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E-learning as a marketing tool for Tour Operators. The ‘Go Academy’ case study

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Abstract:

Professional training has become increasingly more important as the tourism industry grows and evolves. It plays a particularly vital role in supporting business competitiveness in the traditional distribution system. This has encouraged a growing focus on e-learning and on the interesting advantages that it opens up in training activities. However, it has been given limited attention as a useful tool for marketing purposes. This paper aims to analyze the use of e-learning in the marketing perspective, with specific reference to the relationship between tour operators and travel agents, using the case study of the e-learning platform, Go Academy.

Keywords: *marketing, e-learning, tour operator, travel agents, relationship*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism stands out among the sectors most involved in and affected by the digital revolution. The spread of the internet has profoundly modified tourist purchasing behavior and has strongly impacted supply chains and distribution systems (Bigné et al., 2008; Andreu et al., 2010). The evolution of the commercial intermediary in the tourism industry deserves particular attention as greater complexity, and growing competition are observed taking hold. The internet allows travelers to access more information that is readily available online (Gretzel et al., 2006) and to self-produce and purchase holiday packages independently (Cheyn et al., 2006). Selling tourism products has, therefore, become a more difficult task than in the past, not only because of the challenge that is comparing offers from multiple competitors presents, but also because of consumers’ make or buy decision mechanisms. Among the most evident changes taking place, there is the advent of Online Travel Agents (OTAs), which has exacerbated the competitive context by putting the figure of the traditional travel agent (O’Connor and Frew, 2000; Cheyne et al, 2006; Garkavenko and Milne, 2008) in a difficult, or even precarious, situation.

Disintermediation and the accentuated competition of online operators seriously threaten the traditional distribution channel, and interventions aimed at increasing the value of their services on the final market are required. Travel agents have been defined as the most crucial ‘information guardians’ within the traveler decision-making process (Middleton, 1994), ‘experts’ who know the tourism industry in all its aspects (McIntosh and Goeldner, 1990), and ‘information brokers’ whose opinions and recommendations are required for their high level of knowledge and involvement in a particular product class (Jacoby and Joyer, 1981). As influencers, their knowledge and information have a significant impact on consumer choices about tourist destinations (Lawton and Page, 1997). Inexperienced tourists and most of the people who travel internationally are particularly open to using (the services provided by travel agencies (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001). It is taken for granted that they - the agents - understand travelers’ needs and have a deep knowledge of tourism products. However, travel agents are not always reliable sources of information for tourists (McKercher et al., 2003; Fu & Kapiki, 2016); as observed by Lawton and Weaver (2009), a major threat lies in a negative public perception of them, due to poorly qualified agents. Moreover, thanks to the internet, travelers can independently collect information regarding a specific destination, local suppliers, and attractions, in addition to also consulting other travelers’ postings of previous experiences. Therefore, the paradox may be that the traveler is better informed than a travel agent.

In this context of easier access to information, it appears increasingly important to strengthen the assistance and advisory capacities of travel agents as required by the particularities of the tourism product (Christou, 2010; McKercher et al., 2003). It is necessary to understand travelers’ needs better, expressed and hidden, and to identify the holiday package that is best suited to fully satisfying their needs. The passage from the mere sale of tourism products to the actual consultation underscores the importance of on-going learning and continuous updating of knowledge (Cho and

Schmelzer, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2011). Knowledge is the strength of travel agents, and it represents the competitive element in which it seems ever more appropriate to invest in order to face the scenarios that are taking shape.

This is demonstrated by the growing number of training initiatives provided to travel agents by tour operators, to support their business partners in the sales processes. The traditional travel agent familiarization trips ('fam trips'), road shows, and face-to-face classes are increasingly supported by IT-based training methods, such as DVDs, CD-ROMs, webinars, and e-learning platforms. The objective is generally to deepen knowledge about the destinations and tourism products offered by tour operators, but also to improve sales techniques. Behind the training offer, however, it is evident that significant marketing objectives are being pursued. In fact, travel agents continue to be relevant players in the market, acting as influencers of final customers (Revilla Hernández et al., 2016). Therefore, besides improving sales performances, meeting agents' needs and supporting them can also help to develop relationships with this critical component of the market.

Several studies on the e-learning within the tourism industry showed the advantages of this training method to develop the knowledge on specific destinations or tourism products (Cantoni and Kalbaska, 2010; Kalbaska, 2012; Kalbaska and Cantoni, 2018), and how this can influence the travel agents' sales activities (Kalbaska et al., 2013). However, little attention has been paid on the impact of e-learning on the relationships between tourism product suppliers and intermediaries, and on its role in implementing marketing strategies.

