The website's attractiveness

A website's attractiveness affects its ability to be an ambassador for an organization (Ham, 2005: 298). The attractiveness or aesthetics sometimes outweighs the usability in the overall experience of the visitor and has an emotional impact (Hartman et al., 2007: 387). Two dimensions defining website aesthetics have been proposed by Lavie and Tractinsky (2004) as classical aesthetics and expressive aesthetics. Classical aesthetics places emphasis on an orderly and clear design while expressive aesthetics focuses on the creativity and originality of the design. A website should have clear and readable text and hyperlinks, and should have good quality photographs and images. It should not be a copy of a print brochure but an interactive display (Kline et al., 2005: 257). The site's aesthetic features – visual items that raise the interest of the viewer, whether pictures, colours or layout (Han and Mills, 2006: 414) – all contribute to its attractiveness. In this study, attractiveness used the following criteria: 1) text is clear and readable; 2) hyperlinks are easy to read; 3) pages are clean and uncluttered; 4) photos and images are of good quality; 5) effective use is made of webpage space; 6) pictures and images reinforce the text; 7) there is sufficient contrast between the background and the text; 8) the background is effective and appealing; 9) the use of colour improves the site's appearance; 10) the site has a simple and appropriate URL/domain name; 11) there are no compulsory pop-ups; 12) there is good multi-media interaction; 13) the page indicates when it was last

updated; 14) the page has been updated recently; 15) the site is linked to other sites.

Information provided on the website

Current information stimulates visitors' interest in a site: websites should therefore be updated as frequently as possible. They should provide useful, up-to-date and reliable information if they want to attract users (Ham, 2005: 299). Similarly, Katerattanakul and Siau (2008: 65) developed an 'information quality framework' that consists of four categories including intrinsic information quality, contextual information quality, representational information and accessibility information quality. Intrinsic information quality is an information that has quality in its own right where the information provided is accurate. Contextual information quality focuses on the context within which the information is provided, whereas representational information quality places emphasis on the presentation of information that is easy to understand, concise and consistent. Accessibility information quality focuses on the navigation mechanisms providing visitors easy access to the desired information. In this study, determining the accuracy and reliability of information is somewhat impractical, although the dates and relevance of some of the content provided some information of this category. This was done in the context of a tourism website where the extent to which the ease of understanding and consistency of the information was considered. The navigation mechanisms were also explored. Useful information on a tourism website would be such things as travel packages, prices and information about local culture (Han and Mills, 2006: 414). In this study, the site's information was judged according to whether or not it had information about the following: 1) shopping possibilities; 2) accommodation; 3) attractions; 4) restaurants; 5) transportation; 6) directions; 7) embassy/consulate information; 8) pricing; 9) corporate information; 10) meeting planning; 11) information on added value to meeting planners; 12) local activities and events; 13) links to activities and area attractions.

Marketing effectiveness

The marketing effectiveness of a website is determined by the information, research, products, segmentation and positioning evident from the site. It further explores how tangible the product or service is displayed and whether partnerships and customer service exists (Sigala, 2004: 239). Websites should include virtual tours, information about rooms (such as whether or not there are rooms available), information about surrounding areas and contact information. Furthermore, online reservation (purchasing) technology provides a way for customers to conduct secure electronic transactions online. Kline et al. (2005: 257) see whether the site gives a sense of the

uniqueness of the establishment, and whether it provides information on its history, the owners/managers, local events and rates. It should also have photographs, record awards received, a testimonials section and indicate packages – as well as give virtual tours. Han and Mills (2006: 415) look for interactive features that trigger responsive behaviour in viewers – such as planning a trip online or writing an email to query something. In the present study, the marketing effectiveness of websites is judged according to the following criteria: 1) there are pictures of the establishment; 2) there are pictures of the rooms; 3) the uniqueness of the establishment (its architecture and history) is conveyed; 4) there are hyperlinks to sponsors, or advertisements; 5) the owners or managers are described; 6) the establishment's logo is on the website; 7) there is an online reservation facility; 8) there are 'specials' (promotions); 9) special target markets are addressed (the establishment caters for children, pets, or disabled people); 10) there is a calendar of events; 11) testimonials are provided; 12) there is a virtual tour; 13) there is a mission statement; 14) awards are noted; 15) there is room information; 16) there is a FAQ (frequently asked questions) section; 17) there are hyperlinks to other relevant sites; 18) the site is able to tailor itself to different users; 19) the site enables two-way communication.

METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the marketing related aspects of luxury lodge websites in Mpumalanga, South Africa. In order to achieve the primary objective of this study, the following secondary objectives have been formulated:

- i) Quantitatively rate the websites of luxury lodges located in Mpumalanga, South Africa based upon the three predetermined criteria.
- ii) Qualitatively analyse and report on the websites of luxury lodges located in Mpumalanga, South Africa based upon the predetermined criteria.
- iii) Provide recommendations to improve the web marketing efforts of luxury lodges located in Mpumalanga, South Africa.

Rationale for the research

There are many reasons to evaluate the websites of luxury lodges. The costs associated with website maintenance and redesign need to be weighed against the return on investment that the site brings. Understanding the site would allow an evaluation of the impact of specials, say, or of an online booking facility. Understanding the technical aspects of the website can also help to make it more efficient.

Research design

The target population of the study is all Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) four- and five-star lodges with websites located in Mpumalanga. The sampling frame consisted of 40 luxury lodges. Systematic sampling was used to obtain a sample of 20

Table 1. Luxury lodge websites used in the study.

Summerfields	www.summerfields.co.za
Stonecutters	www.stonecutters.co.za
Sabi Sabi	www.sabisabi.com
Mazwita	www.mazwita.co.za
Matibidi	www.matibidi.co.za
Maqueda	www.vdnest.com/maquedaB/
Malapo	www.malapo.co.za
Leopard hills	www.leopardhills.com
Lapeng	www.lapenglodge.co.za
Manyatta	www.kwamadwala.net/manyatta-rock-camp
Kloppenheim	www.kloppenheim.co.za
Kshani	www.kshani.co.za
Jock Safari Lodge	www.jocksafarilodge.com
Jatinga	www.jatinga.co.za/go/home
Iketla	www.iketla.com
Lukimbi	www.lukimbi.com
Halula	www.aaoperators.co.za/accommodation14_368_hulala-lakeside-lodge
Hannah Lodge	www.hannahlodge.co.za
Grand Kruger Lodge	www.grandkrugerlodge.co.za
Isiyala	www.isiyala.co.za

Table 2. Lodges taking part in the study.

Star grading	Frequency	Percentage (%)
TGCSA four-star lodges	12	60
TGCSA five-star lodges	8	40

lodge websites. The concurrent mixed method approach was used in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently, and in which qualitative data leads the analysis and reporting. Quantitative measures use a five-point Likert scale, where 1 is 'poor' and 5 is 'excellent'. For the qualitative component, researchers commented on each criterion in relation to theoretical models of website attributes. The criteria from the theoretical models were grouped into categories. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using the Morse and Field (1996) approach. The lodges included in the study are listed in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All of the lodges in the sample were rated according to the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa as either a four- or a five-star lodge (Table 2). Three tables give the results in four categories:

- Criteria that are present in half or more of the websites evaluated with an overall mean score of 3.00 or more.
- Criteria that are present in less than half of the websites evaluated with an overall mean score of 3.00 or more.
- Criteria that are present in half or more of the websites

evaluated with an overall mean score of less than 3.00.

- Criteria that are present in less than half of the websites evaluated with an overall mean scores of less than 3.00.

An overall mean score of 3.00 or more indicates a favourable evaluation of the criterion, whilst a score of less than 3.00 indicates a less favourable evaluation.

The website's attractiveness

In this category, there were no factors within the category of 'aspects that are present in less than half of the websites evaluated with an overall mean score of less than 3.00 (Table 3). The websites generally were found to be attractive according to the criteria used: the overall mean score for attractiveness factors was above 4 (out of a possible 5). Multimedia is becoming one of key areas of technological development. Tourism sites need photos and graphics in order to provide a tangible sense of place (Buhalis and Law, 2008). However, few websites made use of multimedia. According to McCullough (2001),

Table 3. The attractiveness of websites.

