ORIGINAL ARTICLE

THE GUEST HOUSES AND ELECTRONIC COMMERCE A CASE STUDY ON GUEST HOUSES IN JODHPUR

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Abstract:

Now-a-days, the guest houses in Jodhpur use a high-priced and unique style different from the one in the past. It not only offers accommodation services but also has a variety of other services to serve. The number of online booking has been increasing along with the development of tourism.

E-Commerce for Guest-Houses in Jodhpur is aimed to investigate the business potential of Internet for these guest-houses. The study also identifies the benefits and problems brought by the new medium. E-Commerce is offering the guest houses in Jodhpur, a number of new opportunities that are cost effective and reliable, thereby for the first time, providing them with an opportunity to compete with their larger counterparts.

In this information age, it seems like almost all the guest-houses in Jodhpur has their own websites. A web site that is not effectively designed and maintained could spoil the guest-house's reputation which could certainly affect the travelers by avoiding visiting them.

With the development of information science and technology, the application of electronic commerce is used widespread. The guest houses in Jodhpur have progressed into another phase. This research studies up to what extent, the E-Commerce has been promoting the operations of the guest-houses in terms of providing quality services.

In the near future, E-Commerce seems to become an integral part of the Society, especially with the emergence of new technologies which are about to change the way business is being done.

KEYWORDS:

Guest Houses And Electronic Commerce , information science , technology.

INTRODUCTION:

With the guest-house & e-commerce, the landscape of the hospitality industry is forever changed. Online sales have become an important part of the business which you cannot afford to ignore. The e-commerce covers every aspect of online presence, from search engine rankings to third-party listings on Expedia, Travelocity and Trip Advisor.

The sales and marketing strategies of the guest-houses can make the difference between empty rooms and solidly booked guest-houses. The sales and marketing services through e-commerce covers every area of advertising and marketing through online tactics.

As the tourism industry is expanding in Western Rajasthan, the need for expanding the communication networks to connect the customers and the service providers has increased. The World Wide Web has been utilized as a means for communication widely over the past decade in the tourism industry. It has been instrumental in helping this sector to expand its markets and has played a major role in

helping the growth of the industry. The World Wide Web is a cost effective means for the guest-houses in Jodhpur to directly market their offerings to a large customer population across the globe. It is also a very convenient means for the customers to gather information and compare between alternatives in an interactive manner.

According to O'connor, the main advantages that the internet provides as a marketing medium for travel and tourism sector are: (i) the global market reach, (ii) the customers who access the web-sites are much more interested rather than in a conventional marketing communication where, the message is targeted indiscriminately, (iii) the web-sites are not affected by capacity constraints, and (iv) the possibility of two-way communication offered by the internet.

According to the editor-in-chief of International Journal of Electronic Commerce, Vladimir Zwass, 'Electronic commerce is sharing business information, maintaining business relationships and conducting business transactions by means of telecommunications networks'.

With reference to the e-commerce and the guest-houses in Jodhpur, the term e-commerce includes:

1.Electronic Reservation of Accommodation & other Services offered & sold by the Guest-Houses in Jodhpur.
2.All the steps involved in Reservation & Cancellation, such as On-line Marketing, Advance Payment and Support for Confirmation of the Services.
3.The Electronic provision of services such as Maintaining Customers Services after their check-out from the Guest-House or on-line Recommendations (Comments & Reviews given by the Travelers on the Travel Websites) and Feedbacks posted on the Website of the Guest House.
4.Electronic support for collaboration between other guest-houses, hotel & travel agencies.

The extent of the use of e-commerce by the guest-houses in Jodhpur has increased considerably over the years. The growth in the adoption of e-commerce by the guest-houses in Jodhpur has been facilitated by a number of factors including technological advancements, greater internet penetration among households, heightened competition among the guest houses in Jodhpur, etc.

The adoption and usage of e-commerce by the guest-houses in Jodhpur however has not been very uniform. It has been observed that the adoption of e-commerce is determined by factors like the size of the guest-house and the target market. Till date, no study has focused on this aspect. The present study looks at the factors that influence the adoption and usage of e-commerce among the guest-houses in Jodhpur. Guest-Houses in Jodhpur are selected as a setting to explore the relative influence of factors in determining the adoption of e-commerce.

