
CONTENT MARKETING DECISION APPLICATION FOR RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: CASE STUDY OF 'JLANKOS SODYBA'

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Abstract

The paper presents theoretical and practical aspects of content marketing decision application for rural tourism development using a case of a farmstead 'Jlankos sodyba'. The first part of the article deals with theoretical insights into content marketing ability to stimulate rural tourism development. Results of literature review reveal that there are connections between elements of the content marketing and rural tourism development, which means that the use of content marketing can be economically valuable for the wider range of the farmsteads. The second part of the paper focuses on the case analysis of the farmstead 'Jlankos sodyba'. In order to explore how the application of content marketing decisions can impact rural tourism development, an experiment of content marketing usage in search advertisement of selected farmstead was carried out. Separate content marketing elements were involved in search advertisement and changes of advertisement effect upon the customers were measured. The given results show that content marketing elements can improve the chosen advertisement effect upon the customers. This leads to presumption that the wider use of content marketing can improve not only the effect of separate marketing tool, but also can contribute to the development of rural tourism. The paper concludes with findings and discussion; limitations and future research possibilities are given as well.

Key words: rural tourism, content marketing, search advertisement.

Introduction

Rural tourism is a growing and evolving process related to the natural, cultural, social and economic resources for business development. In Lithuania as well as in many other fast developing countries, tourism is becoming a very significant and rapidly growing industry (Gargasas & Veėerskas, 2013; Grigalūnaitė & Pilelienė, 2014). The analysis of rural tourism reveals advantages of this activity: it is a valuable tool for the sustainable development of rural areas and it makes a significant contribution to the rural economy and to the wider tourism (Pena *et al.*, 2014; Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012; Phillips *et al.*, 2011). For this reason, scientific research and development of the valuable methodologies become more and more important in the field of rural tourism development.

One of the main problems for rural farmstead owners is the high level of competition and lack of effective marketing programs. With the increasing competition among the rural tourism destinations, successful marketing actions become very important for the specific rural destinations in order to profitably operate in the market. Consequently, tourism business operators should take advantage of the increasing public interest in rural tourism and its environment. With the aim of attracting potential users and increasing their loyalty, the owners of rural tourism farmsteads should form a positive image of their business in the market (Ramanauskienė & Narkus, 2009). The company's ability to utilize proper marketing tools through the virtual space is extremely important (Išoraitė, 2013; Rose, 2014).

Aggregated results from different studies provide evidence that digital marketing has a great impact on online and offline sales (Khraim, 2015). Therefore, the business and scientific community has begun to discuss about the importance of the content and its quality (Gagnon, 2014; Hanafizadeh & Yarmohammadi, 2015). P. Hanafizadeh & M. Yarmohammadi (2015) mention that content is the origin of communications. Discussions about the content marketing benefits and application to business show the importance of knowing how the content quality affects consumers in different marketing channels and how it can be used for rural tourism development.

Therefore, the scientific problem of this research has been formulated as follows: how the application of content marketing decision can impact rural tourism development. Accordingly, the object of the research is application of content marketing decision impact on the rural tourism development. The aim is to reveal the impact of content marketing decision application on the rural tourism development.

To achieve the aim of the article, the analysis and synthesis of scientific literature have been used. In order to explore the impact of content marketing decision application on the rural tourism development, one-shot experiment has been accomplished and quantitative analysis is given as well.

Materials and Methods

According to A. B. Radac *et al.* (2012), economic benefits from rural tourism can take such forms as employment, increased spending in the community, economic diversification, farmers markets and

infrastructure. Rural tourism is an increasingly important diversification activity for the progress of rural destinations (Brandth & Haugen, 2011). Rural tourism is one of the most fast growing economic segments that deals with challenges and opportunities of global competitive market (Gargasas & Večerskas, 2013; Snieška, Barkauskienė, & Barkauskas, 2014).

However, Lithuanian Department of Statistics data (2016) shows that rural tourism development has not been that intense in recent years and the number of farmsteads has decreased by 1,1 percent. On the other hand, a growing number of guests in rural tourism farmsteads can be clearly seen (Snieška, Barkauskienė, & Barkauskas, 2014). Therefore, the growing consumer interest leads to increasing competition for consumer attention among the farmsteads. Competition fosters companies to think about their marketing activities and to find ways to reach the potential customers. One of the keys of successful tourism business is a high-quality communication with customers. Moreover, it is a key for new opportunities (Radac *et al.*, 2013) as well. Over the years, the communication boundaries and spaces are expanding. Therefore, more and more scientists (Tsekouropoulos *et al.*, 2012; Keramati, Samadi, & Nazari-Shirkouhi, 2013; Andreopoulou *et al.*, 2014) and entrepreneurs pay attention to communication on the Internet. Moreover, according to researchers (Ionel, 2013; Jha, 2012), tourism marketing and efficient advertising of tourism across the region and private firms is one of the main factors of rural tourism development.

