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Internet blogs as a tourism marketing medium: A case study

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Abstract

This study explores a 2003 Yahoo Anniversary Website—*I left my heart in Aegean Sea*—built by Justin, a Taiwanese engineer. Justin returns from the romantic Aegean Sea and puts 124 photographs he took onto a website to share with his friends. Unexpectedly, the website becomes a hit and the address achieves wide distribution via various chain e-mails. The site helps to promote tourism to Greece, a destination relatively unknown to most Taiwanese. This investigation explores why the site appeals to so many visitors, impresses them, and even draws them to plan travel to Greece. The article describes the effect of the website by analyzing messages left on the site. The AIDA model is useful for classifying holistic messages. The data demonstrate that the website generates desire and action in over 45% of its readers. These individuals either announce plans to visit Greece immediately or at some time in the foreseeable future. The website thus significantly influences browsers and indirectly promotes Greek tourism. Then, this article describes the key success factors of this popular website. Finally, the article presents suggestions and implications for the tourism industry and for nations seeking to promote tourism.

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1. Introduction

Traditionally in Taiwan Greece relates mostly with Greek mythology, Athens, and the Olympic Games, but recently the country has become known as a place of beauty, romance, peacefulness, freedom, and endless blue and white. Taiwanese are increasingly interested in travel to Greece. Besides, Chinese Television System released the TV series ‘*Love of the Aegean Sea*’ in April 2004, and a popular first prize in numerous lottery activities is now a trip to Greece or the Cycladic Islands. Lots of newly-opened stores are using Aegean Sea themes, including restaurants, motels, bed and breakfasts, and so on. Moreover, Greek or Aegean style has become popular in many areas including architecture, painting, bedspreads, food, etc. Some explanation must exist for these rapid changes, and the answer

appears to be a 2003 Yahoo Anniversary Website named ‘*I left my heart in Aegean Sea*’ (see Fig. 1).

An engineer working for United Microelectronics Corp. (UMC) in Taiwan, Justin returned from the Aegean Sea and put 124 photos chosen from the 1400 pictures he took during his holiday on the website of Yahoo-Kimo in May 2003. Originally Justin simply intended to share his photos with friends, and he put them on the website because they were too large to send by e-mail. On the first day, more than 6000 visitors crowded into the website. The abnormal traffic caused Yahoo-Kimo to close the website temporarily. After Yahoo-Kimo reactivated the website, visitor levels increased to tens of thousands daily. Perhaps through a desire to share with other friends, many enthusiastic friends forwarded the beautiful website message by e-mail. For several weeks 40 to 60 thousand visitors viewed the site daily. Over one million visitors visited the website during the first month, and nearly two million visited the site over a 6 month period. Locus, a publishing company, took the opportunity to publish a photo book, 2004 desk calendar and jigsaw featuring Justin’s photographs. According to Zufryden (2000), website traffic is statistically significant in predicting the box