The paper aims to analyze the potential advantages of using IT for this type of application, investigating the role of e-learning platforms from the marketing perspective, regarding the relationships between tour operators and travel agents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The e-learning is based on the use of IT (Zhang and Nunamaker, 2003) and consists on a wide range of learning strategies and technologies, such as online courses, CD-ROMs, DVDs, video conferencing (Sigala, 2002). This combination of tools and strategies allow to access at 'anytime and anywhere' training, to design and implement highly personalized courses, to develop pedagogical methods based on cooperative and collaborative learning (Christou, 2003; Botta, 2003; Trentin, 2004), and to improve retention (Welsh et al., 2003). Moreover, the e-learning solutions allow 'just in time' learning, reducing the time that elapses between the need for knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge, while the accessibility 'anytime and anywhere' shortens the distance between learning and working contexts, facilitating the transfer of the on the job training activity. The prospects for e-learning development are particularly intriguing considering:

- the constant growth of the number of internet users in the world;
- the development of new portable devices with increased opportunities to access to 'mobile learning' (Wu et al., 2012);
- the increase in demand for social learning and Web 2.0 technologies, which are used in conjunction with mobile technologies (Jones et al., 2013).

Moreover, the high flexibility that distinguishes e-learning can favour access to training even for smaller companies. This would allow them to increase their internal skills and thus, influence their competitiveness (Temperini, 2009). As highlighted above, travel agents must improve their knowledge and skills in order to consolidate their position in the market (Milne et al., 2008). They need personalized training and certification to differentiate themselves from their competitors.

In this scenario, e-learning represents the link between the new market needs and training qualification strategies in the tourism industry (Sigala and Christou, 2002; Braun and Hollick, 2006; Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2016). The relevance and advantages of e-learning for training in the tourism sector have been emphasized in several studies (Kasavana, 1999; Cho and Schmelzer, 2000; Christou and Sigala 2000; Kalbaska et al., 2013; Mejia and Phelan, 2014). According to Cho and Schmelzer (2000), e-learning prepares participants enrolled in courses related to tourism and hospitality to think critically, solve problems, and improve their decision-making processes. With reference to online training provided by DMOs, Kalbaska et al. (2013) have shown that it supports travel agents sales activities by increasing knowledge of tourism destinations. Since the tourist can be considered a 'great consumer of information', it is evident that offering travel agents a broader range of learning opportunities are becoming increasingly more attractive. In this sense, e-learning can represent a valid training tool (Zafiropoulos et al., 2015; Nair, & George, 2016; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Beckendorff and Zehrer, 2017; Kalbaska and Cantoni, 2018). Cantoni et al. (2009) ranked online courses on hospitality and tourism in four different categories depending on the training provider: Academics, Business, Destination Management Organization (DMO), and Independent.

In the extant literature, several works have examined the online training services provided by DMOs to travel agents. E-learning courses have been investigated as a training tool for trade partners (Cantoni and Kalbaska, 2010; Kalbaska, 2012; Kalbaska and Cantoni, 2018) and as a strategic instrument for tourism marketing (Kalbaska et al., 2013). Although the marketing perspective remains underexplored, e-learning can, as highlighted by Gregori and Temperini (2013) with specific reference to the lighting sector, play an important role in business communication and marketing activities, as they favor the growth of market relationships in general, and specifically, with the actors who are influencers of the final customers. Even though a growing number of tour operators offer e-learning training programs to strengthening their relationship with travel agents, there are no important works that have analyzed the phenomenon. Travel agents can be considered an 'indirect and external' sales force for the tour operator, who requires training to foster agents' loyalty and make sales more effective. This analysis perspective appears to be of some interest;

however, to date little is known about the current status of e-learning courses offered to travel agents by tour operators. This exploratory study aims to fill this gap by exploring the following research questions:

- (1) What marketing purposes can Tour Operators achieve by implementing e-learning platforms to provide training to Travel Agents?
- (2) How can the offer of online training services impact the relationship between Tour Operators and Travel Agents?

