VISUAL COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGIES IN PROMOTING TOURISM DESTINATIONS

Panayiota Dionyssopoulou
Hellenic Open University Athens, 11 Fornezi str., Athens, 17675, Greece
E-mail:

Areti-Evangelia Pridezi
Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Athens, Greece
E-mail:

John Mylonakis
10 Nikiforou str., Glyfada, Athens, 16675, Greece

ABSTRACT: *The scope of this paper is to investigate the role of visual communication as one of the main factors in order to promote destinations of Greek Tourism Industry and to influence perspective tourists. The paper aims at recording tourism demand trends and the profile the modern tourist, analyzing the use of print and electronic media, with particular emphasis on the Internet, as well as, to focus on the tourism offer, attempting to outline the specific actions used by the tourism businesses in order to communicate with potential tourists/customers. The results and conclusions of both the primary and secondary survey demonstrate the contribution of Visual Communication in tourism and the need to redefine the relationships and the ways of communication between tourism businesses and tourists, according to new requirements in the evolutionary process of the Greek tourism industry.*

KEYWORDS: Information and Communications Technologies, Tourism, Consumer Behaviour, Visual Communication, Internet, e-Tourism, Virtual Reality

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the world's most important industries, especially after the end of the World War II, where it exalts to a mass and major socio-economic phenomenon of the era (Theobald, 2005). The increasing globalization in combination with the rapid technological development, the qualitative improvement of people's life living in the urban centers and the institutionalization of paid vacations for workers (Tsartas, 1996), constitute tourism as one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing sectors of the global economy with socio-economical dimensions worldwide (Gartner, 2001). Nowadays, tourism is developing in a very competitive environment where new competitors, in terms of destinations and companies, appear on the world's tourist map. In addition, the motives and desires of tourists are constantly changing and the tourism offer has to reorganize itself each time in order to meet new expectations.

The rapid evolution of communication and information technology, as well as, the development of Internet could not leave tourism industry unaffected. The development and the necessary significant changes of tourism industry could be interpreted in terms of the communication technology. The introduction and adoption of new technologies, the wide spread of new media, particularly Internet and the impact of the image in the decision making process of tourists, set new terms and perspectives at the process of information and communication between tourism businesses and prospective tourists/consumers.

The modern tourist is bombarded with information through the possibilities that technology offers, while at the same time has to select the place and time of his holidays and the type of entertainment depending on his needs, demographic characteristics, social and economical status and his available leisure time. Furthermore, tourism businesses are called to serve the global tourism market directly and to offer updated, interactive and qualitative information, according to new demands and needs of the modern tourist in a competitive environment which is characterized by constant changes in tourism demand trends and by the entry of new tourism destinations in the world map.

THE ROLE OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

Basic principles of visual communication

According to Lasswell (1948), the communication process as the social interaction through messages (Mc Quail, 1994) is built on five key elements: the transmitter, the message he wants to convey, the medium or communication channel selected for the transmission of the message, the receiver who gets the message and the impact of the message on the receiver (Mc Quail, 2001). Accordingly, it results that the communication as the social interaction through messages (Mc Quail, 1994), is an open and dynamic process which contains elements that are constantly changing. Given that the concept of communication is accrete with the human nature, its evolution and the need for a contact with other people, visual communication, responsible for conveying information, ideas, messages or emotions plays an important role in variety tourism activities. As visual communication, it is defined the communication through visual messages, which must be designed, organized and conveyed via the proper form and means in order to be downloaded from the receiver's optical nervous system. (Bithynos et al, 2002).