Jodhpur is a growing market in terms of the e-commerce usage in hospitality industry. However the guest-houses in Jodhpur are at different stages of utilization of the internet in their business activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Guest Houses in Jodhpur are established under the scheme provided by the Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation which regulates the Paying Guest-Houses in Jodhpur. There are near about 315 registered guest-houses in Jodhpur. Almost 70% buildings/havelis converted into guest-houses hold the reputation of being one of the very oldest in Jodhpur today, some being a 100 year old building, some being 200 year old, some being 350 year old (as claimed by Saji Sanwri Guest House) and even 500 years old (as claimed by Yogi Guest House). In opposition of these, there are some other guest-houses which are newly built buildings converted to guest-houses. Though the guest-houses being running in very old buildings, most of them meet with modern amenities and international perspectives.

Some guest-houses in Jodhpur (Raas Haveli, Pal Inn Haveli, Haveli, Krishna Prakash Haveli & Saji Sanwri) holding with a reputation for driving ever-higher levels of guest loyalty and satisfaction, these guest-houses strive to continually improve its guest experiences. Most of the guest-houses in Jodhpur are ideally located at convenient distances from the airport, railway station & bus terminal. Apart from providing Accommodation & F&B Services, many guest-houses provide other facilities like Complimentary Pick-Up Services, Traditional Folk Dance/Music, Foreign Exchange, Village & Camel Safaris, Spa Services, Doctor on Call, Tours & Travel Desk, Free Parking & Laundry Services, etc.

Category of Guest-Houses & Types of Accommodation provided in the Guest-Houses:

Persons intending to use his residential premises as Paying Guest House for providing accommodation for tourists are provided to apply in Form 'A' for registration of Paying Guest House and for

renewal in Form 'D' to the Prescribed Authority. Those guest-houses which are already recognized and/or registered by the Tourism Department of the State or by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India before the commencement of this scheme, shall be deemed to have been registered under this scheme.

On the basis of the check list given in the Schedule provided by Rajasthan Paying Guest Scheme, 2012 by the Department of Tourism, Government of Rajasthan, the classification committee shall give its recommendation for categorization of the guest-house as 'Silver' or 'Gold' category.

The accommodation of the residential premises to be registered under such scheme as Paying Guest House shall conform to the following conditions, namely :-

(i) The residential premises should be a purely residential unit and the owner should physically be resided therein along with his family;
(ii) The owner should let out not less than 2 rooms and not more than 5 rooms to paying guests consisting of fifteen beds in all;
(iii) Each bedroom should have an attached bathroom and WC and adequate arrangement for water and power supply, proper ventilations and lighting, suitable furniture and other facilities;
(iv) The premises should be in good state of repair and have required standard of hygiene, cleanliness and safety including fire safety;
(v) The premises should have an adequate parking facility either within the same premises or in the vicinity;
(vi) The premises should have been considered suitable by a classification committee for registration as an establishment as silver or gold category; and
(vii) Any other condition the Commissioner, Department of Tourism or the Prescribed Authority may impose, from time to time.

Upon confirming the aforesaid conditions for getting the guest-house registered under such scheme, the owner is issued with a certificate in form 'C'. the certificate is generally issued for a period of 2 years duration in the first instance and shall be renewable thereafter, for one year on payment of fee as laid down by the authority.

Marketing Strategy Adopted by Guest-Houses in Jodhpur:

Almost all the guest-houses in Jodhpur uses e-marketing in regards to reach their customers directly and fill their vacant rooms which is been explored as a part of any robust guest-house marketing strategy. The guest-houses in Jodhpur use the following strategies:

(a) Claim Local Listings:

The very first thing the guest-houses does, is establishing their presence on the web by creating and claiming its local listings. Search engines look to these listings when deciding how to rank their website and the travelers uses local directories like Trip Advisor & Thorn Tree when searching for the guest-houses in Jodhpur. These listings are set up for Free. Using a site like 'GetListed.Org' & 'The Google+ Handbook for Hotels' helps to discover the local listings that the customers can claim for the guest-houses that they are in search for. Sometimes, the travelers are often in search for the guest-houses of their preference which suits them in their travel guide-books (Lonely Planet, Le Guide Du Routard, Chikinyu Arikukata, Rough Guides, Reise-Know-How, etc.) that they carry with them. Getting the name of a particular guest-house from their guide books, they get to online and further proceed to surf on the Internet and read about their Reviews & Comments that other Travelers who have been there already. It is treated as an e-recommendation.

