Qualitative evaluation of chosen online and offline communication means towards visitors of a selected city

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Abstract
Currently not only companies, but also cities, destinations or regions face the challenge of use of new technology in communication with their customers. This paper examines few chosen online and offline communication means (brochures, webpage) of a selected city (Plzeň, Czech Republic) with help of simple qualitative research approaches, including research with help of an eye tracker. Authors also compared the webpage of the city with two other cities within Czech Republic. The means of communications were analysed with following focus: technical processing, content and design (marketing value). The authors revealed some positives, but also some imperfections, e.g. in newsletter, content filters in the communication of the city.

Keywords: city, communication, eye tracking, evaluation, tourism, visitor

JEL Classification: H11, L83, L86, M31, Z33

1. Introduction
Currently tourism destinations are facing the challenge of use of new technology in communication with their customers (visitors, tourists). Recent technological development brought many new possibilities for promotion activities of companies and other subjects. Especially the development of web pages from Web 1.0 to recent Web 3.0 (Minazzi, 2014), social media, portable devices applications and for example HbbTV (hybrid broadcast broadband TV - combination of classical TV and digital content) challenge marketers in most organisations. Together with traditional instruments of communication mix this variety of promotion opportunities, change in customer behaviour in tourism (Cohen, Prayag, Moital, 2014) marketing managers of destinations have to choose appropriate set of integrated communication instruments. Nowadays, the websites still remain the most important interfaces in HCI (Human–Computer Interaction). (Wang et al., 2014) On the web tourism destinations faces dynamic and innovative development. Multichannel (integrated) communication solutions are needed to attract visitors’ (users’) attention. Integration of social media, several platforms (blogs, web) and advertising possibilities is crucial. (Fensel et al., 2016).

In general, all promotional material mix text and graphic (images) information. New technology allows combining text also with video and animated content. The purpose of all marketing material, including the web pages is to protect users (readers) from moving away to another material. The reason could be technical, content, form or design based. (Djamasbi et al., 2010)

Although internet is nowadays one of the most important channels for the promotion and sale of tourism services (Huertas-Garcia et al., 2014; Pompurova, 2014), the use of traditional instruments still remains necessary, e.g. for less technological savvy customers. This has lead the authors to the comparison of online (new) and offline (traditional) communication means of a selected city destination.
Thus, the objective of this article is a qualitative, case study-like, comparison of brochures (traditional) and webpage (“new”) of the city of Pilsen (Czech Republic). The focus will be set on technical processing, content and design.

2. Data and Methods

The paper uses qualitative approach to evaluation of selected communication means of the city of Pilsen (Czech Republic). It can be understood as a case study from a city. This limits the possibilities for statistical evaluation of findings.

The authors chose to examine both offline and online communication. They selected a brochure “City of Pilsen”, which is the general brochure aimed at visitors (tourists) which publishes the city for several years (the authors have researched brochures from the period 2004-2015 – see Figure 1) as example for offline communication. The city publishes several other brochures for tourists, one of them are “tourism attractions”, another “City of Pilsen with children” etc.

And the website targeted on tourists (visitors) has been selected for online communications (plzen.eu/turista, www.visitplzen.eu – both referred at the time of the analysis – 12/2014-01/2015 – to the same content).

Figure 1: Front pages of the brochure “City of Pilsen” 2004-2015

Source: own archive

The main research focus for both online and offline communication means has been placed on three areas:

- technical processing,
- information (content analysis),
- marketing value (incl. user experience, design).

Qualitative evaluation of selected communication means had been conducted. The authors realised 21 non-structured interviews for evaluation of the brochure – age structure – see Table 1. The age of respondents variated between 24 and 79. 13 were women and 8 men. None of the respondents has been living in the city of Plzen (district Plzen-mesto). The interviews took part in October 2015. The interviewees had all 9 printed versions of the brochure available to analyse
and go through during the interview (each respondent had 2 minutes to examine the brochures). The interviews started with initial question, which asked for impressions about the brochures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24-35</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 56</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Structure of respondents - brochure

Source: own research, 2015

For analysis of the webpage 10 semi-structured interviews with eye tracking scenario study were used. Further own observations (user experience) of authors were used, especially for evaluating the newsletter.

