

IMPROVING THE PERFORMANCE AND EFFICIENCY OF TRAVEL AGENCIES WITH IT TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract: *In the present circumstances where tourists prefer to inform themselves and to order through websites, a travel agency needs at least an easily manageable website, through which to provide tourists with as many different travel offers as possible. A management as effective as possible of an agency is made by centralizing the data available in the databases and by informing clients through the agency website. Moreover, in order to increase the efficiency of the agency, to decrease the response time and to increase clients' satisfaction the travel agency should also use business intelligence solutions. We are presenting, in this article the two elements that are essential for a travel agency: the website and its importance and a few data analysis reports built with the business intelligence application QlikView.*

Key words: *travel agency, web-site, business intelligence, analysis reports, QlikView*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most important economic sectors and is also the sector that records the highest growth rate in the European economy. Tourism is an attractive field, although in recent years it has had a downtrend, with decreases recorded at most of the specific indicators.

The travel agency is a privileged intermediary between tourists and tourism service providers. In Romania, travel agencies carry out their activity based on the tourism license issued by the Ministry of Tourism, and the person who provides the operative management must be a the holder of a tourism certificate.

The exchange of information is very important for the sale of the tourism product. Information must flow quickly and securely between the clients and the tourism providers. Information technology (IT) that can be regarded as a mixture of computers and communication has become a vital element for the future of the tourism industry. Its powers allow information to be used more efficiently and to flow through computer networks almost instantly.

An important trend recorded in recent times is that of the online purchase of packages. Online companies will predominate, and thus tourism will become the biggest industry on the Internet. This forecast can be justified by the extent Internet gained in the last few years in the tourism industry worldwide,

Client/server applications have been designed for this purpose and an increasing number of companies, thus including those in the area of tourism services, shifted to business operation on website, because it is not very difficult to write a text message and to enter information in a database, many times found behind a Computer Reservations System/Global Distribution System.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The online tourism development forecasts are very optimistic because an increasing number of persons have access to the Internet. The internet contributes to the change in the tourism activity as follows:

- New manners of organising tourism business are initiated.

- The new stakeholders do not need to invest in material infrastructure, required for a company with traditional trade.
- The business management process is increased.
- New methods of selling the tourism product emerge, for example the auctions.

Through the development of own websites, an increasing number of agencies shifted from the offline sale system to the sale on the Internet, investing more and more in this direction. This can ensure their access to a growing number of clients, and thus the long-term success.

The development of the tourism market, the fierce competition and new requirements created by the technological evolution led to the conclusion that the mere travel offers are no longer sufficient for the success of the business. The productivity, the increased efficiency, the response rate, and the provided services are important elements in attracting clients. The strategy of the electronic tourism business imply continuous action, correlated with the level of progress of the tourism agency and with the environment in which it operates.

The management information systems have an important role in the management of an electronic tourism business. The business intelligence (BI) solutions integrate all the functions specific to a travel agency, replacing multiple applications with single objectives. All the transactions and reports are processed at centralized level, thus answering both the business needs of the agency, and the information needs if the tax administration, providing flexible and detailed reports or summaries that are easily read and interpreted.

In this article we present, by means of examples, the importance of two key elements for the increase of the efficiency of a travel agency, starting from the following prerogatives:

- any travel agency must have a website, it cannot exist without one;
- any travel agency must have a management information system that can be used as a tool for the planning, research and development of the activities.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Online travel agencies provide a fast and convenient solution for booking holidays /annual leaves of people who, unfortunately, are mostly pressed for time lately. By posting information concerning the products offered by a travel agency on a website, instant exposure to clients all over the world is provided, 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. The content of a website must be relevant for the visitors' needs, easy to use and must include logical links to the main areas of interest. It is not enough to determine the visitors to access the website once. Its content must be changed regularly and must be exciting in order to make the users want to return to the website again and again. Clients can access promotional material from anywhere, at a time that is convenient for them, and thus do not have to struggle to find people who deal with sales at hours when they are at the office.

The agencies providing travel services, present online, influence their clients' level of expectation by the promises they make. Agencies have a greater chance to succeed when their promises reflect the actual quality of the services they provide.

The benefits of an online travel agency can include:

- 1. Choosing the best offer.** Online travel agencies provide the direct access to a variety of choices including airlines, hotels and other services, prices and destinations. This allows the tourist to see all the available alternatives and thus choose the best package depending on budget and the travel needs.