(b) Getting a Website Designed:

A report suggests that 56% of all travelers start their guest-house accommodation planning using search engines. This means that overwhelming majority of travelers judge the guest-house based upon their first impression on the website of any guest-house. The guest-house owners get their website designed in a very unique & in a customized way. The top-most ranked guest-houses in Jodhpur designs their website in such a way that the search engines rank them better which puts their presence on the top most places in their first starting page. The website so designed is usually controlled & monitored by them which facilitate them to update at any time. Generally, the websites of the guest-houses in Jodhpur are seen as elaborate art projects, meant to show off the personality of the guest-house. Insteadly, good guest-house web design treats its website as conversion engines, meant to portray the guest-house in the best possible light to

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increase online reservations which can make more money for them.

(c) Mobile Optimized Website:

Since the slice of guest-house reservations made from smart phones is increasing rapidly every year, it has now been essential for the owners of the guest-houses to include some form of mobile optimization, preferably in the for of a mobile optimized website in their marketing strategy. For this purpose, top-most ranked guest-houses in Jodhpur like Raas Haveli have made a static mobile website, built just for smart phones.

(d) Using Internet Booking Engine:

Instead of giving a certain percentage of every reservation to an online hotel agency (10% - Agoda, 10% Hostelbookers), the guest-houses in Jodhpur have now gone with taking direct bookings using internet booking engine through their own websites. Online Payment Gateway System through NEFT Transfers, Credit Cards, Pay Pal, etc., has also been upgraded & linked through the Websites so as to directly deposit the amount into the Bank Account of the Beneficiary. However, e-mail marketing is one amongst them which is the most cost-effective ways of booking the accommodation and building long-term guest loyalty. The bookings those optimized on the tablets and smart phones gains a greater percentage of 'last-minute' bookings.

While every guest-house in Jodhpur has its different marketing strategy, successful guest-houses mix and match ideas like these to create a living, breathing, fluid marketing strategy for guest-houses that turns empty rooms into consistent, regular producers.

Guest Houses & E-Commerce:

With guest-house & e-commerce, the landscape of the hospitality industry is forever changed. Online sales are an important part of any business which can't afford to ignore. E-commerce cover every aspect of a guest-houses' online presence, from search engine rankings to third-party listings on Expedia, Travelocity and Tripadvisor.

As discussed earlier, e-commerce is sharing business information, maintaining business relationships and conducting business transactions. For the guest-houses in Jodhpur, e-commerce comprises the same. We shall study how –

Sharing Business Information:

Almost all the guest-houses in Jodhpur, through internet communication, shares information regarding the accommodation availability, services offered, value added services offered by them, etc.

Maintaining Business Relationships:

Almost all the guest-houses in Jodhpur, through internet communication, maintain business (Guest/Customer) Relationships after their Check-out. They get in touch greeting them on the Festival times, some of them on their Birthdays & Anniversaries of Group Operators, Coming to them with their offer of their best packages , etc.

Conducting Business Transactions:

Guest-Houses dealing on-line through reservations coming on their website/e-mails, usually conducts financial transactions through pay-pal, credit-card, master-card, visa card, NEFT transfers through online payment gateway systems so as to confirm their room reservations and other services offered by them in the high/peak season time. i.e., November to February.

General Terms & Conditions laid down by the guest-houses in Jodhpur in context to online payment are as follows:

Reservation Policy: Travelers seeking to reserve the rooms generally make advance reservations via booking online to assure room availability. A deposit is required to obtain a confirmed reservation. Rates may sometimes change without prior notice and may also vary for special events except for confirmed

reservations (deposits taken). The Top-end Guest-Houses charges 12.45% luxury + service tax on room tariff.