The importance of Internet in the tourism industry has increased dramatically in the past decade. Also for rural tourism, virtual space offers huge opportunities for progress and benefit, and new prospects exist for economic growth, better service delivery, social and cultural advances (Tsekouropoulos *et al.*, 2012; Andreopoulou *et al.*, 2014). Internet provides various advantages and benefits by offering a rich, dynamic environment for the exchange of information and resources. For achieving potential benefits such as cost reduction, improved quality of services and access to technological expertise, information technology is a favourable option for many enterprises, including rural tourism (Keramati, Samadi, & Nazari-Shirkouh, 2013). Customers and potential clients own a leading role in customer-oriented marketing philosophy, and the Internet can fulfil this desideratum with the aid of the technology it uses (Vasilescu & Negrut, 2009). Many tourism enterprises make use of online marketing worldwide as the Internet has been recognized as the most powerful marketing tool. Internet has been extremely important for the promotion and increase in sales of the enterprises (Tsekouropoulos *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, we believe that deeper understanding of online marketing and better application can contribute

to the development of rural tourism and, namely, farmsteads.

Researchers (Pena *et al.*, 2014; Tsekouropoulos *et al.*, 2012) have admitted that the Internet has much to offer to rural tourism companies in terms of promoting their respective service offers, yet, although the online medium enables firms to convey large volumes of information, the user's ability to process that information is limited. This limitation can trigger information overload among users which, in turn, can lead to poor decision-making processes. The efficiency of the promotion activities of rural tourism services can be achieved by using information which is valuable for customers. Thus, when firms use the Internet as a means of promoting their offer, it is vital that they select only the most relevant information pertinent to each client group they wish to reach with their message (Miu, 2012; Pena *et al.*, 2014).

Researchers (Rowley, 2008; Wulf, Schillewaert & Muylle, 2006) concentrate on the content quality as one of the factors determining the attractiveness of virtual information to the consumer that afterwards has influence on consumer confidence, satisfaction and loyalty. Unique and valuable content is becoming a primary goal for companies (Gagnon, 2014; Rose, 2014) that seek to attract consumers. However, a website does not serve only as an informative tool. Many features and capabilities of the website allow a business to actually market a product, and effectively so, as it is able to target and draw customers through expressions unique to the destination product (Srikanth & Liping, 2006). The content of the tourism destination websites and other virtual products is particularly important, because it directly influences the perceived image of the destination and creates a virtual experience for the customer (Andreopoulou *et al.*, 2014). Content quality of tourism enterprise websites is becoming a critical issue for effective online marketing.

Due to the increasing importance of content, new marketing trends appear. One of the most significant among them is content marketing. Authors of this paper believe that content quality takes place of the growing importance in the virtual space, and becomes a weapon helping to earn the sympathy of consumers. As the content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action (Content Marketing Institute, 2015).

The dialogue between the two parties – the enterprise that offers a service and its customers – represents a vitally important element of relationship marketing which helps to build customer loyalty (Andreopoulou *et al.*, 2014). Although the quality of

information and valuable content is one of the ways to establish a dialogue with the consumer, one can see, that content marketing has an interface with other types of marketing, namely, relationship marketing. The creation of content-based marketing program is more than the creation of virtual promotional advertisement (Gagnon, 2014; Chasser & Wolfe, 2010). Development of valuable content should play an important role in marketing programs and their planning process.

Marketing of rural tourism should be based on principles of mutuality, trust and empathy. It would also involve developing a culture of mutual value sensing, nurturing and process-oriented which is humane and holistic and not excessively 'commercial' outcome focused (Jha, 2012). Creation of the advertising message based on the quality content is the new way of branding. And, as H. Chen & S.H. Mathew (2014) marked, that building a strong brand name has become a critical marketing activity for tourism businesses. A strong brand can help firms in attracting, obtaining, and retaining their customers.

Authors (Ružkevičius & Guseva, 2006; Chasser & Wolfe, 2010; Gagnon, 2014; Abel, 2014; Schuinanii, 2014) mention several features of quality content. These features can be perceived as single content marketing elements. Seven characteristics that should be included in high-quality content are listed below:

- Relevance
- Informativeness
- Reliability
- Value
- Uniqueness
- Emotions
- Intelligence.