The eye tracking part of the research used the cognitive walkthrough for the web (CWW) approach (Habuchi, Kitajima, Takeuchi, 2008; Habuchi, Takeuchi, 2012) which is sometimes reference as scan-path method (Coco, 2009). The scenario for eye tracking included following tasks (not full list): find the official web page of Pilsen for visitors/tourists; find the newsletter sign-up; find information about parking in the city; find restaurants with place for children to play; find the page with beer events in Pilsen etc. Each respondent got through all defined tasks. His/Her behaviour had been monitored with the eye tracker, which also saved a video with the proceeding of the user while fulfilling the tasks. The eye tracking has been used for revealing obvious mistakes and trouble during the use of the web page. It did not try to discover specific design mistakes of the web page. The eye tracking scenario has been completed with semi-structured interviews, so the RTA (retrospective think aloud) method was applied (Hyrsykyari et al., 2008). The eye tracking study has been conducted on a desktop computer. Therefore its outputs are not valid for portable devices such as tablets or smartphones.

For comparison purposes the authors compared the web page of Pilsen with tourist web pages of Ostrava and Hradec Králové. Both of those cities had been competing on national level with Pilsen in the competition for European Capital of Culture 2015. Therefore their tourism web pages seemed to be a good comparison choice for a research conducted in 2015.

The objective of the research was to evaluate both offline (and traditional) and online (and “new”) communication means. An attempt to compare both nowadays mainstream, at least in the environment of the Czech Republic, instruments of communication with visitors/tourists – brochure, web page – has been partial objective of the conducted research.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Evaluation of the brochure

The brochure is offered in nine languages (11/2015). Figure 1 shows that analysed brochures can be divided into four categories according to the front page and published year: 2004 + 2007; 2008 + 2009; 2010 + 2011; 2013 + 2014 + 2015. The changes on the front page include the change of used logo (and visual manual), cover photo. Since 2013 the format changed from folding flyer to a brochure. Actual use of color is almost the same as on the web page (just yellow is missing on the web page). The content of the brochure changed only slightly and they
do not follow the changes in the design of the material. The biggest change happened between 2011 and 2013, the text information was reduced and only general information about the city is used, compared to more detailed information in previous versions. The number of pictures does not change during the years, the count is 17-18, but in the last version of the brochure less pictures covering one entire page are present. Thus less text in last version of the materials has not been exchanged for more pictures.

The use of colors in the brochure did change, until 2007 the main colors were yellow and red (partially pink), since 2008 the colors did change to blue, pink and white, 2010-2011 the use of colors were blue, yellow, white, black text and since 2013 in the brochure the use of colors is yellow, white, green and pink.

The results of the interviews showed following:

- the new format (brochure) is better (more practical) than folding flyer (100 % respondents),
- front pages were evaluated as positive,
- readability of the brochures was evaluated as very good,
- version from 2015 contains outdated pictures (e.g. picture from soccer game with a player not playing in Pilsen from 2012) – 10 respondents,
- colour combination (orange and yellow) in the years 2004 and 2007 were perceived as not suitable,
- 2009 version has been evaluated better than actual version due to more text information about sights in the city.

Concluding, authors state that the publisher of the brochures should especially consider:

- up-to-date pictures (with legends) and texts,
- choice of colours regarding readability and corporate image of the city communication,
- updating text information, alternatively extending the amount of text information.

The brochure does not use a QR code, which could link up the brochure with the web page. Such interconnection might solve the missing texts about tourism attractions in the brochure at least for technologically advanced users.

3.2 Evaluation of the web page

The evaluation of the web page has been conducted in several steps. The authors firstly analysed the web page (plzen.eu/turista) and its contents, signed in for the newsletter and prepared the scenario for eye tracking testing. Members of the authors’ team are dealing with web page analysis for several years (e.g. Tlučhoř, 2009; Janeček & Tlučhoř 2015; Janeček, Jakubíková & Tlučhoř 2015) using predominantly content analysis.

The web page is available in Czech, German and English. Facebook, Instagram and YouTube are used from the tourism authority of the city. Mobile application for Android, iOS and Windows 10 are available to download.