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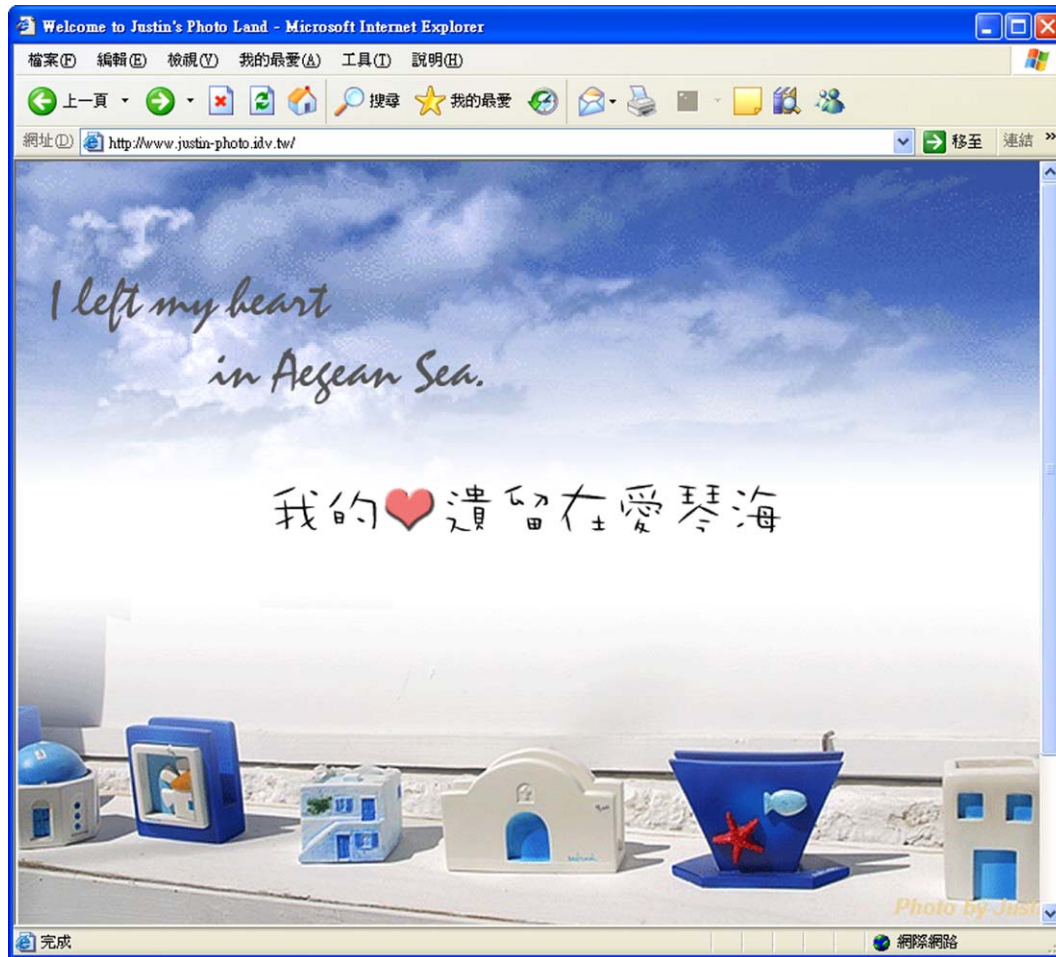


Fig. 1. The website—I left my heart in Aegean Sea (http://home.kimo.com.tw/yuchang_chen.tw/).

office take of a new film, and thus the publisher's action made sense and good sales volumes were achieved.

2. Research motives and objectives

As standards of living improve, people are placing an increasing emphasis on leisure. People are increasingly actively seeking ways to relax and eliminate stress. Thus travel has become a popular leisure activity. Numerous factors influence the destination choice, including advertising campaigns by destination countries, travel agency promotions, airline ticket discounting, movies or TV programs, word of mouth, personal preferences, and so on. Various nations and regions have made considerable efforts in tourism marketing and promotion. For example, Taiwan is pushing 'Doubling Tourist Arrivals Plan' and has designated 2004 as Taiwan Tourism Year; the Hong Kong Tourism Board has adopted the new slogan 'Hong Kong—Live it! Love it!' as its global advertisement and has invited the famous actor, Jackie Chan, to be a travel ambassador promoting Hong Kong. All such campaigns share a common goal of attracting more overseas tourists.

Due to the prevalence of network technology, the Internet has become the main channel for seeking and disseminating information. The website created by Justin is undoubtedly ex-

remely successful in introducing Greece and the Aegean Sea to many people within a short period of time. To explore why the website appealed to so many visitors, impressing them and even leading them to plan travel to Greece is useful. The website was highly effective in place marketing, but used a different approach to those generally prescribed by marketing theory. First, the website was not built by a government agency or tourism association. Furthermore, the website did not resemble word of mouth promotion because the subject was not the tourism place itself but rather a website. These distinctions merit further study.

The following section reviews the previous literature on photography and tourism, Internet marketing on tourism and the AIDA model. Subsequently, the messages on the website are analyzed. Finally, an integrated conclusion is presented. Therefore, this study explores the substantial effect and the key success factors of the website 'I left my heart in Aegean Sea'.

3. Literature review

3.1. Photography and tourism

Everyone surely has experienced taking photographs during a tour. Photographs provide indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had

(Sontag, 1977). Moreover, photographs help to record memories. Some scholars have studied photography in tourism. Chalfen (1979) investigated the theoretical relationships between photography and tourist types. Cohen, Nir and Almogor (1992) explored stranger–local interactions in tourism photography. Moreover, Markwell (1997) examined the spatial, temporal, and social dimensions of photography in a nature-based tour experience. Past studies primarily focused on the impacts or roles of tourism photography, but few explored its promotional function. Photographic images of places and attractions help form expectations regarding tours during the pre-travel stage (Markwell, 1997). Therefore, photographs of scenic spots are ubiquitous, for example in travel agency or tourism bureau websites, media advertisements, guidebooks, travel brochures, postcards, and so on. The case study in this article attempts to identify the power of photographs.