Authors of this paper hold the opinion, that the content-based marketing elements are influenced not only by user's perspective, business type, but also by the technology used. Information can be provided for customers in many different feeds, and this variety complicates work of marketing professionals or owners of farmsteads, who intend to use content marketing. As R. Vasilescu & C. Negrut (2009) mentioned, Internet users are one click away from numerous Web pages and software applications which facilitate communication, information and idea exchange. When a site is built, its owner fall prey to the trap of Internet coverage: they believe that the Internet is so extensive that visitors will access the site anyway. This is true, but the visibility of the website is difficult to obtain when search engines index is approximately one billion Web pages. As a result of this, some farmsteads use search advertisement in order to get more visitors for their websites. We believe that content marketing can improve the effect of various online advertising channels and contribute to

the development of rural tourism. Therefore, the next part of this paper deals with the experiment in order to explore how the application of content marketing decisions affects search advertisement effect using the case of a particular farmstead.

Results and Discussion

Experimental designs are the quantitative research designs most closely associated with an action or applied research. An experiment involves the creation of a contrived situation in order to get information about the effect of an independent variable (X) on a dependent variable (Q1). The research will be carried out on the pre-experimental research bases. With this type of experimental project, we aim to check the impact of the independent variable on dependent variable, but not seeking to find out whether there are other secondary factors influencing the outcome.

A farmstead 'Īlankos sodyba' which is located in Lithuania was chosen to perform the pre-experimental research. This farmstead started its business in 1998. The farm stay 'Īlankos sodyba' offers various services and attractions for the customers: water entertainments, a bar, a private beach, hiking tours, ceramic workshops, a ballroom etc. The company also offers services for private celebrations or business meetings. The main target group - people who are looking for a quiet holiday place. Up till now, about 90% of advertising budget are allocated to the online marketing. The farm stay 'Īlankos sodyba' uses communication in social networks, publications in various directories, but search advertisement is considered as the most important marketing tool. Company has used Google AdWords advertising constantly from 2013. However, this type of advertising is very popular in rural tourism sector, and the competition for user clicks is huge. Therefore, the owners of the farmstead are still looking for new ways to improve the advertisement effect upon the customers.

The pre-experimental research was conducted in the spring of 2015 and lasted a month. The spring is quite an intensive period for the summer holidays to plan. During the experiment, Click-through rate (CTR) was measured by using different content marketing elements (X) in a text Ad. CTR is an indicator of Internet user interest on a particular Google AdWords text Ad. Change of CTR (Q1) was measured by comparing previous CTR statistics with the data obtained during the investigation. We aimed to find out the impact of separate content marketing elements on an advertisement. When analyzing the statistics of the past, it was noticed that Google AdWords natural click-through rate (CTR) changes by 10%, so during the experiment CTR change is considered statistically significant only in the case if a change is greater than 10%. In order to check the

validity of the results obtained, the experiment was repeated twice in the same order. Between the first and the second test there was a week-long break. For application of content marketing decision, we selected one Ad group 'Holiday in the countryside' which includes only exact match keywords. In order to get more objective results, no other changes were made during the experiment in the selected Ad group.

Table 1 contains Ad group statistics in both trials and overall results. Although the main focus is on the X (element) impact on the Q1 (click-through rate), other extraneous factors such as cost-per-click (CPC) and the average Ad position (Av. Pos.) were taken into account as well. Actually, the following indicators may also be affected by X. This kind of analysis leads to the practical insights and opens new opportunities for research in the future, because both of the mentioned indicators show the quality of Google AdWords Ad.

Before the experiment, the Ad group 'Holiday in the countryside' had 10.88% CTR, one click cost about 0.22 € and Ad was shown on average 1.9 position. With regard to the effect of content marketing elements, we can see that not all elements made a positive impact on CTR. Four elements had positive, one negligible and two had a negative effect on CTR (see Table 1). The relevance and uniqueness can be distinguished as the most significant elements. Both of them increased CTR almost twice. Relevance of Ad and matching of the user's search query both are inseparable from Google AdWords policy. Therefore, improving the Ad text and connection with keywords has a significant effect on the advertisement impact. As it was mentioned earlier, online communication and advertisement are widely used in rural tourism enterprises. The logic and results of experiment clearly show that the uniqueness is taking an important place.