Used colours are white, pink, black, green and grey. Compared to print material the yellow is missing.

The first page (homepage) is long (need to scroll), but not on all devices it is clear that it continues and the user has to scroll down to obtain further information. This has been observed also during the eye tracking, when some respondents had trouble finding information, which were positioned lower on the first page. Figure 2 shows the first view on the examined homepage (before scrolling). It also includes the heat map, which shows the first moments of looking on the web page right after finding it. It is obvious that most respondents looked at the
main menu, alternatively at the search field and link to actual culture programme. On the other hand nobody looked at the circled selection between citizens’ and tourists’ point of view.

**Figure 2: Heat map (first view) for homepage plzen.eu/turista**

Further results from eye tracking testing scenario and follow-up semi-structured interviews are:

- restaurants with amenities for children are not available to be found in the section Gastronomy (only in the section Visit),
- newsletter sign-up is not visible (an interview with the designer of the web page showed that visibility of this element has not been demanded),
- good use of colours (although considered as dark) and graphics,
- many useful information,
- useful information about parking and transportation in the city,
- web page is optimised for tablets – for some respondents it looks not arranged,
- better filter (search) options in the Gastronomy section, it is confusing for users (only two managed to find what they searched for),
- search engine does not provide relevant information.
The newsletter functionality just automatically sends information about new articles on the web page, using the same Subject for all e-mails and not providing any value added. Therefore the clear conclusion is to completely rearrange this service (e.g. graphically advanced e-mails, possibility to choose frequency of sending newsletters, providing value added, not just overview of changes on the web page).

The authors also concluded comparative analysis with two other city web pages for tourists/visitors. The chosen cities were Ostrava and Hradec Králové. All three cities had been competing on the national level for the title European Capital of Culture 2015. The comparison overview provides Table 2, where “0” means acceptable, “+” perfect, “-” insufficient. The evaluation has been done by authors.

Table 2: Comparative analysis – web pages of Plzeň, Ostrava and Hradec Králové

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plzeň</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web address</td>
<td>plzen.eu/turista</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>- (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigation</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text size, graphics</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used colors</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usability</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with users</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own research, 2015

Hradec Králové does not have official web page for visitors/tourists, which explains some of the insufficient evaluation in some observed points. From the observed web pages the Ostrava’s seems to be the best. Nevertheless the Pilsen’s web page for tourists is satisfying, some possibilities for improvement showed previous findings.

Concluding, authors state that the publisher of the web page should especially consider:

- clearer “link”/advise to scroll on the homepage,
- improving newsletter,
- further research on graphic layout (different designs for different devices),
- improve search engine,
- improve filter (search) options in the Gastronomy section, it is confusing for users.

The web page does not provide electronic versions of printed promotional materials or at least a possibility to order them. Such functionality (content) would improve the integration between offline and online information provided to visitors/tourists.

4. Conclusion

The presented results of our qualitative evaluation of two selected means of online and offline communication of the city of Pilsen towards visitors/tourists showed that even qualitative research approaches (with limited numbers of respondents) could reveal serious imperfection in communication instruments used by a destination. The results were presented to the city authority and also to the developer of the web pages. They stated that the findings of the study
seem to be relevant and could improve the brochure and/or web page. Obviously such evaluation of the materials has not been conducted after publishing them.

Some of the imperfection of the web page has been discovered within the eye tracking part of the research which proofed that the cognitive walkthrough for the web (Habuchi, Kitajima, Takeuchi, 2008; Habuchi, Takeuchi, 2012) which is sometimes references as scan-path method (Coco, 2009) in combination with RTA interview (Hyrskykari et al., 2008) can deliver usable results.

The presented research has some limitations, e.g. limited number of respondents/evaluators, eye tracking on desktop solution (therefore no consideration of portable devices), but despite these imperfections the authors were able to deliver some applicable results.

Our prerequisite for selection of researched communication means – brochure, web page – has been their use of the majority of visitors/tourists (generality). In further research the intended and real target group of the communication material should be taken into the consideration, especially if examining more targeted communication instruments.

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References


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