eLearning Courses on Tourism Destinations: Travel Agents’ Perceptions

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Executive summary

This report is based on the analysis of a global online survey conducted among travel agents in the spring of 2011. It explores the perception travel agents have of the eLearning training courses created ad-hoc for them by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). The research examines 1004 travel agent profiles worldwide.

Besides its academic relevance, being the first exploratory study in the field, current research has a significant tourism industry application, as marketing managers and responsible persons for trade partnerships within Tourism Boards are presented with the first research on travel agents’ evaluation of eLearning Training platforms.

DMO representatives can see the course topics that attract the biggest interest from travel agents, can get hints on the drawbacks of existing platforms, and can be made aware of factors that actually make travel agents participate in eLearning experiences.
Introduction

In the last two decades the world of tourism and hospitality has been deeply reorganized due to the development of new information and communication technologies (ICT) – not just in terms of how tourism products are being marketed, sold and purchased, destinations being promoted, hotels and airline companies being ranked online, but also in the way tourism and hospitality personnel is being trained. eLearning – which can be defined as “the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration” (CEC, 2001) – has been widely adopted by the tourism and hospitality industry as a means of increasing skills and knowledge guidance. According to ABTA – The Travel Association (2010), eLearning has been the fastest growing travel trade marketing medium in recent years.

Despite the number of traditional travel agencies having decreased significantly, their recommendations are still an important source of information for tourists in their decision-making process. Travel agents’ knowledge of the product, their experience, as well as the ability to sell the right destinations to the right people, and one-to-one relationship with clients, still represents their greatest competitive advantage. However, in order to consolidate their position in the market, travel agents have to upgrade their knowledge and skills constantly.

eLearning courses created by Destination Management Organizations

Destination Management Organizations worldwide have started to leverage on digital technologies not just to spread marketing messages to potential clients, but also to coordinate all the partners and industries involved in the production and delivery of the tourist activity/product as well as in their training activities. These online courses – started in 2006 – represent one of the Business-to-Business offers by DMOs. Such courses present an interesting opportunity for travel agents who are trying to find their identity and competitive advantage within the diverse context of eTourism.

69 national DMOs (see Fig.1; in 2009 they were 37) offer eLearning courses to trade partners who can then better serve clients/tourists, hence being better prepared to sell more and send more people to a given destination. A full list of courses can be found at www.elearning4tourism.com
While considering the content of Destination Management Organizations’ eLearning courses, most of them are represented in especially designed learning modules covering general information about the destination itself (including geographical position, demographics, languages spoken, etc.), history, culture and traditions, accommodation and transportation systems, formality issues, selling tips, as well as help in itinerary planning.

Moreover, the following media are used in the development of courses: rich flash animations, videos, interactive maps, and high-impact images. Most of the courses are easily navigated. At the end of the training activity, after passing an evaluation exam, travel agents receive a certificate of completion, which may then be displayed in the agency. The time needed to complete an online training ranges from 40 minutes to 30 hours, with an average of 4-5 hours. All the course developers have chosen self-study as a strategy of training delivery. As a result, courses have low interactivity and low (if any) assistance from the DMO side.

While previous studies (Cantoni et al, 2009; Kalbaska, forth.) present a comprehensive picture of the courses offered by national destinations, no data have so far been available on the point of view of travel agents. This research offers a first comprehensive outlook on it.
Sample

With the purpose of collecting data worldwide, the questionnaire was conducted online in order to reach as many travel agents as possible, independently from their knowledge and use of DMO eLearning courses. Indeed, this research was concerned both with the perceptions and interests of non-users, as well as with the opinions of eLearning users.

Approximately 60,000 professionals were invited to complete the questionnaire. Invitations were sent directly to databases of webatelier.net partners (World Association of Travel Agencies, Online Travel Training, PromAx Communication SA, IFITT: International Federation for IT in Travel and Tourism, IATA Training & Development Institute). Links to the survey were also made available on partners’ websites as well as on professional social networks. Ultimately, 1004 valid responses were collected and analyzed.

Methodology

Since the aim of this study is to get an overall picture of the interest and penetration level of DMO eLearning courses among travel agents worldwide, a quantitative research approach with the collection of primary data was chosen. A questionnaire was administrated online from April 10 to June 11, 2011. The survey included 34 questions structured in 4 main categories: (1) demographics, (2) knowledge acquisition, (3) eLearning courses by DMO usage / non usage, (4) application of acquired knowledge (transfer to the profession). Respondents required approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire; no incentives were offered to them.

