

Culture Influences Travel Website Use

Culture makes a difference in travel website use note the SHTM's Rob Law and Bonnie Leung in a recently published research paper. Website operators need to consider the cultural norms of their target customers to increase the likelihood of online purchases. Focusing on customers from mainland China and the United States, the researchers identify the aspects of website quality that most appeal to the two cultural groups.

Commerce and Culture Online

With the Internet becoming increasingly significant as a sales channel for travel agencies, there has been a marked increase in searches for travel information and online bookings. Yet there have been very few attempts to investigate the links between website quality, user satisfaction and the intention to purchase a product or service. This is a particularly important oversight, because the Internet has allowed travel firms to move from being reactive to customer requests to being proactive by "meeting customers' needs for the most updated information".

There is also a clear indication that this change has led to increased purchases. The researchers note that 67% of travellers in the United States have checked "travel-related information" online, with more than 42 million people making purchases. In Asia, there was a 54% increase in travel information searches and related purchases from 1998 to 2001 alone.

In this sense, a comparison between American and Chinese website users is grounded in increasingly high levels of Internet use, with the added benefit that it allows observations of a relatively mature market and one that is growing rapidly. As the researchers put it, "the US is a leading country with a well-established environment for e-commerce, whereas China is a fast growing country with an enormous potential online market". As yet, only an estimated 20% of mainland Chinese Internet users have made online purchases.

Significance of Cultural Differences

The differences between users in the two countries are likely to be rooted in dissimilar cultural traits, write the researchers. They point to the individualism that leads to less avoidance of uncertainty in the United States, and the communalism that encourages the search for more certainty in mainland China. This, they note, is essential to understanding the online purchase intentions of customers from the two cultures.

Consideration should also be given to "the compatibility of the Internet with the values and norms of a society". Clearly, given the levels of use and its origin in the United States, the Internet does not clash with any American societal norms. In mainland China, however, the researchers suggest that attitudes towards, use of, and self-confidence when using the Internet could be different.

International Visitor Survey

To determine whether these cultural disparities actually made a difference in travel website use, the researchers drew on data from a large-scale international visitor survey conducted at the Hong Kong International Airport. The relevant part of the survey asked departing travellers from the United States and mainland China about their perceptions of travel website quality, their satisfaction with using such websites and whether they would make purchases through those websites in the future.

Of the interviewees who had visited a travel website in the previous year, the researchers identified 249 travellers from mainland China and 238 from the United States. The majority of the Chinese travellers were women, between 26 and 35 years old and tertiary educated with annual family incomes ranging from US\$10,000-29,000. A majority of the American travellers were also degree holders, but in stark contrast to their Chinese counterparts they were men, aged 45 to 65 years old and had annual family incomes of at least US\$100,000.

Website Quality Crucial

The researchers measured website quality in terms of functionality and usability. Functionality covered whether the websites that were visited offered information on purchases, services or products, destinations and contacts, as well as the quality of that information.

Both groups of travellers thought that information quality was the most important aspect of a website's functionality, but the Chinese were also interested in destination information and the Americans wanted purchase information. According to the researchers, this suggests that "Chinese could be less likely to make online purchases" than their American counterparts.

In terms of website usability, the researchers obtained information on language use, layout and graphics, information architecture, the user interface, ease of navigation and general perceptions. Both groups of travellers thought that language use was important and website layout and use of graphics were relatively unimportant. However, the American users were more concerned about overall usability than were their Chinese counterparts.

Satisfaction Increases Intention to Purchase

When asked about how satisfied they were with their website experiences, the Chinese travellers were a little more reserved than their American counterparts, probably because the Americans were more frequent website users. Overall, the researchers found that improvements in how travel websites function and their ease of use were likely to enhance customer satisfaction and thus the intention to purchase from those websites.

The American travellers were also more likely to purchase through a travel website over both the next six months and the next two years. The researchers link this to the individualistic culture in the United States, wherein people are more likely to make decisions based on their own needs and interests rather than consult widely, as Chinese tend to do. The Chinese travellers trusted online purchases less than their American counterparts,

which could have been affected by worries about online credit card security.

The researchers suggest that website operators should generally pay more attention to language use and the quality of information on their websites to enhance the intention of users to purchase from them. Yet, they should also consider the specific needs of different cultural groups that they target.

"The success of a travel website", conclude the researchers, "depends largely on the extent to which it can meet the requirements of targeted customers".

Points to Note

- The Internet is allowing travel businesses to move from being reactive to proactive.
- Cultural differences in Internet use affect the intention to purchase online.
- American travellers are more likely than mainland Chinese travellers to purchase online.
- Travel websites need to meet the societal and cultural requirements of customers.

Law, Rob, Bai, Billy and Leung, Bonnie (2008). Travel website uses and cultural influence: A comparison between American and Chinese travellers. *Information Technology and Tourism*, Vol. 10, pp. 215-225.