Deposits: To confirm the room reservations, guest-houses in Jodhpur normally demands for a deposit equal to a minimum of one night's room rate, or 50% of the entire stays; whichever is more. Most of the guest-houses however, accept American Express, Maestro, Visa and MasterCard. For Corporate reservations secured by a company credit card, the deposit requirement may be waived at the discretion of the guest-house. For this, the traveler has to first inquire before making a reservation. Group bookings for four or more rooms require a 30 day cancellation notice for refund of the deposit.

Cancellation Policy: The guest has to inform the executive of the guest-house within the following guidelines for a refund of his deposit. Some guest-houses provide a cancellation number that is to be given to insure proper return of the deposit after deducting taxes & surcharges. If the cancellation does not meet the guidelines, the deposit shall be retained. For early checkout, the guest is responsible for his entire reservation and is charged as such if the remainder of the reservation can not be rebooked.

Most of the guest-houses follow the below given guidelines on the cancellation policy:

Cancellation of the Reservation for 01 Reserved Night prior to the guest's arrival has to be cancelled at least 48 hours before. For 02 to 06 Reserved Nights, prior to the guest's arrival has to be cancelled 07 days before. For 07 or more Reserved Nights, prior to the guest's arrival can cancel his reservation within 14 days from the date of his arrival.

Refund Policy: Upon cancellation of the booking, the processing generally takes for a week until the whole amount is refunded to the traveler's account and which is due to the processing time of the bank. The refund amount depends on numerous factors such as the cancellation policy, time of cancellation and processing fees.

Non-arrival of the Guest/Traveler to the Guest-House: If the guest fails to arrive to the guest-house on the arrival date the entire reservation is cancelled automatically and he is charged the cost of the whole reservation. If he fails to check in on the first date but still continue his travel plan to stay at the guest-house, and in this case, if he contacts the guest-house owner to keep the room for him for the rest of the nights, the owner can do such adjustments. And if he fails to do such thing, the entire reservation is auto-cancelled and no refund is issued.

Shorten Stay (Early check-out): Shorten stay is subject to the whole period charge whether or not the guest stays for the whole period. If the guest has changed his travel plans, he is entitled to contact the guest-house owner as early as possible so as to minimize the charge by the guest-house.

Voucher: At the time the reservation is confirmed, the guest-house owner issues a confirmation number and voucher which the guest can print out and which is very important to present the confirmation voucher to the guest-house upon his arrival.

Payment Security: The personal details or credit card information that has to be provided on the guest-house's website for the purpose of reservations is generally claimed to be secured by the owner of the guest-house. The credit card number, name, address, and telephone number are protected by the latest security technology.

Travelers/Guests arriving to Guest-Houses through Various Modes by means of E-Commerce:

The study revealed that the Travelers/Guests, while making their Reservations choose their place of stays in the Guest-Houses by:

i.)Mouth Recommendations
ii.)Guest-House to Guest-House Contacts
iii.)Referring Guide Books
iv.)Online Surfing
v.)Using On-Line Travel Websites

i.)Mouth Recommendations: Guests who have already stayed at a particular guest-house, and upon being satisfied with the services offered by the guest-house, that guest, during his visit to other places/destinations, often recommend the guest-house in which he had stayed in, to the other guests recommending him to stay there during his visit. Around 10% - 15% travelers visiting Jodhpur, mostly backpackers among them, are found using such mode of reaching the guest-house. This of course, does not include any participation of e-commerce. However, when accessed to the internet, they are often found searching and booking with the guest-houses online.

ii.)Guest-House to Guest-House Contacts: Upon asking by a traveler to the manager/owner of the guest-house for any good contact that he can provide him good accommodation of his choice in the destination city, the manager/owner is often found recommending those guest-houses which are in contact with that guest-house. Similarly, the guest-house in other destinations recommends the guest-houses which recommend their guest-house. Again, this does not include any participation of e-commerce. However, when accessed to the internet, they are often found searching and booking with the guest-houses online.