Aristotle in his book Art-Rhetoric defines the rhetoric as the faculty to have someone the means to persuade. But even the visual communication has its own rhetorical action. The rhetoric as the art of the feigned speech (Durand, 1970) is a functional relationship between clean and stylized speech and uses this symmetrical way, which is described as codification and decipherment of the message. This whole process, from the creation of the visual message till its understanding and ownership from the receiver, is achieved using the rhetoric of the image. At the time of creation, the transmitter encodes the message with the selection and arrangement of objects within the image, starting with a simple sentence or creating a photographic print or an art project which formed into a rhetorical shape. Upon receiving the message, the receiver restores the idea in its original form and involves in the formation of the meaning by the decipherment of the message. This means that the receiver will recognize the important visual and - if any - verbal parts of the image (Antoniadis, 2002), combining them with relevant information contained in his environment, experiences and knowledge, dreams and aspirations, his own aesthetic and emotional situation (Durand, 1970). The transmitter encodes the message and the receiver should decode it through associations, semantic analysis or personal experiences in order to understand the image and the message sent by the transmitter through it (Antoniadis, 2002). Moreover, the interpretation of the viewer-receiver shapes only a part of the message as the image may be open to many interpretations beyond the obvious, relative to the perceptional interpretations of the receiver (Bithynos et al., 2002). However, it is confirmed that the images, which carry different types of semantic concepts, cause different levels of response from the users (Moriarty, 1995),

depending on the hierarchy of values and the different types of psychological, biological, cultural and social stratification (Eco, 1990).

Nowadays, Image is the primary ingredient and the product is treated simply as a variable that attempts to represent the image (Schroeder, 2002) and, in many cases, the message is decoded by the consumer more quickly and accurately (Machin, 2004). According to Barthes, in a typical advertising image there are three messages: a visual literal, an iconic symbolic and a verbal one (Barthes, 1988). Thus, the communication through the photographic capture is based on the detection and decoding of signs it contains (Antoniadis, 2002). The picture, therefore, is considered as a visual language with a global reach and has already begun to replace the speech form. The fast decipherment of messages offered for the transmission of a message (visualization of message) render it particularly popular as a mean of visual communication. A picture serves as a stimulus or a representation that leads to the interpretation, the preference and consumption of the advertised product. Moreover, through statistical data and even from our daily observation and experience, it is realized that we live in the era of images (McLuhan, 1997), where the received visual stimulus gain the better of all other stimulus directed to the other senses. We live in a society of intense communication, where the overall mass media play a crucial role in the functioning and development of societies. Each formatted visual signal, that is to say every photographic image occurs in the eyes of the receiver/viewer as an intermediary, a reflection of reality, an experience of life itself, a visual language that can be understood by all. The picture however is not a simple reflection of reality. The choice of the moment, the angle, the lighting is not accidental. On the contrary, all there constitute interventions that are shaping the photographic display in a certain way (Antoniadis, 2002).

2.2 The degree of visual communication's impact in the decision making process of tourists

Image has become a strategic tool and constitutes a competitive advantage in tourism, playing a key role in describing, promoting and selling tourism products (Pikkemaat, 2003). This fact is very important if we take into account the specific characteristics of the tourism product, which should be conceived as a complex product, such as a composition of material goods and intangible services (Middleton, 2001). Therefore, it is considered to be heterogeneous, not a priori distinguishable. It is defined by the consumer behavior of the tourists themselves, not tangible and thus not visible before the consumption (Baker & Michael, 1991). This means that, due to the intangible feature of tourism product, tourists cannot easily see it or evaluate it before buying or arriving to the destination or accommodation (Middleton & Hawkins, 2004). Therefore, the tourist is the main modulator of the tourism product, which assesses the tourism product after having consumed it. Recognizing these characteristics, tourism businesses search for the best promotion of the tourism product through the proper selection of media. The excellent combination of the means and the advertisement message defines the success of each promotion. Today, a large number of media is used, including Newspapers and Magazines, Brochures, leaflets and Guide Books, Outdoor Advertising, Illuminated Signs, Mail Advertising, Radio, Television, Movies, Internet, etc.

In order for tourism to work effectively as a whole, communication is the most decisive factor. The choice of a tourism destination is a difficult task because the tourism product is produced and consumed at the same time. This makes it difficult for tourists to know, in

advance, the product that will consume. The most common way of "recognition" of a tourism product is to search and collect information (Hawkins et al, 2001). Tourists obtain actively different sources of information and the media strongly influence the decisions of tourists when they plan their holidays (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). During the decision making process and at the time that the tourist chooses the destination, travel agencies, tour operators, experiences of friends and relatives, brochures and the Internet help him to collect information, to select specific destinations, excluding others that he considers not being suitable for him. Currently, it is one of the most important sources of information collection, making the presence of mediators less necessary. Users can visit the websites of tourism businesses; evaluate bids and offers, reserve rooms, vehicles, etc.