3.2. Internet marketing on tourism

The Internet has proven effective for advertising, marketing, distributing goods, and providing information services (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). The information-intensive nature of the tourism industry suggests an important role for the Internet and Web technology in destination promotion and marketing (Doolin et al., 2002). The Web has great potential for promoting regional tourism, and is relatively inexpensive compared with other promotion and advertising media (Standing and Vasudavan, 2000). An effective website can reach global audiences, being accessible 24 h a day from anywhere in the world. Notably, Hanna and Millar (1997) reported that following the initial welcome page, photographs of destinations are the most popular website content. Website photographs thus are important in tourism marketing.

Although the web is itself a communication tool, a site needs the support of other media to reach a critical mass of visitors (Haas, 2002). Sites can be advertised on-line at other sites, be promoted free of charge via links, or traditional media can be used to promote the URL, including business cards, newspaper advertisements, letterheads, etc. (Standing and Vasudavan, 2000). Furthermore, building network traffic via tourism newsgroups, signature files and electronic mails is another effective form of promotion (Sweeney, 2000). E-mail is obviously an excellent medium for marketing and recently has become very popular. E-mail is not only convenient but also can easily reach numerous targets. Of course lots of other media could also play the supportive roles, but these other media are not included in the present discussion.

3.3. AIDA model

After defining the desired response the communicator moves to developing an effective message. Ideally, the message should gain Attention, hold Interest, arouse Desire, and elicit Action (a model known as AIDA). In practice, few messages take the consumer all the way from awareness through purchase, but the AIDA framework suggests desirable qualities for any communication (Kotler, 2002).

4. Method

This study selects the case study approach. Data are drawn from the message board of Justin's website. The board used was an original one, and lasted from 1 July to 2 November 2003. Another new board was linked to the page of Locus (the publisher mentioned above). To avoid the interference effect, this work only examined the messages on the original board. Visitors browsing the website left some 301 messages reflecting the initial impressions to the site. All of the messages are exhaustively analyzed and categorized. The classification is based on AIDA model in the field of consumer behavior. Careful analysis of holistic messages confirms the substantial effect of the website. Thus the mode is an effective marketing tool. Finally, implications for tourism practitioners are discussed.

5. Results

All the messages are circumspectly analyzed, and the results are listed in Table 1. Over 45% of the research objects exhibited aroused desire and elicited action. They will visit Greece right away or someday in the foreseeable future for sure. The website had a considerable impact on browsers and indirectly promoted Greek tourism.

The messages were left by people not only from Taiwan, but also from other countries (10.3%), including the U.S., U.K., Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, and so on.

Here are some excerpts, "Those pictures are gorgeous! You really have turned Greece into heaven. Because of this, I have decided to visit Santorini next month. You're a star!" Wai-Chi. "Amazing! After browsing the website, I wish to visit Greece. I must share this great site with my friends," Xiao-Mao. "The Greek National Tourism Organization (GNTO) should make you an ambassador because my co-workers and friends are now

Table 1
Categorized messages—Attention, Interest, Desire, Action (AIDA)

| Categorized messages | Frequency | Percentage | AIDA |
|--|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Praise for works and be touched | 67 | 22.3 | Attention |
| Thank for sharing | 18 | 6.0 | |
| Recollect former Greek tour | 14 | 4.6 | |
| Share websites discussing Greece | 1 | 0.3 | |
| Question about the camera | 3 | 1.0 | |
| Make a comment out of personal feeling | 14 | 4.6 | |
| Others | 17 | 5.7 | |
| Subtotal | 134 | 44.5 | |
| Seem to be personally in the scene | 20 | 6.7 | Interest |
| Be interested in and like Greece | 10 | 3.3 | |
| Subtotal | 30 | 10.0 | |
| Buy books | 47 | 15.6 | Desire |
| Intend to have an independent tour and ask questions and details | 5 | 1.7 | |
| Dream of visiting | 13 | 4.3 | |
| Aspire to visit at once | 53 | 17.6 | |
| Subtotal | 118 | 39.2 | |
| Have visited or plan to visit recently | 19 | 6.3 | Action |
| Subtotal | 19 | 6.3 | |
| Total | 301 | 100 | |

all looking forward to seeing the legendary Aegean Sea with their own eyes,” Amber. “Greece has long been a dream destination for many. Owing to some reasons, they are tardy for finding any information about going to Greece. After seeing your touching photos, lots of my friends are finally actively seeking information and planning to visit Greece...,” Qing-Qing. “...you really make us yearn for Greece. Recently I have heard so many people planning to visit Greece. The magic is so great,” Yao. “...many friends around me are flying to Greece because of your photos...” Vicky. “I heard who went to Greece this summer say that the Taiwanese she met in Greece all had browsed your website...” Ishtar.