2. **Convenience.** It is very important that the tourists can build his/her own travel plan, based on his/her personal needs. When making a reservation online, a person can control and plan himself/herself the desired travel.
3. **Flexibility.** One of the biggest advantages of an online travel agency is that tourists can plan the travel based on his/her time, own pace and without any pressure from any other person.
4. **Various sale approaches.** As compared to the offline agencies working for a fee and that must reach a target, online agencies have no such pressure. Instead, they rely on advertising and it seems that they make discounts in order to encourage clients to spend as much as possible.
5. **Reduced promotion costs.** The promotion on the Internet is not affected by the size or the capacity required by the allocated costs or space. The cost of the website creation is very low, and moreover, in the electronic world it is possible to include information as relevant and comprehensive as possible. A website keeps *working* for you until you decide to give it up or to change it. With the help of hyperlinks a very comprehensive customized multimedia brochure, which is available to clients worldwide instantly. In addition, servers can provide usage statistics and show what websites are accessed by clients. Thus, with the Internet-based promotion, you can know exactly how many people see the information uploaded on the website, which are the most visited websites, and the order in which they were accessed.

The success factors that must be taken into account by a travel agency in developing its own website are:

- The website idea and content must be client-oriented.
- The website is interesting for the client and in accordance to the style of the agency.
- The presenting information, reserving the tourism product.
- The website must contain links that are truly useful for the clients.
- The information on the website is current and accurate.
- The promotion of the website is regular and financially ensured.
- Contests and auctions are proposed which ensure the clients' permanent interest for the website of the travel agency.
- The product offers meet the clients' requirements.

We are presenting below an example of website that was created using the application Macromedia Dreamweaver. A database was designed in Access that contains information concerning the travel destinations, hotels, prices per day or per package, clients and reservations. The information in the database is posted on the websites with the help of Active Server Pages(ASP).

The designed website has a homepage containing information about the travel agency and several links allowing for easy navigation through the pages, namely :

- The category “*About us*” which contains various information about the travel agency operation.
- The category “*The Romanian Seaside*” or “*Holidays in Romania*” contains information about the offers in Romania and information about the hotels contained in the respective offers.
- The category “*Holidays Abroad*” contains information about offers from abroad as well as the hotels contained in the respective offer.
- The category “*Booking information*” contains a form where online bookings can be made.

- The category “*Collaborators*” contains information about the various tourism agencies with which it collaborates.
- The category “*Contact*” contains information about the telephone numbers and the email where the agency can be contacted for further details.
- The category “*Plane tickets*” contains links to various websites dealing with booking plane tickets and moreover, if the tourist does not want to make his reservation himself an order form is also designed so that the agency can order the plane ticket.
- The category “*Useful Information*” informs the clients concerning all the documents required for a travel.

All the pages have, at the bottom, access to various online communication applications (facebook, twiter, you-tube) and a mini-blog with which the agency announces various offers, contests, and tourists can enter opinions about the visited places.