iii.)Referring Guide Books: Almost 90% - 95% foreign travelers and 20% - 30% Indian travelers carry guide-books for their reference to search in the general information about the city, places to stay in, places to dine & drink, places of excursions, etc. Among 80% - 90% travelers, whether Indian or foreigner gets online to search more information of the guest-houses they want to stay in. Further, they get accessed to the website of the guest-house where they fill out the room reservation form and make payments online through credit cards, online transfers, etc.,

iv.)Online Surfing: Travelers are often seen surfing on their browsers in the internet café in the market nearby or in the guest-houses itself for finding accommodations to their destinations. They usually refer names of the guest-houses from their guide-books and search on google.com for their website and traveler's reviews on the thorn tree, trip advisor, etc. from where they can get complete information and all the useful reviews about the place they want to stay in. Online Surfing also helps the travelers to compare overall determinants of the guest-houses so as to choose the best alternative place to stay in.

v.)Using On-line Travel Websites : There are thousands of travel websites to search in for the guest-houses such as yatra.com, goibibo.com, agoda.com, hostelbookers.com, hostelworld.com, etc., who not only provide useful information & contacts of the guest houses but also facilitates in terms of percentage / ratings provided to the guest-houses on the basis of travelers reviews. The travelers often book their rooms through these travel websites by filling a reservation form giving the name of the person in whose room is to be booked, date of arrival & departure, no. of persons, type of room and extra person.

Comparison of Traditional and Online Booking:

Ways to Book Rooms	Traditional Way of Booking	On-Line Booking
Information	Not Convenient	Rich and Rapid
Work Process	Complicated	Easy and Transparent
Consumers' Characteristics	Local	Worldwide
Service	Depend on Service Personnel	Computer in-charge of Service
The Staff	The Operator of Management & Service	Operators of Website Maintenance
Main Circuit	Bricks and Mortar (Hotel, Traditional Travel Agency)	Virtual Circuit
Payment	By Cash and Credit Card	A Variety of Ways, NEFT Transfers Including Remittances
The Cost	Higher	Lower

THE STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted through a questionnaire survey amongst the guest-houses in Jodhpur and the domestic & foreign tourists. 85 guest-houses were randomly selected from 150 odd guest-houses for the survey. The questionnaire was directly administered to the executives of the guest-houses. The study focused on the analysis of the current situation. Several key insights emerged from this situational analysis.

The guest-houses considered in the study are located in six popular visiting areas for the purpose of excursions in Jodhpur, e.g. (i) The Clock Tower Area (inside city wall in & around 200 sq. mtrs. From the clock tower), (ii) Nav-Chokiya & Chandpole Areas, (iii) Nai Sarak-Sojati Gate Area, (iv) Ratanada Area, (v) Paota-Mahamandir Area & (vi) Chopasni Road. Together these locations attracted about 13 million visitors in the year 2013 and around about 3.9 million visitors have visited until this May, 2014. The figures include both, foreign and domestic visitors. Also these six areas have a total of about 280 registered guest-houses.

The study was performed using a process consisting of facilitated brainstorming, structured interviews, primary data collection with multiple subject matter experts and secondary research to address the following critical questions:

1. Whether e-commerce can promote the operations of the guest-house?
2. What is the satisfaction level of the customers through online services?
3. Realize the market strategies, online booking and the risk of unbalanced information between them.
4. Does the e-commerce can improve the effect of business?
5. How are the consumers satisfied with online service by the operators?
6. What is the overall response to the current situation going in the Guest-Houses with E-Commerce?
7. Are there any other alternatives emerging? If yes, then what and how?

The questionnaire drafted was issued to all the participants who were interviewed for this study. Be it the owners and the managers of the guest-houses or the domestic & foreign tourists/travelers or the officials at the RTDC, Jodhpur. The results are intended to provoke discussion and communication within all the selected guest-houses taken for the purpose of the study in an effort to drive further collaboration between the participants.

While conducting interviews, the researcher discussed many of the critical issues including:

Work Process in the Guest-Houses
Services Availed
Service Quality
Maintaining CRM
Increasing Room Sales
Availing Value-Added Services
Social Media Activity
Staff Operations & Management
No. of Inquiries & its Positivity
Timely Payment Transfers and related Issues
Promotion Schemes
Customer Satisfaction and many more…

Sampling Area

The study is conducted in various busy touristy places in Jodhpur.

Population

All persons, whether directly or indirectly dealing in the context with providing and using accommodation facilities in Jodhpur such as those guest-houses providing accommodation to the travelers, the travelers themselves availing such services, the officials of the RTDC, Jodhpur.