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions mentioned above, in this paper the Go Academy case study is examined. Go Academy is an e-learning platform implemented by "Go Asia" tour operator, an Italian leader in travel sales to Asian destinations, with a medium-high market position and an average annual turnover of around 10 million euros. From the methodological point of view, an exploratory research study was carried out through the integration of different qualitative techniques. First, the participant observation method (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011) was adopted: a PhD student was on the tour operator's staff for three years, participating in the various stages of development of the electronic platform, thus being able to understand the dynamics between tour operators and travel agencies, and then, improving the TO's digital training service. Next, in-depth personal interviews were carried out with the owner and with the head of the tour operator's marketing department. The semi-structured interviews focused, in particular, on the marketing objectives pursued and the perception of relationships with buyers.

In addition, with the support of the marketing manager, six travel agencies whose staff was involved in the training activities provided by the Go Academy platform were selected for participation in the study. In this case, purposeful sampling was chosen, a method widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of cases rich in information concerning the phenomenon to be investigated. Interviews with the managers of the selected travel agencies were carried out in order to investigate their perceptions regarding the e-learning services used and their relationship with the tour operator. The choice of the case study methodology was motivated by the fact that the phenomenon being investigated is not well known (Yin, 2003).

The semi-structured interviews were developed on previous research works that examined the relationship between tour operators and travel agents (Pencarelli et al., 2013; Pencarelli and Dini, 2016), and the use of e-learning within the tourism intermediation system (Kalbaska, 2012; Kalbaska et al., 2013; Kalbaska and Cantoni, 2018). The interviews were conducted using a micro tape-recorder and then, they were manually transcribed for analysis and interpretation.

DISCUSSION

Go Asia Tour Operator launched the Go Academy electronic platform in 2014 to offer online training courses to travel agents. The courses are free of charge; it needs only to fill a form requesting some information about the user and the travel agency he/she belongs to. There are currently over 1,000 travel agents registered in the platform from different parts of Italy. The project began with a survey conducted on a sample of 80 travel agencies to discern the need for information and knowledge regarding the Asian destinations where the tour operator is present, from the need to support sales processes of tour packages for these destinations. The first step of the research provided interesting input for the development of the e-learning platform, which is structured in seven main sections:

- The best agents: shows the names of the travel agents who have taken the courses and achieved the best results in the learning assessment tests;
- Prizes won: reveals the prizes that the tour operator awards to travel agents who successfully pass the courses related to specific tourist destinations;
- Advice: it is possible to directly consult the tour operator's product managers who operate in the various destinations and to follow webinars given by them;
- Travelers' blogs: posts travel reports to stimulate interest in certain destinations or tourist itineraries;
- Video channel: gives the link to the tour operator's YouTube channel to view exciting videos related to travel;
- News and events: provides information on the tour operator's activities and initiatives, such as participation in trade fairs;
- Go Academy training: highlights the online courses, featuring a combination of images and texts.

Various thought-provoking aspects, from a marketing standpoint, emerge from the participant observation and the interviews carried out. A first achievement to highlight is the opportunity to collect and systematize relevant data from travel agents and their agencies. Then, a dataset is developed by which intermediaries can be profiled to create more targeted and effective communication or commercial activities. It is also important to note that the e-learning platform contributes to feeding the CRM system, integrating useful data for the development of customer loyalty programs.

Moreover, it is worth noting that e-learning also acts as a communication tool for starting new relationships, helping the tour operator to build new business contacts and expand its network of intermediaries. In fact, some travel agents have started business relationships with the company after taking an online course. Another advantage of e-learning is

the acquisition of increased knowledge related to the final market. The users' interaction with the platform's tools allows to obtain information regarding, for example, market trends and travelers' uncertainties, needs, and behaviors. The greater knowledge about the final market particularly benefits the processes of product innovation and planning. The e-learning platform is also a useful means to enhance sales activities. Through the awarding of prizes (educational tours, gadgets, etc.) it is possible to draw travel agents' attention to specific destinations that the tour operator has an interest in promoting. It has been noted that travel agents, who successfully complete online courses, tend to increase their travel sales towards these destinations. Benefits are seen also in terms of increased visibility and brand awareness among intermediaries.

The findings of the interviews highlight some significant aspects of the relationship between tour operators and travel agents. Go Academy has found that the offer of online training services can affect its relationship with its direct customers (travel agents) who gain a different perspective on the offered tour packages as they have a greater awareness of them. One of the respondents stated: *“Those who have taken online courses almost automatically request that destination afterwards because they feel more confident in proposing it [to their clients]”*. In all likelihood this could have a positive impact on the loyalty of the intermediary and could also affect agents' behavior in the sales phase; by directing the customers to what most satisfies their needs, travel agents also spotlight the tour operator that helped them to obtain and, consequently, to complete the sale.