The widespread use of the Internet and the multimedia information provision have changed and affected so radically such as the profile of the tourist-consumer and its preferences in tourism products and services consumption in tourism destinations as the purchasing power and how to buy travel services. Nowadays, tourists are less dependent from the travel agents and having direct access to information and to competitive products, have the potential to shape their trip or vacation. Tourists become more experienced and well-traveled and, therefore, more exigent. They are more critical and selective, less loyal to any company and tend to make shorter trips deciding and designing the itinerary at the last minute (Study GBR Consulting, 2008). They are more informed and probably aware of environmental, social and cultural issues while looking for quality services. They are looking for the diversity, not just pictures and sights. For this purpose, they choose a tourism destination, not on the basis of geographical location or of the package price but on the basis of experiences (activity-interest based than destination based).

Tourism marketing plans attract new visitors or remind ex visitors to return, using various communication processes and tools (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Hotels and travel agencies usually offer a combination of visual and verbal communication in order to create an attractive product for the consumer and to stimulate their interest. The websites cover a large part of the tourism market with different needs and desires, aiming to satisfy the needs of all categories of tourists (Edwards & Curado, 2003). Seeking for new models and forms of communication, tourism businesses have turned to the media. The multimedia, as often reported, using text, audio, images and video and combining different types of media in a single continuous outcome (Sloan, 1996), offer to the tourist-consumer interactivity, which means the ability to create himself the desirable outcome and to participate actively in the communication process (Bithynos, et al, 2002). The same result can be achieved through virtual reality for the moment that it essentially offers "a multi-sensory experience» (Holmes, 2001). Moreover, the tourist-consumer-receiver, desiring to use the five senses of "sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell" in order to evaluate the services of the hospitality and travel and meet its needs, will choose those which offer the excitement and challenge him to live travel experiences in various destinations. A typical example is the website of the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas (http://www.mgmgrand.com). Clicking enter maximum Vegas, a video, lasting just one minute, brings the sense of "experience" in a unique way. The textual content of the website is clearly at the second level. Another particularly striking example is the website of the hotel in Sardinia, called Fortevillage resort, (http://www.fortevillageresort.com/en) not only for the fact that it is a significant and complete site which creates "experiences" without high technical requirements, but because it has a separate, animated site for children (http://kids.fortevillageresort.com). In this, the

young travelers have the opportunity to tour the premises of the resort and play online games such as puzzles, memory and art.

