
The audience of a Destination Organization E-newsletter: some marketing comments

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The major focus in e-newsletter management is on gathering information. Little has been done to segment e-audiences and to have a marketing approach to e-newsletters.

Nonetheless, destination managers have to better know who their web audience is if they want to convince web viewers to become real tourists. At the same time, although local residents are not assumed to be regular users of destination web sites, they represent a significant part of their audience.

Since tourists and residents differentially consider and process news about recreational activities and events in the tourist area, this research offers a basis for examining the relevance of a segmented e-newsletter for a local Destination Organization.

Introduction

Destination tourism academics and managers scrutinize the Internet. Two main streams of research can be distinguished. The first considers tourist requests about website contents (Beldona and Cai 2006; McLemore and Mitchell 2001; Larson and Ankomah, 2004). The second tries to determine web sites' effectiveness (Stockdale and Borovicka 2007; Park and Gretzel 2007; Kaplanidou and Veogrt 2006).

Although pull-communication Internet strategies, i.e. web sites, are largely investigated, little interest has been put on Internet push-communication techniques. E-newsletters and e-mails, however, are interesting push promotion tools for Destination Organizations. Specifically, newsletters have great marketing potentials. In fact, they are expected by web-viewers who have signed up to receive information regularly. Newsletters are not considered unsolicited commercial electronic messages (i.e. spam). For managers, they represent an opportunity to send requested and controlled information to already engaged tourist prospects.

To catalogue further their marketing virtues, one must remember that newsletters are easy-to-use, low-priced, and lively. In fact, whereas the website proposes static and fixed information, the newsletter is a dynamic and flexible apparatus for the institutional website. Newsletters allow delivering news about the country's everyday life on an updated basis, for instance when an unanticipated event is occurring. Moreover, since webmaster or computer sciences skills (i.e. computerization costs) are not required today for sending electronic messages to mailing lists, newsletters are very simple and useful tools for Destination Organizations' marketing managers.

Yet, the contents of tourist e-newsletters are rarely adapted to specific audiences. This lack of customization results from a pragmatic difficulty. In fact, according to managers, the major focus in e-newsletter management is to gather information. The selection and fitting of contents remain secondary. Although communications specialists have not yet called for e-audience

segmentation and for a marketing approach to e-newsletters, results show it is essential to investigate this alternative further..

Investigating the audience of a Destination e-newsletter

As preliminary research, this study investigated the audience of a Destination Organization newsletter. The tourist board concerned is the "Département des Côtes d'Armor", a French country. This Destination Organization sends monthly newsletters to inform potential clients about recreational activities and events.

Method

Questions dealt with newsletter reading behaviors, words spontaneously associated ('relaxation', 'loss of time', 'entertainment', 'waste', 'holidays', 'spamming', 'dreaming', 'office', 'other'), impact on the desire to visit the tourist area, impact on the number of website viewings, the confirmation of their desire of being listed in the e-newsletter mailing list, and website requests. The questionnaire ended with the traditional demographics questions about origin, occupation, age, and gender. Additionally, respondents were asked if their occupation relates to the tourism sector. This latter question seeks to identify the ratio of tourism professionals among the whole audience and to explore potential benchmarking behaviors.

Sample

All the newsletter-list members (11743 email addresses in May 2007) were asked to reply to a web survey. The survey was designed following advice on designing a successful tourism web-based survey (Tierney, 2000). After a second e-mail solicitation, the total sample gathered 770 respondents, which represents a satisfactory reply rate of 6.56%.

Results: A triple audience for tourist Destination e-newsletters

Results presented here focus on describing the audience's profile (result 1) and on comparing tourists' and local residents' responses (result 2). Some details about professionals' characteristics are also compiled (result 3).

The e-tourist audience: 'diligent' and 'dilettante'

To better fit the newsletter contents to the e-tourist audience, we propose distinguishing the audience regarding their representations of the newsletter. Since the words spontaneously associated refer to the ideas of pleasure and leisure, with positive items checked off like 'relaxation', 'entertainment', 'holidays',

‘dreaming’, or conversely to negative ones like ‘loss of time’, ‘waste’, ‘spamming’, etc., we can assume there is a radical opposition about the ideal newsletter contents and particularly about the way to stop list membership.