Sample Size

The research focused on over 85 guest-houses randomly selected out of 150 odd guest-houses taken for the purpose of the study.

Sampling Design

The sample was designed by the convenience based random sampling method.

Primary Data

Most of the data collected for the purpose of the study was primary data through a simple structured questionnaire, which was inculcated on the samples of subject matter experts from the guest-houses in Jodhpur and the visitors, both, frequent & infrequent.

Secondary Data

The secondary information was collected from the published sources such as the RTDC Color Magazine & the websites of the selected guest-houses.

Data Analysis

All the data collected from the respondents was critically analyzed on the given topic on Guest-Houses & E-Commerce.

Research Period

The research was carried out from 25th October, 2013 to 19th June, 2014.

KEY FINDINGS:

1.Around 90% of the 85 paying guest-houses had an online booking facility on their own websites. However, 15% of the websites had difficult online booking processes.
2.Only 8 paying guest-houses among the 85 allow making a restaurant reservation during the online booking process. This serves an opportunity to ensure that the guests eat in the guest-house rather than going elsewhere.
3.Only 15% of the 85 paying guest-houses that I tested had a mobile-optimized version of their websites.
4.Around 30% of the 85 paying guest-houses that I evaluated and that had a profile on TripAdvisor were responding to every single comment made about their guest-house, whether good or bad. If we look at the conversations, we could come to know how important TripAdvisor is to the industry.
5.Only 13 paying guest-houses among the 85, allow giving facilities to Bishnoi Villages & Camel Safaris in Osian.
6.Around 60% of the 85 paying guest-houses did not appear on the first page of Google natural search results for their keywords. Research also suggests that 9% of Google users will click on the second page and therefore the chances of Guests looking on pages two or beyond are slim. Search engine optimization may allow guest-houses to ensure that they appear high up on relevant results pages.
7.Around 20% paying guest-houses Responded to Tweets while 65% were on Facebook, although the quality of the updates varied.
8.Only 9 paying guest-houses among the 85 were paying to advertise for the name of their guest-house.
9.Around 40% of the paying guest-houses among the 85 with an online booking system did not accept bookings beyond the next five months.
10.Very few paying guest-houses having an online booking facility on their own website were carrying out 'Quick Calls' during the booking process to provide a responsive online experience.

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS:

With the rapid penetration of the Internet, its use as a medium for communication and transaction is increasing. The study attempts to understand the factors that influence the usage of e-commerce in the hotel industry. Jodhpur being an important tourist destination in Rajasthan provides an excellent context for the study. Further, Jodhpur being one of the fastest growing cities in India, the extent of use of the Internet is in its growth phase. While all the guest houses that were surveyed had a website of their own and an e-mail service to get into communication directly with the travelers.

It is important to find out more about the factors that influence the usage intensity of e-commerce in the hospitality industry. The study gives a general idea about the impact of the various factors on the intensity of use of e-commerce.

The study attempts to link external and internal factors related to a guest-house to its dependence on e-commerce. In terms of managerial implications, the study gives an insight towards the reasons behind e-commerce usage in the hospitality industry. This shall be very useful for e-intermediaries in assessing

new opportunities for expansion and market growth.

1.Those guest-houses having an online booking facility on their own website should also accept bookings beyond the next five months up to at least 15 months.
2.Those guest-houses having an online booking facility on their own website should also provide other services additionally for sales such as Bishnoi Village Tours, Camel Safaris, City Sight-Seeing, etc.
3.Those guest-houses having an online booking facility on their own website should also provide restaurant services also.
4.The owners and/or the managers of the guest-houses should also consider the importance of social media and interact with those guests who stayed at their place as well inviting and attracting other guests to come to their place by giving special offers, packages etc.
5.Those guest-houses having their own website should update their websites in regular intervals and also get their website updated under mobile-optimized version.
6.Those guest-houses which are listed on the TripAdvisor should respond to all comments received by their guests who stayed at their place, whether good or bad.

LIMITATIONS:

The study also has some limitations which are as follows:

The time is the main constraint so limited period of time has been spent on this study.
The support from the management of the guest-houses was limited due to their uncomfortability to disclose their business service secrets among outsiders.

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