Previous studies found that the behavior of tourists and the factors that affect their decision-making process is confirmed that individual judgments and choices can be influenced not only by the content of the information which is communicated, but also by the way that information is presented (Orth et al, 2007). More specifically, mass media, movies, various television programs, literature and history can provide substantial information about a destination and cause a variety of emotions and desires (Hyounggon et al, 2003). Moscardo (1996) emphasized the importance of the tourists' behavior orientation and the effects of interaction through the use of those media, which involve all five senses of the human being. Considering the behavioral profile of tourists, businesses will be able to reach them with the appropriate communication tools in order to shape their opinions and desires during the destination selection. Specifically, a research conducted in 2007 in Spain determine the influence exerted by Internet, as a new information source, in intense competition with travel agencies, on the development of the tourist's pre-visit image. The results show that tourists appear to be affected in a negative way and destination image is worse when tourists use a travel agency and Internet together, than when they use exclusively the travel agency (Frias et al, 2007). Sometimes, the influence of the internet is worse when the degree of the tourist's message involvement and Internet experience are low. Ease of use is fundamental in the effort to eliminate the possible effects of information overload and content –not always of high quality- in the tourist's mind who turns to the Internet for information. A survey that could be used as a source of practical advice for planning, organizing and managing content on websites of travel agencies and hotels is held in 2005 at the Taiwan University concerning the effectiveness of advertising in combination with the use of more information in text, graphics (static/animated) and video on travel agency websites (Wang et al, 2005). The results show that more content does not mean more effective advertising, because it caused users frustration in the reading process. Specifically, the curve changes form depending on the choice between different combinations of advertising components, such as text, graphics, video and graphic animation to a webpage. Initially, the curve (ad effectiveness) demonstrates a decreasing trend but then the graph displayed an inverted "U" shape. At the beginning of reducing ad effectiveness, we found that the ad effectiveness combining graphics and animated graphics was poorer than graphics alone (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: The advertisement effectiveness
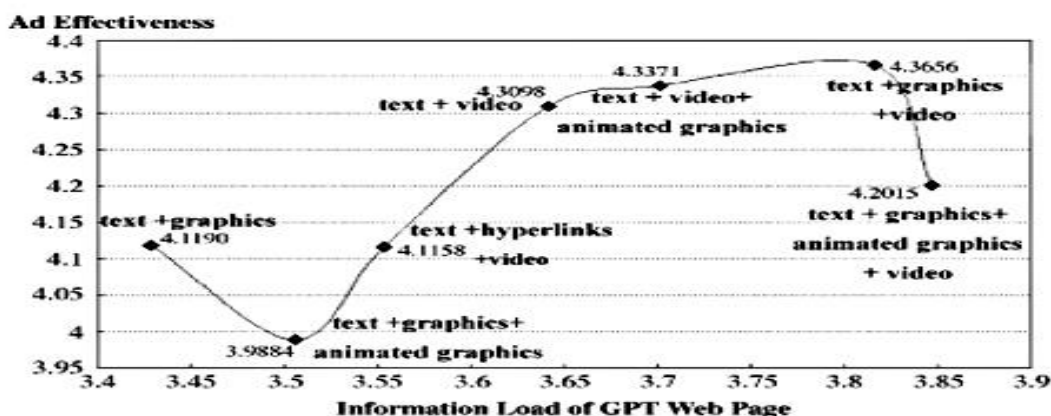
Source: Wang, Chou, Su & Tsai, 2005, p.386

Tversky and Morrison (2002) argued that the incorporation of video into the components mix enhances ad effectiveness and consumers' perception of the destination image. In this way, the purchasing decision process will be easier for the moment that the tourism product is tangible through the power of the image (Seaton & Hay, 1998). Virtual experience has begun to play a significant role in the tourism industry. The aim of a survey conducted in 2007 to college students of the Cultural Park in Taiwan (Chiou et al, 2007), was to examine the advertising effects of traditional brochures vs. virtual experience on consumers-tourists' cognitive preferences. Findings showed two types of consumers: verbalizers (verbal consumers) and visualizers (visual consumers). The traditional use of brochures in advertising would be more effective for verbalizers, whereas the virtual experience mode would be more effective for visualizers. Verbalizers tend to use fewer images but rely mostly on verbal material, whereas visualizers tend to remember better from visual material. In practice, marketers could employ both virtual experience and traditional brochures in advertising tourism products. Thus, the virtual experience mode should be presented to visually oriented consumers after the traditional brochure mode, whereas the traditional brochure mode should be introduced after the virtual experience mode for verbally oriented consumers. This research enhances the understanding of the usage of virtual experience in advertising products in the tourism industry and its impact on consumer preferences. Additionally, it is an important tool for selecting the appropriate means of communication and tourism products promotion and the results of interaction between consumers and advertising can be measured and evaluated. Therefore, tourism and visual communication are inextricably linked, since the power of the image transforms the tourism product into visible and tangible before its consumption, while the appropriate promotion with the right choice of means of communication by the businesses influences effectively tourists in the decision making process.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Objectives and research questions

