

Press Release

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PolyU Study Finds Cultural Information Critical for Hotel Websites

Beijing hotels could improve the quality of their websites by providing more cultural information about the destination, according to Professor Rob Law of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) and a co-researcher. Although Beijing is a popular tourist destination with a wealth of cultural attractions, the capital's hotel websites pay insufficient attention to them. Those websites that do provide related information tend to focus on China's ancient imperial culture, but there is little mention of everyday culture in Beijing, which is of interest to many tourists.

The rapid development of the online travel market has led to the Internet becoming what the researchers label an "essential tool" for hotels to communicate directly with their customers. They note that "the 'first image' of a hotel has now been transferred from its front desk to its website". Poor web design can thus result in the loss of sales.

The researchers explain that website quality can be assessed using various criteria, such as ease of access, search mechanisms, layout and information relevance. Information quality is often the most essential feature of a successful website. The availability of information on destination features such as local attractions, shopping and cuisine is important in helping potential customers to make decisions about their destination, yet such information is rarely available on hotel websites. This means that customers will go to other websites to obtain destination information, a situation that the researchers describe as putting hotels "into a passive position".

To determine how this situation might play on Beijing hotel websites, the researchers consider the attributes of destination cultural information and the "factors that contribute to hotel website performance". Of all Chinese cities, Beijing is an important choice because of its "fame, long history, and diversified culture", and how local cultural factors are presented on its hotel websites is likely to have a significant affect on the hotel market.

Having identified a broad range of possibly significant cultural attractions, the researchers interviewed nine Beijing residents of at least three-years' standing. The interviewees were asked to "to think about the cultural factors they thought should be represented on Beijing hotel websites", and how those websites "could better represent and promote Beijing's culture".

The twelve factors identified for further investigation were the Great Wall, the Temple of Heaven, the Bird's Nest stadium, the main Olympic Games site, the Forbidden City, Siheyuan (quadrangle residences), hutongs (Beijing's narrow alleys), Peking Opera, tea houses, Peking roast duck, the Temple Fair and pet birds.

The researchers evaluated the websites of 168 3-5 star hotels, focusing only on those with English versions because their interest was in determining relevance to international tourists. Sixty of the hotels were 3 star, 65 were 4 star and 43 were 5 star.

A minority of the hotels were state owned, and almost three-quarters were run by private operators. Most of the hotels were mainland China based, with only a minority of international brands represented. Chain hotels constituted just less than a third of all those under consideration.

The researchers find that the Forbidden City was the most frequently mentioned cultural factor, probably because it “is in the centre of Beijing and is the imperial palace of ancient China”. Some websites use it as a geographical landmark. Other features relating to ancient and imperial China were mentioned relatively frequently, but few of the features relating to the everyday lives of Beijing people are mentioned. The Temple Fair, an increasingly important part of Beijing life, and pet birds are not mentioned at all.

Even more significantly, almost a third of the hotels include none of the cultural factors under consideration, and only 13 include at least half. This, note the researchers, indicates that “the majority of Beijing hotel websites do a poor job of introducing destination cultural factors on their English webpages”. However, they suggest that “it may not be a hotel’s intention or decision to include certain information” at the expense of other information, as websites are often developed by third parties that “may have no idea of what kinds of information they want to include”.

When considering the cultural information on display by type of hotel ownership, the researchers find that privately owned hotels only provide moderately more cultural information on their websites than state-owned hotels. On the surface, this could be seen as not reflecting well on privately owned hotels, given that state-owned hotels depend less on marketing to attract customers because they “have a steady stream of visitors due to official conferences and other events”. However, as the websites under consideration include only those with English versions, the state-owned hotels covered are likely to already have good knowledge of Internet marketing.

Turning to whether the websites belong to chain or independent hotels, the researchers find that chain hotel websites are more likely to include information on the Bird’s Nest, the Great Wall, the Temple of Heaven, the Forbidden City, Siheyuan, Peking Opera, and hutongs. Chain hotels benefit from economies of scale that allow them to create higher quality websites, so this disparity is not surprising. Yet, independent hotels are more likely to mention the main Olympic Games site and Peking roast duck, which chain hotels should also be covering.

When comparing mainland China based hotels and their international counterparts, the researchers find that the local hotels include less cultural information on their websites. Although they do more frequently mention the Great Wall, the Forbidden City and Peking Opera, they tend to treat their websites more as what the researchers term “electronic brochures” than as marketing tools.

There are also differences between the websites of hotels with different star ratings. Higher-rated hotels generally offer more cultural information on their websites than lower-rated hotels, which is probably to be expected given different marketing budgets

and focuses. However, tea houses are more likely to be mentioned by 3-star hotels than their 4- and 5-star counterparts. Overall, mainland Chinese, independent, smaller, and lower star-rated hotels need to put greater effort into promoting destination culture.

The researchers conclude that Beijing hotels generally provide insufficient cultural information, which is a “basic need for visitors to a city”. Hotels would benefit from including more detailed information on their websites to provide integrated travel services to customers, particularly for foreigners “who may not be familiar with Chinese culture and history”. In that respect, more attention should be paid to the English versions of websites, which tend to offer less cultural information than the Chinese versions.

Yet even more importantly, the hotels need to move away from their focus on ancient imperial culture. The researchers argue that the rapid development of Siheyuan and hutong tourism suggests tourists want to experience the everyday culture of Beijing. It would just be plain good business sense for hotel websites to mirror that growing interest.

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