On the buyers' side, as well, perceptions are positive regarding the effects of online training on relationships with the tour operator. Online training is especially appreciated for the flexibility and cost savings it brings. From a relational point of view, digital training is seen as a tool able to increase the loyalty of travel agents, who feel that they are better supported by the supplier of these courses.

The attenuation of the travel agents' fear of being 'cannibalized' by tour operators has allowed them to trust TOs more, thus transforming the relationship; from a simple business relationship, it becomes a two-way partnership. Another respondent stated: *“Tour operators who have decided to offer us a tool such as digital training that allows us to improve our work, show that they want to strengthen our position as an intermediary and not that they want to exclude us from the distribution. Rather, they are helping us to survive and fight the competition of OTAs”*. This is in line with the results of the empirical study conducted by Pencarelli and Dini (2016) that shows the relevance of customer service to agencies in order to develop the relationship between the travel agencies and the TOs.

Building trust also appears to be a significant factor underlying relationships (Balaji, 2015). The travel agents who were interviewed declared that they rely more on providers who offer online training services than on those who do not offer them. One of them declared: *“I believe that those who offer training services such as online courses are certainly qualified and reliable; otherwise they would not have prepared a training course that puts their reputation on the line.”* This aspect is very interesting considering that image and reputation of the tour operator are the most important factors in the choice of the supplier by the travel agencies (Yevstafyev and Yevstafyev, 2015; Pencarelli and Dini, 2016). The quality of the training contents allows the intermediary to evaluate the skills and reliability of the tour operator's staff, thus building a degree of trust.

As pointed out by Pencarelli et al. (2013), building trust with intermediaries is a primary objective for the development of TOs. The relationship can also be strengthened indirectly, as the skills acquired through the training courses help travel agents to improve by becoming more effective and efficient in their work. These benefits may help the travel agent feel a sense of gratitude towards the tour operator that can lead to loyalty in the supply relationship. Considering the various advantages pointed out above, that online training can bring to the relationship between tour operators and travel agents, e-learning can be considered an increasingly captivating tool for relational marketing.

Table 1. Main findings

Research questions	Main results
(1) What marketing purposes can Tour Operators achieve by implementing e-learning platforms to provide training to Travel Agents?	Lead generation More effective communication with intermediaries Support to the promotion of destinations / products Increased knowledge related to the final market Benefits for product innovation processes Greater visibility of the offer at travel agencies Increased awareness among intermediaries Development of relations with intermediaries Sales increase
(2) How can the offer of online training services impact the relationship between Tour Operators and Travel Agents?	Perception of positive image Increased trust of intermediaries Increased loyalty of travel agents

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH PATHS

E-learning is an interesting tool that can be used to support travel agents transitioning from the role of mere service providers to that of consultants, to address the severe threats of growing competition from online travel agents (OTAs) and disintermediation favored by the spread of the internet. Providing solutions to travel agents' ongoing need for continuous learning can help tour operators to achieve important marketing objectives, in general, and to influence their relationships with these intermediaries, in particular. The analysis of the case study highlights how an online training offer positively affects the trust and loyalty of travel agent's vis-a-vis suppliers. In this sense, e-learning is configured as a valid tool for relational marketing.

To date, marketing literature has devoted little attention to this issue. This study contributes to the literature by offering ideas and reflections on the opportunities for using e-learning, both theoretical and managerial, for TOs specifically, but also, in more general terms, for other organizations operating in the tourism sector. The results confirm the evidences of previous studies (Cantoni and Kalbaska, 2010; Kalbaska et al., 2013) according to which TOs can reach marketing goals providing e-learning services to travel agents.

The e-learning platforms allow to generate leads and to collect important data from the continuous interactions with the travel agents. This strengthens the market knowledge and enables to implement actions aimed at developing the agents' loyalty. The integration with CRM systems allows to consolidate the relationship with the agents and avoid the high turnover caused by the multiplicity of relationships that the agencies have with the TOs and the strong competition (Pencarelli and Dini, 2016).

The single case study and the limited number of agencies involved in the empirical survey represent important limitations of this research work. Therefore, an expansion of the research by extending the number of operators to be analyzed is required.

This study provides important input for the development of future research on the topic of relationships between tour operators and travel agents. A possible objective could be to investigate the relationship between the level of satisfaction of travel agents that have taken online courses and their loyalty to the tour operator that provided the training. Another objective of future research could be that of verifying the impact of e-learning activities on sales performance and therefore, highlighting the role this training method plays as a tool used to strengthen the traditional distribution system.

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