Tourism in Greece is one of the major sectors contributing to social, economic and cultural development. In a competitive environment characterized by constant changes in tourism demand trends and by the entry of new tourism destinations in the world map, Greek hotels and travel agencies are called to communicate with the global tourism market and to promote their tourism services, using the appropriate promotion and advertising tools. In order to achieve the best results, it requires a continuous observation and research. In Greece, they have not been conducted or analyzed similar studies, as it should be, about how the businesses efforts and the offered tourism product meet the expectations and needs of tourists, by emphasizing on the tools of visual communication. In this context, two separate primary surveys, using two different structured questionnaires with closed and open type questions, carried out in the region of Attica, during the second semester of 2012. It aims at two objectives: to record of tourism demand trends and the modern tourist profile, regarding the use of print and electronic media, with particular emphasis on Internet, as well as, to focus on the tourism offer, attempting to outline the specific actions used by the tourism businesses in order to communicate with the potential tourists/customers.

Based on the conceptual framework described in this study, four hypotheses or research questions were considered:

- In which way is applied the promotion of Athens, as a tourism destination, and tourism businesses, taking into account the used marketing actions?
- What is the communication policy implemented by the hotels and travel agencies, what aspects are covered by the advertising and what strategic and effective promotional methods could use in order to reach the modern tourist?
- What is the responsiveness of tourists from this communication policy?
- What are the tourists' desires and needs on Internet services offered by hotels and tourism agencies?

Sample design and data collection

The first survey was addressed to a sample of 316 tourists and visitors of Athens. In particular, the participants were 154 women and 162 men, aged 17 years old and over. Respondents were both foreigners and Greeks who were selected by random sampling at the Athens airport (Eleftherios Venizelos) and in the area outside the new Museum of Acropolis. The questionnaire was anonymous, included 15 questions in Greek and English language. The independent variables used in this questionnaire were age, sex, education level, nationality and frequency of trips made per year.

The second survey aims at managers of hotels and travel agencies of the region of Attica. After a random choice, 92 businesses are participated, of 49 hotels (5 *, 4 * and 3 *) and 43 travel agencies. For the purposes of this survey the non-probabilistic method is used, while for data collection was considered appropriate to use the method of personal interview after a telephone communication with the staff manager or sales manager.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In total, 408 sample questionnaires were collected from both surveys (316+92), of which all of them were usable. According to the results of the first survey addressed to visitors-tourists of Greece, the characteristics of the 316 respondents, 75% of them are between 17-45 years old, while 59% are university graduates. A large proportion of the sample (61%) said that they didn't travel frequently -till 3 times a year- and choose to travel individually (75%) rather than choose a tourist package. The experiences of friends and relatives (49%) and Internet (32%) are the most common ways to choose a tourism destination. On the other hand, tourists do not seem to trust media in order to choose a tourism destination, although it is very likely to use them, in general, as sources of information. The majority of visitors prefer less the GNTO (Greek National Tourism Organization) offices abroad to obtain reliable information (3%). For those who first visited Athens, the reasons for which they had not visited before were the incomplete and/or negative information about the city (47%). Between the main reasons for which they will not intend to visit Greece within the next years or would not recommend the city of Athens to friends and relatives, were cost (49%), hygiene (80%), transport (70%) and the lack of environmental awareness (50%).

According to the results of the second survey which took place in the tourism businesses of Attica, it is noticed that 60% of them is an independent company and not a member of a franchise. Their customers are between 31-45 years old (88%) and 73% of the sample carries out a market research in order to know the needs and desires of their customers. In 71% of businesses operates a Sales and Public Relations Department, while a large percentage (75%) have set a goal to attract a specific tourism market (target group), such as wellness tourism,

conference tourism, incentives, etc. The main marketing tools used by businesses are ads in print media (66%), online advertising (71%) and distribution of brochures (61%). It is significant that the vast majority of the sample has a webpage (89%). However, with few exceptions, businesses have websites with low quality content and limited navigation. This is evidenced by the fact that they used to update rarely (1-2 times/year) the content of their web pages and the Greek (76%) and the English (85%) language are, in the vast majority, the languages in which information is available.