A dedicated website to support and provide details about the research was launched www.elearning4tourism.com.

Pre-testing of the questionnaire was conducted at the beginning of April 2011 in Lugano (Switzerland) in the form of a focus group with 10 travel agents from Argentina, Greece, India, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Turkey, and the UK.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for the purposes of analysis.
Results

1. Demographics

1.1 Respondents’ general profile

A total of 1004 travel agents worldwide participated in the survey “eLearning courses about Tourism Destinations: the Travel Agents’ Perception”. Of these, 48% were male and 52% female. The majority of respondents (29%) report an age between 30 and 39 years old, 22% are listed as ‘Under 30’ and 21% reported to be between ‘40 and 49’ years old. The others are distributed in the rest of the classification groups, namely ‘50 – 59’ with 20% and ‘Over 60’ with 8%.

Fig. 2. Age of respondents

1.2 Country of origin

All the continents are represented in the sample. The majority of respondents are from Europe (48%), followed by Asia (30%), Africa (12%), Americas (8%), and Oceania (2%). The most representative countries in the sample are the UK (30%), India (16%), United States, Pakistan, Italy (4% each), and Nigeria (3%).

1.3 Respondents by sectors

Taking a closer look at respondents’ working profile, most of them (45%) work for an ‘Independent Travel Agency’, while the rest are divided as follows: ‘Travel Agency (Worldwide chain)’ and ‘Travel Agency (Home-based/Consultant)’ with 13% and 14% respectively, ‘Travel Agency (Call center/Internet based)’ with 9%; while 3% of the respondents work for a ‘Corporate Buyers Agency’. 16% are working in other types of travel agencies. The biggest group within the respondents (27%) has worked in the tourism industry ‘for 1 to 5 years’. 

2. Level of education and knowledge acquisition strategies

2.1 Level of education

Respondents were asked specifically about their level of education. Results indicate that the majority of travel agents that participated in the survey holds a Bachelor degree (34%), followed by 31% with a High School degree and 19% with a Master’s.

2.2 Travel agents strategies to improve their knowledge

Among respondents, 571 did attend eLearning courses in the hospitality and tourism field as a strategy to improve their knowledge, while the remaining 433 did not. Those who have not previously taken any eLearning courses were asked to explain why. The following responses were received:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did not know about the possibility</th>
<th>44%</th>
<th>75%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No or little time to do it</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not useful for my business</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not interested</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3. Respondents’ rationale in not taking any eLearning course

When it comes to other strategies being adopted by respondents, a different training “diet” can be seen in the two groups.

| Attend familiarization/educational trips | 53% | 48% |
| Read books/magazines                   | 45% | 55% |
| Attend roadshows                        | 36% | 22% |
| Attend seminars/conferences             | 35% | 47% |
| Follow specialized websites/blogs/mailing lists | 32% | 42% |
| Follow relevant groups on social networks | 9%  | 20% |
| Other                                   | 2%  | 6%  |

Fig. 4. Respondents’ strategies to improve knowledge
3. Travel agents participation in eLearning courses offered by DMOs

While moving to the penetration of eLearning courses usage among travel agents worldwide, the following distribution can be noticed: 46% (or 466 profiles) of respondents confirmed that they have previously followed eLearning courses provided by Destination Management Organizations.

It is worth noticing that 90% of the respondents who never experienced any online training plan to start an eLearning course offered by a DMO within the next 12 months.

3.1 Number of attended courses

On average, a travel agent has participated in 6 courses, which indicates a high level of satisfaction and interest in online training activities.

3.2 eLearning courses completion

Out of those travel agents who have actually undertaken DMO eLearning activities, 64% claim to have completed all eLearning courses they started. On the contrary, those who did not finish their courses list the following reasons for that (multiple answers were possible):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The course was too long</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much textual information</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too boring</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information was not useful</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many tests</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needed more assistance from the DMO</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Already knew everything about the destination</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 5. Travel agents’ reasons for not finishing DMO eLearning activities
3.3 eLearning courses content

In the following table, responses to the question “What are the most interesting and valuable pieces of information you have found while taking a destination online course?” are presented (multiple answers were possible).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main activities at destination (sports, museums, attractions)</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General information (high-low seasons, currency, language, etc.)</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top selling tips</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about transportation</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic background</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about special events at destination</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special offers at destination (hotel deals, packages, excursions)</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To learn about which tour operators feature this destination</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 6. Respondents’ most preferred topics/content within DMO eLearning courses