6. Discussion and implications

‘I left my heart in Aegean Sea’ is undoubtedly successful in terms of visitor numbers, publicity in other media, and so on. The Key Success Factors (KSFs) of the website are discussed below.

The first factor seems to be related to the atmosphere in the time of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). ‘I left my heart in Aegean Sea’ was established in May 2003 when Taiwan was suffering from SARS. Everyone was living in a state of fear. A website presenting touching photographs and fine music helped bring calm, peace, courage and hope, while dispelling browsers fears. Many browsers stated that they were greatly touched and even cried after viewing the photographs.

The second factor seems to be the identity of the photographer attracting the attention of browsers. Many people became very curious about who had taken such amazing pictures, and they started to ask whether he was a professional photographer. People were extremely surprised to find that Justin was an engineer. The stereotype of an engineer is unsentimental, inflexible and mechanical. To believe that such a romantic website had been created by an engineer was difficult for many people. Maybe there was a perceived paradox in the combination of a rational engineer taking such beautiful pictures of a romantic destination such as Greece. Besides, the website creator was simply an ordinary person, not a specialist. The fact that an ordinary engineer had gone to Greece as a backpacker and taken such beautiful photographs inspired others to do likewise and suddenly made Greece appear much nearer to Taiwan than previously.

The third factor seems to be the force of viral marketing. All marketing activities are ultimately viral in nature. Whether the virus can successfully diffuse depends on generating originality, creating topics, triggering browser resonance, and possessing deliverable value. Clearly, ‘I left my heart in Aegean Sea’ behaved like a very strong virus. Stirred by the pictures they saw, most of browsers forwarded the URL address to their friends and associates. As such e-mails circulated, the website was introduced to millions of people and achieved an unexpectedly wide impact. Another key point was that the website was non-commercial. Generally, people are defensive towards e-mail marketing, but a message about a website shared voluntarily by people among their friends via e-mail channel is easily acceptable.

The fourth factor seems to contribute to individuals realization of their dreams. Kotler and Armstrong (2003) stated that Coca-Cola stands for ‘refreshment’; Marlboro stands for the ‘freedom of the open range’; Starbucks brands an urban ‘third space’; Pontiac represents ‘excitement’. These brands place these meanings at the core of their products. Charley Revson of Revlon provided an excellent example, saying ‘In the factory, we make cosmetics; in the store we sell hope.’ These are what Levitt (1986) calls the ‘intangible properties’ of the product. Consumers do not buy products for the products themselves. Similarly, browsers do not admire the website for the website itself. The intangible property of the website is a ‘dream’. The website not only strikes the right chord but also touches the deepest human desires. People understand that their personal dream can be actualized through the website. Dreams thus are no longer merely dreams, but rather are realizable.

The fifth factor seems to be simple website content. A common rule of thumb in advertising is to ‘keep it simple’ (Roman et al., 2003). ‘I left my heart in Aegean Sea’ mainly consists of beautiful photos, carefully selected melodies, and brief statements. Because of no long-winded statements or irrelevant components, simply images and sounds, browsers can skim without any burden.

A website originally intended to simply share photographs ended up unintentionally promoting Greek tourism, and helps the GNTTO access the Taiwanese market. Traditionally, nations use TV, magazines, Internet, direct mail, brochures and leaflets to conduct advertising campaigns. Additionally, they may sign contracts with other nations for exchange visits, participate in travel shows, invite overseas journalists to visit, and so on. But the key question remains successfully firing up the enthusiasm of potential tourists. “I left my heart in Aegean Sea,” is undoubtedly a very successful case. Simply the touching photographs accompanied by soft music could touch quite a few people and even inspire them to action. The above case provides global countries and tourism promoters with a brand-new approach to promoting tourism. This new approach is totally different from traditional approaches, but has the potential for enormous impact. All marketing personnel should move beyond traditional methods and be much more original when seeking to attract international tourists. Using non-conventional, high-impact approaches can achieve an advantage in the competitive tourism market by bringing the promoted destinations closer to their target customers.

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