The percentage of customers who prefer the online booking is relatively low -15% for hotels and 28% for travel agencies. This shows that businesses have not understood the usefulness of a well designed website and the peculiarities of the Internet. Noteworthy is the fact that 3* hotels present more responsive to the needs and desires of tourists, offering well designed and multilingual websites, rich information material, high quality photos and virtual tours. However, the large percentage of businesses seems to be optimistic and is satisfied with the advertising effectiveness (85%), while only 15% reported that ad is not so effective. In the multiple choice question put to the tourists about which books should be distributed by hotels and travel agencies for them, 47% answers a city map, tour guides for attractions and restaurants and guides with information about possible trips in the surrounding area. 37% of them prefer a calendar of annual events (festivals, conferences, exhibitions, sports, etc.), while for 29% and 13% history books and gastronomy brochures are respectively between their preferences.

At the same aspect, the next multiple choice question put to the tourists is relevant to web services. According to their requirements, in order to choose a hotel or a travel agency, tourists consider as more attractive the following additional web services: information material for possible excursions to the surrounding area, such as islands, villages, etc. (57%) sightseeing (56%) and restaurants (23%). Furthermore, tourists looking for a calendar of annual events such as festivals, conferences, exhibitions, sports activities, etc (34%) and for interactive virtual tours and trips through the websites of hotels and travel agencies (25%).

However, the information contained in the websites of hotels and travel agencies are limited to text and photographs on the services and products (99%), general information about the company (98%), a communication form (87%) and a booking form (67%). In contrast, low percentages hold those actions which tourists consider as very important and attractive, such as information on attractions (24%), information on dining and entertainment (20%), virtual presentations/360° virtual tours (11%), information on travel opportunities in the city (7%) and annual events calendar of the city, such as festivals, conferences, exhibitions, sports, etc. (2%).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Regarding the results of this survey, it is noticed that the destination's pre-visit image assumed by visitors of a tourism destination is essential for the promotion and competitiveness of the tourism product. Findings showed that many respondents claimed that they had not visited Greece before because the information was incomplete and/or negative (47%). For a large proportion of respondents (38%), Athens was not an attractive destination. Generally, the image of a tourism destination is created through direct and indirect advertising communicated abroad. The promotion tools of Greece are the same as for any

other country. Media, including entertainment media, internet, tour operators, travel brochures, the experiences of relatives and friends are sources of information about a tourism destination. Specifically, the survey showed that previous experiences (19%) of the respondents and personal experiences of relatives and friends (49%) affect directly their decision. Furthermore, after visiting Greece, their opinion of Athens is very good or better than the pre-visit image (66%). In this context, their holiday's experience in Greece is positive (90%) and 91% would recommend this tourism destination to friends and relatives. In general, the largest percentage of visitors obtain a better opinion of Athens after their visit, compared with the image they had before, while only few of them (17%) seem to find exactly what they expected. Maybe, this means that the promotion through print and electronic media is not effective enough or that the information is not representative of the conditions and the quality of services offered. It is obviously worth mentioning the fact that tourists leave Greece with the best impression of the country and they did they selected the best destination of their holiday. Those with negative impression of the country focus on bad transportation conditions, high living cost, economic crisis and the lack of ecological awareness.

The survey underlines the necessity to find some alternative ways of promotion, which are beyond usual practices and, therefore, will be more effective. Nowadays, tourists know exactly what they want and they are able to prepare their own holidays, based on their needs and wants. Additionally, they expect reliable information about the destination they intend to visit, without stress while they navigate on many websites. The long-term trends in tourism demand show the need to develop thematic discussion forums, where groups of users can discuss various subjects based on their interests (e.g., forest protection, wine tourism, ecotourism), share their experiences and multimedia material (photographs, videos, audio files), communicate and advise other members (Sigala et al, 2007). The Destination Management Systems (DMS) offer the user the capability to identify, store and then arrange his choices for a personalized travel itineraries, giving him the autonomy to the final selection without the involvement of tour operators (Tsartas, 2009). Thus, it is essential a distinction in the promotion that will stimulate the attention and interest of potential customers. This requires creativity, originality, good knowledge of the communication process and searching of the best practices of other businesses worldwide (Martakis, 2005).