4. Most appreciated DMO eLearning courses

The most appreciated course, suggested by 84 Travel Agents, is “The Aussie Specialist Program”, run by Tourism Australia. The second one is that presenting destination Dubai, with 48 preferences, while in the third position there are two courses: the Caribbean region and Mauritius, with 34 preferences. The list of 15 best evaluated courses can be seen below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dubai</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritius</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Lucia</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 7. List of best evaluated DMO eLearning courses suggested by travel agents
5. Application of acquired knowledge (transfer to the profession)

5.1 Satisfaction

Among DMO eLearning users, the level of satisfaction is very high. 88% of respondents are ‘significantly satisfied’ or ‘somewhat satisfied’ (41% and 47% respectively) about the courses they have followed. Moreover, 83% of travel agents have recommended such courses to a colleague.

5.2 Confidence and knowledge

More than half of respondents (53%) – after completing eLearning training about tourism destinations – feel to be ‘significantly confident’ about selling a specific destination, followed by 29% who are ‘somewhat more confident’, and 14% ‘slightly more confident’. Only 3% of travel agents affirm that online trainings are not making them more confident. In addition, 56% of travel agents significantly improved their knowledge about studied destinations thanks to online training.

5.3 Transfer to profession

While analyzing the impact of DMO eLearning courses on travel agents’ current working activities, the next response is of our interest: 67% of travel agents claim that they have sold a destination package as a result of taking such a course.
5.4 Motivation

The following figure presents the main motivations of travel agents in their decision to subscribe to eLearning courses offered by DMOs (multiple answers were possible).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to acquire new knowledge about the destination</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to respond to my client’s needs/requests</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to sell more and earn more</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to participate in educational/familiarization trips</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to enrich my curriculum</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to win a competition</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be registered on the official travel agent list of the destination</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to display an official certificate in my office</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to access special offers</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to respond to my manager’s requests</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 8. Travel agents’ main reasons to take destination eLearning courses

More than three quarters of the respondents listed ‘to acquire new knowledge about the destination’ as one of the main reasons, while fewer travel agents are following eLearning courses due to financial benefits they may receive (familiarization trips, competitions, etc.).
Conclusions

Results show that DMO eLearning is positively perceived by travel agents worldwide: they believe that this activity adds value to their overall knowledge about tourism destinations, helps them in selling activities, and gives them more confidence in serving clients.

The results of this study present main motivation factors that influence travel agents willingness to subscribe to eLearning experiences:
- opportunity to acquire/improve knowledge about the destination
- ability to respond to client’s needs/requests
- potential to sell more and earn more
- opportunity to participate in educational/familiarization trips
- likelihood to enrich curriculum

Findings suggest that DMOs should work closely with travel agents, as
- they are still very important in promoting them
- they need to find their way to the customers through specialization and training

The importance of eLearning training in the tourism field is indicated by research results; in particular, DMO eLearning platforms for travel agents can be an additional tool to enrich the trade corner of DMO websites. Moreover, taking into account the high appreciation of and the need for those types of courses, DMOs should consider to opt for broader promotion and expansion of this kind of training activity.

eLearning platforms for travel agents may also add value to a destination’s innovative communication and marketing concept, can strengthen the awareness of it among trade partners and potential tourists, and as a result might bring the destination on the top of benchmarking as an innovative eTourism destination.

www.elearning4tourism.com

- to download this report
- to find a full list of national DMOs eLearning courses
- to read new papers on the subject “eLearning use in hospitality and tourism”
Publications by webatelier.net on the subject


The following publications were used in the preparation of this report


Nadzeya Kalbaska is PhD candidate at the Università della Svizzera italiana (University of Lugano, Switzerland). Her research activities primarily focus on eLearning integration into the hospitality and tourism sector. Since 2008, Nadzeya has been working as a researcher at webatelier.net. There, she manages eLearning-related projects for both academia and industry. Nadzeya also teaches at the European Humanities University (Vilnius, Lithuania). She holds a Master's Degree in Economics and Communication, Major in International Tourism from the Università della Svizzera italiana. Nadzeya worked previously for the Belarusian Ministry of Tourism, and in the Event Management sector.

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webatelier.net is a research and development laboratory of the Faculty of communication sciences of the Università della Svizzera italiana (University of Lugano, Switzerland). webatelier.net deals with a broad range of topics related to new media in Tourism communication: eTourism.

Its mission is: “to investigate online communication as a true human activity, with a long-term, comprehensive and holistic approach. In particular, stressing human growth and quest for meaning in touristic experiences – eTourism”.

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