

Website performance: Hong Kong hotels

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This research examines the performance of Hong Kong hotel websites in terms of information quality, and compares the performance among different hotel categories. Different from existing theoretical studies analyzing hotel websites, this research incorporates the perceptions of hotel guests and practitioners in the evaluation development process. Empirical results reveal that significant differences exist in the performance scores of luxury, mid-priced, and economy hotels. The authors also discuss implications for hotel industry practitioners and policymakers.

At present, the hotel industry makes heavy use of the World Wide Web for electronic commerce. In general, hoteliers hold a positive view toward bookings on the web because they perceive it as serving as a low-cost distribution channel, which has a significant effect on both businesses and consumers.¹

The distinctiveness of the web lies in the fact that it offers high-speed global data transferring, high levels of interaction, and the possibility of direct links to database and

reservation systems, all without any limitations in locations, time zones, or computer platforms. These unprecedented advantages benefit a hotel's business. When potential consumers browse the web, the company has a chance to extend its marketing reach to the global marketplace, supplementing traditional distribution channels.

Van Hoof, et al., conducted a study with hotel managers in Queensland, Australia, about their use and perceptions of the Internet. The research indicated that the managers perceived the Internet to be very important to the future of the accommodation industry. However, Internet use in the form of e-mail and the web is still limited.² Morrison, et al., presented a similar argument, stating that many small hotels are definitely not realizing all advantages of the Internet.³ In a study of the websites of 30 small travel agencies in the Netherlands, van der Pijl stated: "Although almost all site owners

acknowledge the importance of the Internet, the actual behavior does not always illustrate a real sense of urgency.”⁴ Such a statement appears to be applicable to hotel websites in Hong Kong, a major sector of the tourism industry in a leading Asian travel destination.

Websites provide convenience

In recent years, many hotels have created websites to promote services and products, with the ultimate goal of making it easier for customers to make online reservations. Despite the growing popularity of online promotions, the existing hospitality literature does not contain much in-depth information about the information quality and performance of hotel websites. Simply counting whether a particular feature is available on the website does not provide much knowledge about the quality of information contained, and, therefore, the site’s performance.

Likewise, using traditional metrics such as number of hits and number of unique visitors does not offer enough reference standards for both guests and hoteliers to determine the relative standing of a specific hotel website. Some published articles have discussed tourism marketing on the Internet and the contents of travel websites.⁵ However, the number of studies examining the quality of contents and features of hotel websites has been very limited. In an earlier study, Chung and Law proposed an incremental website performance measurement technique which

used the hotel website functionality factors ranked by hotel managers in equal intervals.⁶

The technique starts by calculating an average score (M_a) for each attribute of the included dimensions. This average score is then transformed to a weighted score (W_a), for a total of n factors by:

$$W_a = \frac{1 + n - M_a}{\sum_{i=1}^n M_i} \dots(1)$$

Depending on its content, each factor was mapped by a value in the range of 1 to 5, representing the rating scale of the factor. Aggregating the average weighted values and their corresponding rating values generated an overall performance score for a specific hotel website. However, in their study, Chung and Law failed to offer detailed examination of individual hotel websites. In view of the emerging need of studying information quality on hospitality websites, this research applies the incremental website performance technique to investigate and evaluate the applications of the Internet to the information quality of hotel websites and to examine the performance of the websites in terms of content richness for hotels in Hong Kong. This approach should have direct applicability to hotel websites in other regions.

Study is evaluative

This study identifies the predominant features of hotel websites, and evaluates the contents of the websites of Hong

Kong hotels on the basis of the selected features, which have been validated by a group of senior hotel executives. It then comparatively evaluates and compares the site contents of different categories of hotels. There are several important implications for hotels that are currently adopting or are considering adopting the Internet as a medium for marketing, communications, and reservations. It portrays current standards within different hotel categories, allows hotels to compare the performance of their websites with those of the industry at large, and may serve as a reference in the future development of a company-wide e-business standard.