The available means of communication are common to all businesses. An advertisement showing impressive plans from the interior of a hotel or the natural beauties and attractions of a region could create a very positive opinion, but it would not translate necessarily into a desire to visit it. The question is therefore how effective are the means of communication, how could influence the tourism market, how businesses exploit their power and how could use them in the best possible ways in order to achieve the best possible results. Furthermore, an advertisement that no one reads in a magazine or watch on television has no any effect. For example, brochures are now obsolete. They could be used to attract people at an initial level but certainly they are not the decisive tool for tourists-consumers to decide a tourism destination.

As McLuhan noted, communication theorist and philosopher of the 20th century, focused primarily on the way (by what means) a person experiences the world and not what (content) experiences, putting great emphasis on the strength of the medium. With the famous phrase "The medium is the message", McLuhan argues the power of the means in modern communication procedures (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). They argued that a medium affects the

society in which it plays a role not only by the content delivered over the medium, but also by the characteristics of the medium itself. The information has not a status by itself, but only when is disseminated (or propagated) by some means (Kittler & Friedrich, 1999) and influences the way in which the message is perceptible (McLuhan, 1995). We say "I read a newspaper or magazine" without referring to specific articles, we say "I watched TV" without mentioning the title or the content of the show, we say "I surf the web" but we mention rarely the names of the sites we visited. So the message is not in the text but in the print media, on television or internet. Therefore, the value of means is defined by the way it is used. Ultimately, no matter what medium we use, it is important that we be able to communicate clearly and precisely, and we are more likely to do so when we are explicitly aware of the character of the medium (Robinson et al., 1976).

It is also true that picture worth a thousand words. But in design, it is quite difficult to translate these thousand words, which are the goals and the message of a business, to a picture. The visualization of the message is met in all media. The space of promotion of the tourism product specifies/determines often its communicative nature. In the vast world of Internet information is not hierarchical nor controlled (Robbins & Webster, 1999). Internet has its own rules and requirements. For example, in print media when something is written, usually, there is an introduction, then an analysis of the issue with the presentation of arguments and finally the findings. On the internet, information follows the reverse path, with "the final message" at the beginning in order to facilitate users to find what they are looking for. The necessary elements of a successful website development grouped into four categories and the Internet marketing star is made up of these four categories (Benckendorff & Black, 2000): Site planning (business objectives and identification of the target audience), Site design (website design with interactive tools), Site content (accuracy of the information presented and updated text content) and Site management (management and regular update).

A webpage should have a hierarchical structure, designed by following the cycle of "the visitor's journey", from the initial contact when it needs to inspire, to charm, impress and make visitors dream a potential trip to the destination. Then it must give him the necessary information to plan his trip, and also the opportunity to share his experiences of this trip (Fotiadis, 2009). Meanwhile, the modern tourist is looking for recreation and personal consummation through unique experiences and emotions. Even the selection of a tourism product is based on his emotions, related to his needs and incentives such as relaxation, pleasure, prestige, etc. There is a correlation between logical and emotional incentives when consumers choose and buy a tourism product. The modern tourism industry does not aim, any more, at the cover of some basic needs but "sells" feelings and experiences.

The success of a website depends not only on the accuracy and regularly updated information it contains, but also on the value-added services it can offer. The site should make use of value-added content to encourage users to explore further and to return to the site. Many times, these websites do not speak the same language and do not use the same terminology with users. Therefore, websites should be more user-friendly, more understandable and more attractive and to inspire credibility. Planning should be done carefully, paying attention even to details (using appropriate colors and sharp color contrasts, sharp images, smooth fonts readability, etc.), while the information must be accurate and updated frequently with personalized information, direct and live content (fashion, daily weather, etc.). A successful online promotion can be achieved by creating an "ideal" navigation experience on the website

with feedback, either for a simple user or a potential traveler.