A typological analysis, based on the Ward method, allowed us to distinguish two groups among respondents (valid sample for this analysis is $n=630$, only on tourist audience). The first group, the “dilettante e-tourist” (41.1%), associates the newsletter with ‘loss of time’ ($\text{Chi}^2=13.079$, $P<0.01$), ‘spamming’ ($\text{Chi}^2=3.148$, $P<0.1$), and ‘office’ ($\text{Chi}^2=6.035$, $P<0.05$). Since they declare they are not working in the tourism sector, we can posit that the association with the office is due to the fact that they receive the newsletter at work. They must have given their office e-address when they subscribed to the newsletter list. By consequence, this newsletter which is not linked to their job appears synonymous of loss of time and spam, especially if received during occupation time.

In contrast, the second group, the “diligent e-tourist” (58.9%) associates the newsletter with ‘relaxation’ ($\text{Chi}^2=515.790$, $P<0.01$), ‘leisure’ ($\text{Chi}^2=17.241$, $P<0.01$), and ‘dreaming’ ($\text{Chi}^2=32.825$, $P<0.01$).

The “dilettante” group is characterized by the fact that they read the newsletter less thoroughly than the “diligent” group ($\text{Chi}^2=29.930$, $P<0.01$). They score the newsletter lower ($\text{Chi}^2=19.576$, $P<0.01$) and declare little desire to discover the destination ($\text{Chi}^2=19.631$, $P<0.01$). Their evaluation of the newsletter and of its impact on their intention to visit the tourist region appears less positive, and they are also less positive regarding the impact of the newsletter on the website attendance ($\text{Chi}^2=13.898$, $P<0.01$). This generally bad evaluation of the newsletter is congruent with a last result: they would less often confirm their membership to the list if they were asked to do so ($\text{Chi}^2=38.813$, $P<0.01$).

The unexpected: A resident audience

85% of the respondents are national or international tourists and the other 15% are local residents. This local audience ($n=74$) lives within the administrative area of the “Côtes d’Armor” region, which implies a trip of at most one hour to any event in the tourist area.

As for the preceding analysis, we paid attention to the words associated with the newsletter. As expected, the resident group differs from tourists regarding the lack of association with the ideas of ‘dreaming’ and ‘holiday’. Since they live in the region, they do not believe they are going away to discover an idyllic country. In general, they appear more dubious about the newsletter. For instance, they have doubts about the newsletter’s potential as a visiting catalyst. And they do not read it fully. However, they appreciate receiving it. They link it to ideas of ‘leisure’, ‘relaxation’. They declare a strong willingness to confirm their subscription to the newsletter list. And they view the website more frequently than tourists do.

The benchmarking audience: other Destination Marketing professionals

Results show that 8.6% ($n=66$) of the respondents declared they work in the tourism sector. Among them, 48.5% are professionals living within the resident area and 51.5% are living beyond. They declare more that they read the newsletter approximately and that

they do not view the website frequently. They also appear more critical since they score the newsletter lower.

Discussion: How to manage the three audiences of e-newsletter?

Although professionals are classified as an autonomous segment, results show that destination organizations’ e-newsletters have a triple audience. From a marketing point of view, only two segments remain since they should be actively targeted. Not surprisingly, tourists represent the key part of the audience. The residual fraction, quantitatively modest in comparison but qualitatively significant, corresponds to local residents.

The audience of the destination newsletter: two targetable audiences and a piggy-back one

The diversity of e-newsletter audiences should be addressed by Destination Organization managers. Following a marketing approach, the first step consists in identifying and segmenting current e-list members. For instance, through semi-automatic investigations of email domains and Internet providers, e-attendance could be distinguished according to geographic origin. This segmentation between tourists and local residents should prove useful. Based on the results, some recommendations are proposed here.

Segmenting and marketing for the tourist audience regarding their attitude to the newsletter

The results suggest a dual tourist audience should be considered. One part, the “diligent”, is positive and behaves in an expected way regarding the newsletter. They read it closely. They consider it as an effective promoting tool for the region. On the contrary, the “dilettante” part has a negative stance about the newsletter.

Considering perception and attitude regarding destination newsletter, the tourist e-audience is very heterogeneous. Some are fond of this promotion tool and appreciate receiving it. Others consider it commercial pressuring and spamming. This suggests that when dealing with their e-newsletter list, destination managers should begin by a filter stage. This preliminary segmentation step should allow identifying those who are less positive and why. For instance, we can posit that the ‘dilettante’ subscribed during a precise and past vacation planning. This subscription during a particular Vacation Planning Process (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006) can explain their lack of interest for the newsletter today.