Category	Subcategory	Number and percentage of websites where the factor is present (%)	Mean score (where 1 is 'poor' and 5 is 'excellent')	Standard deviation
Half or more with an overall mean score of 3.00 or more.	Text clear and reliable	20 (100)	4.15	0.933
	Hyperlinks easy to read	19 (95)	4.58	0.692
	Photos and images are good quality	18 (90)	4.44	0.784
	Effective use of space on webpage	17 (85)	4.18	0.883
	Pictures and images reinforce text	19 (95)	4.42	1.017
	Sufficient contrast between background and text	19 (95)	4.53	0.905
	Background effective and appealing	17 (85)	4.29	0.985
	Use of colour improves visual appearance	15 (75)	4.07	0.884
	Simple and appropriate URL/domain name	17 (85)	4.12	0.781
	Degree to which the site is linked to other sites	12 (60)	3.83	0.937
Less than half with an overall mean score of 3.00 or more.	Good multimedia interaction	2 (10)	5	0.000
	Date given on which site last updated	1 (5)	3.00	0.000
	Site updated recently	9 (45)	3.56	1.014
	Pages clean and uncluttered	1 (5)	4.00	0.000

multimedia is characterized by a combination of text, language and images on the Internet. Luxury lodges need to make use of the power of multimedia, since the market might be seen as a 'me-too' market in which potential customers will be swayed by imagery rather than by any inherent need for the product. Also, information on lodging operations changes frequently and so the contents of lodge websites should be updated frequently, especially as current information stimulates guests' interest (Ham, 2005). Only 1 website indicated the date on which its information had been updated. However, it was clear that 9 websites had been updated in the recent past (during the year in which the study was conducted). This was inferred through things such as Valentine's Day promotions or the dates given on tariff lists. Although the degree to which

websites were linked to other sites was satisfactory, there could be more links to the websites of local tourism bureaus, for example. As for whether pages were 'clean and uncluttered', only 1 website was clean and uncluttered. The rest were cluttered and one got the impression that as much information as possible was placed on the first page to showcase everything the lodge had to offer. This gave a disorderly, unprofessional impression. Ultimately there is very little differentiation among the 20 sampled websites when it came to attractiveness.

It is here that luxury lodges have the opportunity to make their offering distinct: they could use more multimedia, provide up-to-date information, and generally have a clear, uncluttered website. All of this will sway prospective clients – what Kline et al. (2004) refer to as 'site attractiveness'.

They show that a website should not replicate a 'print' brochure online, but be an interactive display of what an establishment offers. The website should entice the user – not turn him or her away. If the website is unattractive, then potential clients will feel that the lodge itself is not appealing.

Information given on the website

In this category, there were aspects within the category of 'aspects that are present in less than half of the websites evaluated with an overall mean score of less than 3.00 (Table 4). Although the mean scores of the aspects within this category of general travel information are below 4; it is evident from the standard deviation that the

Table 4. Information given on the website.

Category	Subcategory	Number and percentage of websites where the factor is present (%)	Mean overall score (where 1 is 'poor' and 5 is 'excellent')	Standard deviation
Half or more with an overall mean score of 3.00 or more.	Pricing information	17 (85)	4.24	0.903
Less than half with an overall mean score of 3.00 or more.	Links to activities and attractions in the area	1 (5)	4.00	0.000
Half or more with an overall mean score of less than 3.00.	Attractions	11 (55)	2.36	1.502
	Directions	18 (85)	2.82	0.636
	Corporate information	14 (70)	2.86	1.027
	Meeting planning	14 (70)	2.57	1.399
	Added value for meeting planners	11 (55)	2.64	0.924
	Local activities and events listed on the site	11 (55)	2.82	1.079
	Shopping areas	1 (5)	1.00	0.000
Less than half with an overall mean scores of less than 3.00.	Restaurants	2 (10)	1.00	0.000
	Transportation	6 (35)	2.17	1.472
	Embassy/consulate information	0	-	-

aspects within the general travel information category vary greatly. Several websites provide directions as well as pricing information – and, to a lesser extent, information about attractions in the region, information for corporations, meeting planners, as well as information about local activities and events. Only 1 website referred to shopping areas in the region; 2 referred to restaurants (other than their own) in the area; 6 provided information on transportation to and from the lodge; and 1 gave links to local activities and attractions. The websites varied greatly in the information they provided: some provided comprehensive information in almost all of the criteria that were measured; others provided little information. It needs to be borne in mind in this regard that travellers seek extensive general

travel information on a destination's website (Hamer and Connor, 2004).