THE ABILITY TO PROMOTE COUNTRY'S IMAGE THROUGH THE INTERACTIVE GAME "VISIT GREECE"

As already mentioned, it is important to use multimedia content and interactive applications that provide information and fun at the same time. Such actions and activities are interactive games. Moreover, nowadays, the game is able to escape from the confines of entertainment and leisure and is part of promotions in marketing applications, even in marketing of businesses and organizations. Combining graphics and tourism, an action game is designed, titled «Visit Greece». The game was a part of a study of the postgraduate program *Graphic Arts-Multimedia* of Hellenic Open University and also is presented at the thesis of the Department of Tourism Economics & Development of the National School of Public Administration. Since, there are no such games, which promote Greece, in contraposition with the efforts of other countries, perhaps, such games could be a part of the websites of Greek tourism businesses (hotels and travel agencies), even of Greek National Tourism Organizations. In this way, it is provided to prospective tourists not only information about services and events of destinations or accommodations, but in addition, through these interactive and fun applications with multimedia content, users/visitors will be able to be both informed and entertained. Therefore, besides stores and points collection, such games will produce benefits for both players/users/tourists and businesses.

The game is targeted at both adults and children aged 6-7 years and over, Greeks and foreigners or future tourists (Fig. 2,3,4). For this reason, the English language is selected. The predominance of bright and spot colors throughout the game gives a sense of childhood. This childishness was reflected in the design of puppets/heroes (tourists and driver), objects or animals and in the background (sun, trees, sea, island, etc.). Also, many vibrant colors are selected and heroes are drawn as cartoons. Generally, the design looks like a hand-painting or made by a child. The curves in design are selected in purpose in order to give a sense of warmth, cordiality and protection. Even the map of Greece has only few details and is designed with many curves.

The aim of the game is to earn as many points by collecting various objects within a given time. The player who has the role of the driver-guide must help three tourists to travel in Greece and admire the attractions of the country. There are two levels of difficulty. At the first level (easy level), tourists have a coach tour to mainland Greece and at the second one (difficult level) they travel by boat to Greek islands. During their journey, they are called to avoid hitting brown bears, hedgehogs, seals monachus-monachus and sea turtles caretta-caretta. These animals live in Greece and are protected species. If they hit them, tourists loose lives and the game ends. Thus, the game promotes a different kind of holidays and underlines an ecological awareness in a fun way. In the following Figures three screens of the game are presented.

Figure 2: Main game screen

Figure 3: the trip to mainland Greece

Figure 4: The trip to Greek islands

It is worth noting that the constant adaptation to new facts and circumstances is crucial for the survival of tourism businesses. In an increasingly competitive environment, the new tourism products should gain added value and be able to satisfy the customers in order to gain their trust and loyalty. Moreover, the expectations are not the same for all tourists and are always changing over time. This finding requires constant evaluation of the impact of these changes and strategy review. Furthermore, the effective implementation of good practices and the successful and proper use of new technologies and visual communication tools are required. It is obvious that traditional methods of communication are insufficient, while modern ones are on the way and should replace the old, such as road tours, video surround, virtual reality, interactive digital communication and online games.

The online communication is offered as a wonderful tool of visual communication, marketing and promotion of products and services. It is one of the best practices in order to raise emotions, "steal" the impression and the prospective visitors further aiming at the intense desire to visit and live the "dream" offered in their virtual tours.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

For future studies, it is important for businesses to obtain the updated opinions and views of tourists, since the results of each survey represent the opinions of the sample for that period of time and took no guarantee that future time these opinions or aspects will remain unchanged.

In terms of sampling, tourists from different target group or different market segments could be studied. For the effective promotion of hotels and travel agencies of Athens, it is necessary to take place a similar survey, which will consist of much larger sample of tourists. This will be preferable and easier to achieve by the businesses carrying out an online survey initially to

their customers and website visitors (Lau et al, 2001). Additionally, the businesses must be able to understand what should be the necessary changes and adjustments to be made through a global research in order to meet the modern needs of tourism, to gain the confidence of tourists and to create them the desire to visit the destination or the hotel. This feature helps to identify both the strengths and weaknesses and the future trends of tourism demand. In this way, the existence of a clearer picture of reality will be checking the performance of the changes made by the businesses, while new targets will be set according to the needs of the tourism market and the tourism policy of businesses.

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