Table 1

Results of the experiment

Test 1						
Element (X)	Clicks	Impressions	CTR (Q1)	Change (%)	CPC (€)	Av. Pos.
Relevance	9	42	21.43	+ 96.96	0.3	1.4
Uniqueness	8	37	21.62	+ 98.71	0.26	1.4
Reliability	4	27	14.81	+ 36.12	0.21	2.4
Intelligence	4	38	10.53	-3.22	0.2	1.3
Emotions	2	49	4.08	-62.5	0.5	2.0
Value	1	26	3.85	-64.61	0.28	1.8
Informativeness	4	29	13.79	+ 26.75	0.21	1.7
Test 2						
Element (X)	Clicks	Impressions	CTR (Q1)	Change (%)	CPC (€)	Av. Pos.
Relevance	10	48	20.83	+ 91.45	0.29	1.4
Uniqueness	8	41	19.51	+ 79.32	0.28	1.5
Reliability	5	31	16.13	+ 48.25	0.21	2.3
Intelligence	5	42	11.9	+ 9.38	0.2	1.3
Emotions	3	53	5.66	-47.98	0.42	1.9
Value	2	38	5.26	-51.65	0.29	2.9
Informativeness	5	37	13.21	+ 21.42	0.2	1.6
Overall results						
Element (X)	Clicks	Impressions	CTR (Q1)	Change (%)	CPC (€)	Av. Pos.
Relevance	19	90	21.11	+ 94.45	0.29	1.4
Uniqueness	16	78	20.21	+ 88.51	0.27	1.5
Reliability	9	58	15.52	+ 42.65	0.21	2.4
Intelligence	9	80	11.25	+ 0.34	0.2	1.3
Emotions	5	106	4.72	-56.62	0.46	2.0
Value	3	64	4.69	- 56.89	0.29	1.9
Informativeness	9	66	13.64	+ 25.37	0.21	1.7

During the experiment, all advertising positions (total of 11) were occupied. This means that competition for consumer attention is huge among farmsteads. So the use of uniqueness and exceptional features of farmstead gave positive results. The use of intelligence in the first attempt had a negative impact, in the second - positive, but the overall change has not exceeded 10%. Negligible impact could be explained by the popularity of intelligence usage. It could be assumed that advertisement is not standing out from competitors' ads. However, this element has the most positive effect on Ad position and CPC. As it may be seen in Table 1, emotions and value had a negative impact on all three indicators of Google AdWords quality.

Experimental data revealed that Ads with emotional and promotional information had the lowest CTR. This can be explained by the fact that consumers who use search engines expect high-quality, relevant and reliable information. Therefore, the advertisement should not distract them.

In terms of advertisement cost, only three elements reduce CPC, other four have a negative impact on it. The strongest influence on the price of advertisement had the use of emotions, which raised cost-per-click more than twice. Application of content marketing decision in search advertisement is not the cheapest solution for farmsteads that regularly have a strictly limited budget. The first reason is that more than half of content marketing elements had a negative influence on CPC. Another reason is the positive effect on CTR: a higher CTR leads to a bigger number of clicks, more clicks lead to increased advertisement costs.

Regarding the advertising position changes, it is noted that 4 of 7 elements have a positive effect on this. But looking at the overall results, it could be seen that a higher position not always leads to a higher CTR. Therefore, it can be assumed that content quality in advertisement is more significant than technical indicators of the advertisement.

Taking into account all the aforementioned, it could be stated that the research revealed that the application of content marketing decision has an effect on Google AdWords impact upon the customers and can be a great tool for the advertisement campaign, and even improvement of the content of website.

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Conclusions

1. Rural tourism is a valuable tool for the development of rural areas and it is becoming a significant and fast growing industry. With the increasing competition among rural tourism destinations, significance of successful marketing actions is rapidly growing. On the other hand, farmstead owners still lack effective marketing programs.
2. Many tourism enterprises make use of online marketing worldwide, since digital marketing has been recognized as the most powerful marketing tool. Digital marketing is one of the most popular frameworks to spread the message about an organization to the consumers. However, farmsteads are facing a huge competition in virtual space as well.
3. Marketing experts and scientists recognize the importance of quality content and information. Literature review has shown that high-quality content consists of seven separate elements: relevance, value, emotions, intelligence, informative once, reliability and uniqueness. Furthermore, theoretical analysis leads to an assumption that application of content marketing decision may positively affect the development of rural tourism.
4. The results of the experiment show that content marketing elements can improve the efficiency of the Ad. In order to increase Google AdWords impact upon the customer, farmsteads should use content which is relevant and unique. It is worth to note, that separate content marketing elements have an impact not only on the search advertisement effect expressed by CTR, but on other quality indicators as well.
5. Limitations of this study offer opportunities for further research. Keeping in mind that this research has focused on content marketing element influence on the effect of search advertisement, namely, in the farmstead case, for further development and wider practical application it is necessary to expand the field of research. It would be worth to carry out an experiment in the future by testing the influence of elements in different combinations in order to verify the reliability of the pre-experimental project results.

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