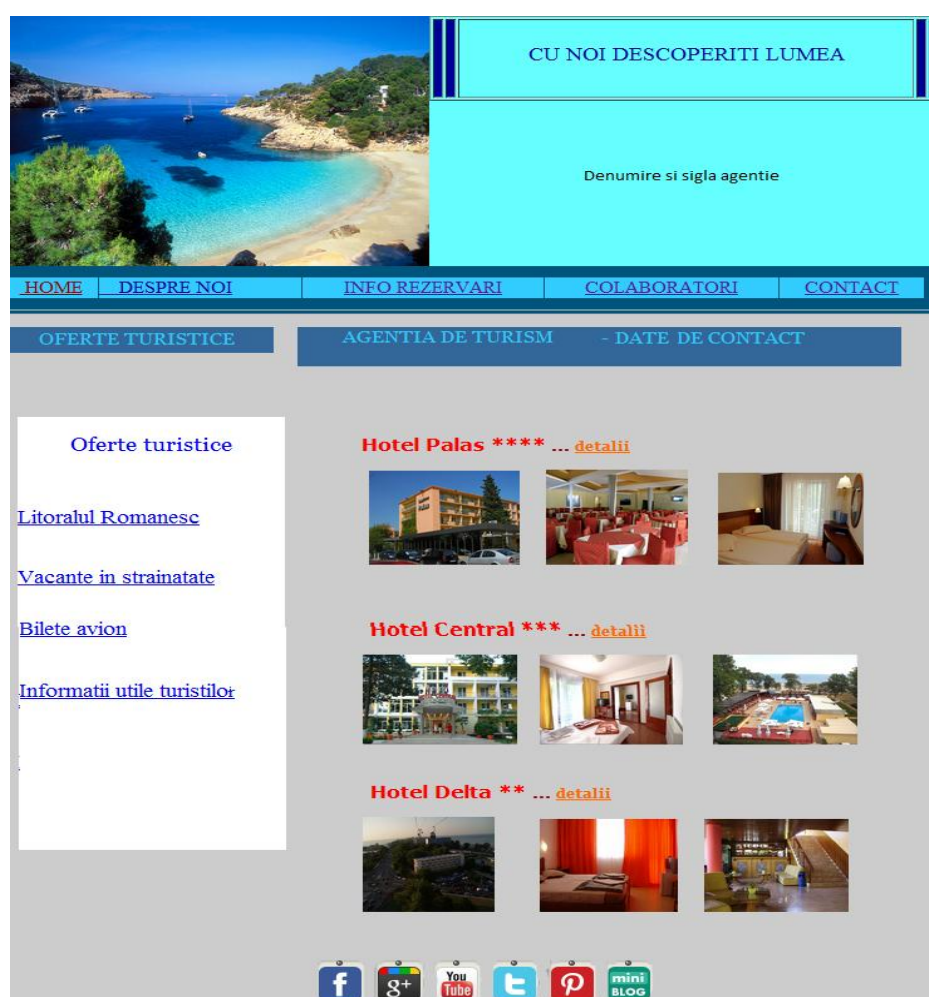


Figure 1 Minimum elements that should not miss from the website of a travel agency

Any travel agency that wants to have visibility in the market must have a website, both as a business alternative and for promotion.

Moreover, in order to remain in a competitive market it is recommended that travel agencies also have a management application, providing a fast analysis of all the information recorded in the database, as well as statistics on the offer trend.

The data are simple records of current events in the operations of travel agencies: accommodation offers, booking, making the payment, etc. Current business intelligence

solutions (BI) can be regarded as an important stage of the integration of the business field with the one of the information technology. The fact is that the implementation of a BI solution is a big challenge both for management specialists and for the information technology specialists. They must be members of a joint team that must aim at struggling for the successful completion of the implementation.

We are presenting below a few analysis reports we made with the application QlikView that is a BI platform. The application QlikView provides the power to handle huge amounts of data in an easy manner and allows for the analysis of the data from multiple sources, running “What if?” scenarios and printing complex reports in any manner, without limitations.

The most important operation that can be done very easily with QlikView is the “Filter” spreadsheet. This allows visualizing several pieces of information at the same time. The operations that can be made on this page are:

- The simple or multiple selection: for example if we select a certain product we can visualize information about the name, the customer’s type and location to whom the product was distributed, about the group of product to which the particular product belongs, the warehouse, the delivered quantity and the price of the product, about the bills released for the sell of the product (see figure 1).
- The search: for example, if we want to find a bill number in order to see the information comprised in this particular bill (sold product, date of release, quantity, price), we have to select the thing corresponding to the bill and introduce the number of the bill. As the numbers are being introduced, all the bills that have the specified values comprised in their number are selected.

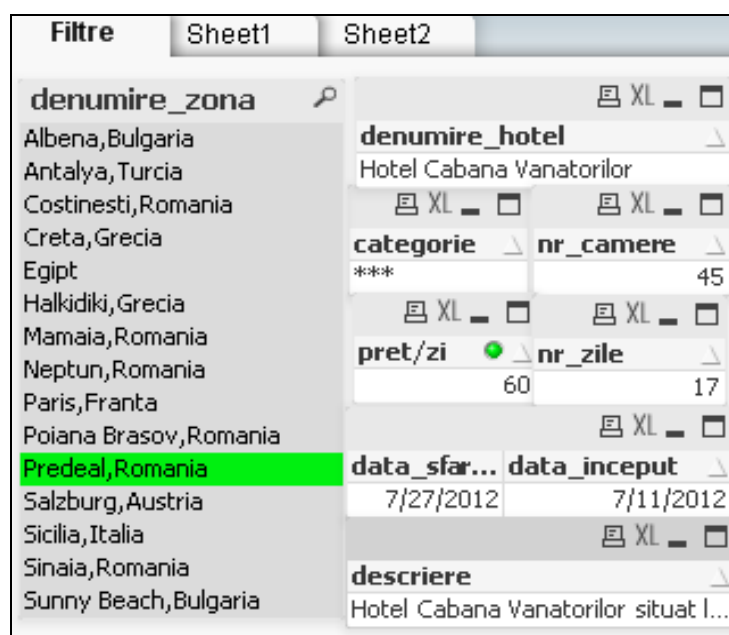


Figure 2 Filter Page

Am realizat câteva rapoarte de analiză care prezintă sub formă de grafic:

1. Numărul hotelurilor din fiecare zonă turistică.
2. Venitul maxim obținut de fiecare hotel sau numărul de camere ale fiecărui hotel. Se observă în figura 3 că printr-un singur clic se poate modifica venitul maxim cu numărul de camere, iar când stăm plasați cu mouse-ul pe un anumit hotel ne afisează informații despre acesta.

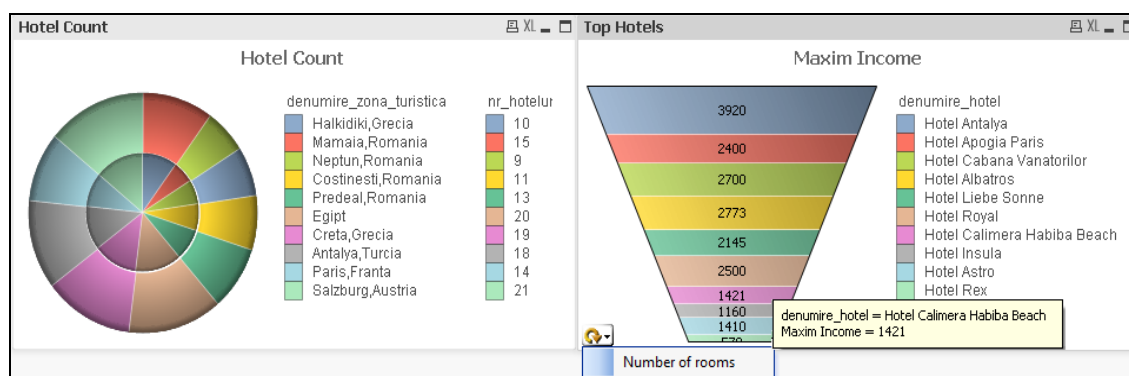


Figure 3 Hotel chart

- The price of a stay and a price statistics that contains: the number of analyzed hotels, the price amount per day, the arithmetic mean, the minimum and maximum value.

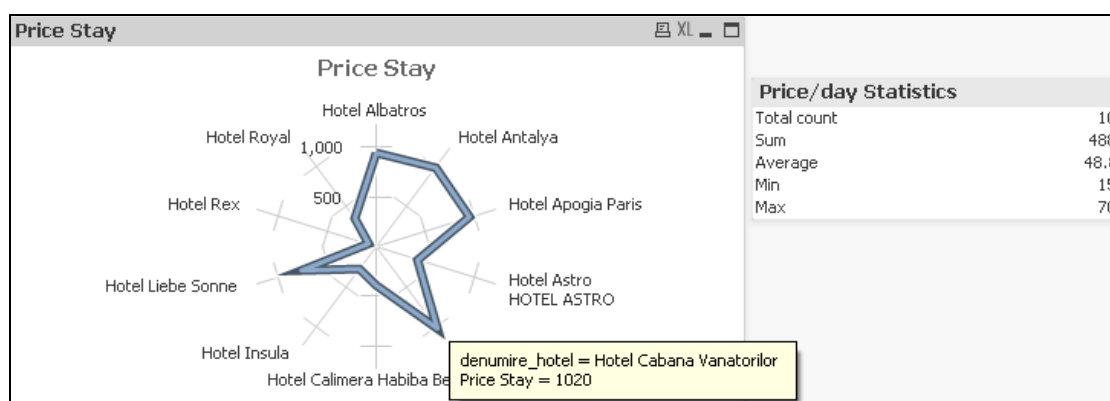


Figure 4 Stay prices

CONCLUSIONS

Business Intelligence systems are useful to all who need quality information as to be efficient. BI solutions offer the possibility to select needed data in view of realization of suitable analyses, generation of graphs according to different types of content and forecasting – all integrated in the specific business context. Moreover, they provide the support for daily activities: issuance of offers, contracts, personalized invoices, takeover of orders and complaints.

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