At a managerial level, this attitudinal segmentation serves to adapt the contents and the frequency of the newsletter. No change should be made for the “diligent” group. Conversely, for the “dilettante”, contents should be modified and the frequency reduced by Destination Organizations wanting to preserve their non-profit status and credibility.

To avoid the associations with ‘spam’, ‘office’, and ‘loss of time’, a simple and general recommendation should be to request a personal e-mail address in subscriptions to the newsletter list.

The resident audience: the implementation of an exclusive newsletter

Regarding the resident audience, two main features appear. The first feature is the significance of residents within the Destination

Organization's e-audience. Obeying to Kotler and his colleagues' recommendations about place management (Kotler, Haider and Rein, 1993), this result should trigger the implementation of a "people (i.e. resident) marketing policy". The second feature is that residents have a critical view of the newsletter but simultaneously express that they are fond of this informational tool. Even if it is not satisfactory, the newsletter is appreciated. This ambiguous result suggests destination managers should dedicate a special version of the newsletter to this resident audience. Following the principle of a "people (i.e. resident) marketing policy", a preliminary step should be to identify the specific contents expected by residents. Results would orientate the contents of this ideal resident newsletter.

The professional audience: beware of this piggy-back audience

Managers should pay attention to and deal delicately with the professionals. Actually, when communicating through newsletters, Destination Organizations have to bear in mind that they are instantly giving precious information about their marketing action and strategy. Like Big Brother hidden in the Trojan horse email-list, professionals from other destinations whether direct or indirect competitors use e-newsletters as an awareness tool.

More precisely, newsletter functions as a double information source about local events for professionals living in the resident area (53.3%). It is a simple way to be informed of events and leisure products currently proposed and to be well-aware of the way they are presented to final consumers. And, for the more-distant professionals, 46.5%, the e-newsletter is a relevant and easily used benchmarking tool. First, in the particular context of the "Côtes d'Armor" website, the referencing performance is good and worth copying. Actually, the website link appears second on the Google search engine. Second and in a more general context, it is a way to be informed about the new events and recreation proposed to attract tourists by closer and distant Destination competitors. Moreover, it provides newly invented techniques to be copied by other Destination Organizations to reach their own web-viewers.

To conclude, the audience of professionals represents potential errors and bias when evaluating performance scores of Customer Relationship Marketing actions (because of an overestimation of the figures for electronic audience). This audience is also an intrusion of competitors directly at the heart of Destination marketing actions. Another option would be to take advantage of their presence to create some buzz when launching new proposals that could not be imitated.

Conclusion

Tourist organizations use the web to convince web viewers to become real tourists. Although newsletters are sent to residents as well as to tourists, there is usually no difference in their contents. There is a single discourse, dispatched on the same media-support, and sent at the same time, either to tourists or residents. We argue that marketing attention should be paid in terms of contents, tone, and discourse level of destination e-newsletters.

A major challenge for communicators is to reach target audiences with content relevant to them. The practical consequences of this investigation are that e-newsletters should be customized. In particular, Destination Organizations have to be persuaded of the relevance of adapting their newsletter to the resident and the

tourist segments. Newsletters are very interesting push-information electronic techniques in nature, but it is decisive to capitalize on these inherent virtues by employing a more refined marketing approach.

Obviously, tourists and residents differ in how they consider and process news and previews. For tourists, referring to the destination attractiveness theory, newsletters should provide some appealing rationales for long-term intentions to visit the tourist area and some stop-delaying motives for short-term visits. For residents, referring to local management and leisure development concepts, the reports and previews highlighted in the newsletter should be consistent and practical news about leisure facilities and events should be available.

Therefore, and in order to reply to the general need to tailor websites' promotion tools to targeted audiences (Poria and Gvili, 2006), Destination Organizations have to think about the relevance of adapting their newsletter to resident and tourist audiences.

Some indications for differentiating contents were provided thanks to the survey administrated here in the context of a French Destination Organization. But, since they dealt with only one destination case, further investigations and tests should confirm these results and especially the relevance of the typology of a tree-fold audience for tourist electronic communication tools.

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