Marketing effectiveness

In this category, there were no items in the categories of aspects that are present in less than half of the websites evaluated with an overall mean score of less than 3.00; aspects that are present in half or more of the websites evaluated with an overall mean score of less than 3.00 (Table 5). Pictures on websites are an important part of the destination's image and are visual cues about this (Govers and Go, 2005). Several websites had pictures of the accommodation on offer. However, on 2 websites it appeared that the

pictures were not taken by professional photographers. Such pictures are detrimental, as they do not match the image of a luxury lodge – irrespective of how appealing the lodge is in reality. It seemed that very few of the lodges studied actually had a unique story to tell. Also, since the lodges in this study cater mostly for international tourists, and since only 3% of the population of South Africa have an average monthly income of R25 520 (SAARF, 2009), the vast majority of South African citizens could not afford to visit these lodges. It would therefore make sense for the lodges in this study to allow for online bookings. However, only 20% of the websites allowed tourists to make bookings online. On the remaining 80% of the websites, the potential client could fill in an inquiry form to

Table 5. The marketing effectiveness of websites.

Category	Subcategory	Number and percentage of websites where the factor is present (%)	Mean overall score (where 1 is 'poor' and 5 is 'excellent')	Standard deviation
Half or more with an overall mean score of 3.00 or more	Pictures of establishment available	17 (85)	4.24	0.903
	Guestroom pictures available	18 (90)	4.06	0.938
	Logo reflected on the website	16 (80)	4.56	0.629
	Special promotions addressed	15 (75)	4.13	1.060
	Room information	19 (95)	4.16	0.958
	Text describes uniqueness of the establishment	19 (50)	3.80	1.751
	Special target markets addressed	11 (55)	3.45	1.036
Less than half with an overall mean score of 3.00 or more	Hyperlinks to sponsors/ advertisements present	5 (25)	4	1.732
	Text describes owners or managers	5 (25)	3.20	1.304
	Ability to make reservations online	4 (20)	5	0.500
	Calendar of events	4 (20)	3.25	0.500
	Testimonials available	7 (35)	3.71	1.113
	Virtual tour available	3 (15)	4.67	0.577
	Awards information available	6 (30)	4.5	0.548

determine availability of accommodation – and then be contacted by the lodge. The Internet allows people to interact with destinations using 'three-dimensional' virtual tours (Cho et al., 2002). The experience can be quite lifelike and can communicate a sense of what the destination is like. It is therefore worrying that only 3 of the 20 websites had a virtual tour – especially since the target-market is mostly overseas.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The information-intensive nature of the tourism industry, suggests a significant role for the internet and web technology in the marketing of destinations. The purpose of this study was to explore the marketing related aspects of the websites of luxury lodges in South Africa, based

on a set of established criteria. The rationale for using luxury lodges is that this type of accommodation has the highest economic impact as it is the most expensive accommodation type and the per capita per diem spend of international tourists are typically higher. These lodges are in general too expensive for the use of South African nationals. As indicated in the research question, the focus was on the marketing related aspects and attractiveness of the websites as a contributor to the marketing of these destinations. From the results of the study, the following observations are made coupled with a number of recommendations:

1) There is little differentiation between the sampled websites in terms of 'look and feel' of the sites. It is suggested that marketers of luxury lodges look at the websites of their competitors

and focus on including visual and other elements that set their websites apart from those of competitors.

2) These luxury lodge websites lack originality and uniqueness. With this, it is argued that in all these websites, there is a single African themed approach – merely stereotyping of what is considered the African experience, instead of focusing on a unique aspect within the African experience. Marketers of luxury lodges should consider moving away from the stereotyped approach to an African experience and re-invent the experience as it were.

3) As tourists visiting these websites are by implication looking for as much information as possible about a destination to make an accommodation decision, these websites could make considerably better use to integrate social media (Web 2.0) strategies to further differentiate

them.

4) A key challenge for these websites is the balance to provide enough information but not clutter the websites with irrelevant information. Hence, the importance of providing visual information to prospective tourists.

5) It was interesting to note that, there were barely noticeable differences between four and five star lodges on the websites. This could be linked to the argument of a stereotyped African experience, without niche uniqueness within this context. Marketers of five star lodges should focus on conveying to their target market what sets them apart from four star lodges in terms of experience, services and physical amenities.

A limitation of the study is that tourists' opinions on the effectiveness of the websites and the level of their satisfaction of what was presented on the websites were not included. Future studies may therefore conduct tourist surveys since destination websites could be regarded as competitive if it can attract and satisfy potential tourists. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that this study was designed to illustrate the relative competitiveness of selected luxury lodge websites based on its marketing related aspects.

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