Internet transforms sales

Sanders estimated that global sales conducted over the Internet would reach US\$6.8 trillion in 2004, and that North America would remain the leader of online sales, attaining a value of US\$3.2 trillion.⁷ The same study predicted that the regions with the second and third largest volume of sales will be Asia-Pacific (US\$1.6 trillion) and Western Europe (US\$1.5 trillion). The rapid growth of Internet-based business transactions can be expected to continue, judging from a global survey of more than 500 business leaders in which most believed that the Internet would transform the market in the near future.⁸

In Asia, the number of active Internet users has been growing

considerably. E-marketers expect that the region's Internet users will increase from 64 million in 2001 to 173 million by the end of 2004. Although business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce growth is still at an early stage of development, business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce is quickly expanding in many Asian countries. The total amount of revenues from B2B e-commerce is anticipated to grow from US\$36.2 billion in 2000 to more than US\$300 billion in 2004.⁹

The Internet provides a platform for the largest and fastest revolution ever seen in tourism marketing and distribution. The technology can help trace and meet the needs of rapidly changing consumer patterns. Gerry McGovern, president of NUA Internet Surveys, has said that the Internet is an important marketing channel and that this channel will make a company stronger.¹⁰ The major challenge, however, is how to attract visitors to a site. Providing high-quality and timely information appears to be a major factor in ensuring such an attraction. As a result, companies have to act and react quickly.

McGovern expected that one-third of all bookings in the business travel sector would be channelled through the Web by the end of 2003. According to José Luis Zoreda, former chief executive officer of the World Tourism Organization Business Council, Internet technology offers Spanish tourism a unique opportunity to regain control over sales of its own holiday products, but the sector needs to get onto the

web as quickly as possible. Zoreda commented that, given the size of tourism interests, Spain could not afford to miss this opportunity, and that the country had to position itself strongly in the new information channels that are progressively revolutionizing distribution methods.¹¹

Online travel grows

Using the web to make travel arrangements is one of the largest commercial applications in the Internet.¹² It has been forecast that online U.S. leisure travel and reservation sales will rise from US\$12.2 billion in 2000 to US\$32.7 billion in 2005, representing 22 percent of the industry's total sales.¹³ The World Tourism Organization also predicted that the value of online leisure travel bookings will grow as much as tenfold to some US\$29.4 billion by the end of 2003.¹⁴

There are numerous successful cases of online travel sales and transactions. One example is Priceline.com. The president of Priceline.com, Tim Brier, explained how his company used the Internet to boost sales of airline tickets and hotel rooms to US\$400 million and US\$100 million, respectively, in a year. After a customer has made a bid for an airline ticket, for example, Priceline.com lets the airlines decide if they will accept the client's offer, based on whether there are seats available at the price the client wants to pay. If so, the sale is made; vacant seats are filled, and people who want to travel can do so at their own prices.¹⁵

Similar to the rapid growth of Priceline.com, travel agent bookings through Global Distribution Systems (GDS) increased significantly at a rate of 8.3 percent in 2000, illustrating continuously strong growth in what is already the dominant electronic distribution channel for hotels. Currently, 95 percent of GDS related hotel bookings are made by travel agents. The remaining 5 percent of electronic hotel bookings through GDS engines are consumer Internet bookings made through websites of major online retail travel agencies, such as Travelocity and Expedia. TravelCLICK's data indicate that more than 17 percent of consumer hotel bookings on the Internet were made via GDS in 2000, up considerably from 11 percent in 1999. Internet hotel bookings on GDS in the previous year were more than triple compared to the 1999 level.¹⁶ Existing hospitality literature has a very limited number of published articles investigating the performance of websites, thus, hoteliers generally have no benchmark to follow for developing professional and useful websites to attract online purchasers. This study makes an attempt to bridge such a gap by setting up an evaluation approach that measures the overall performance of a hotel website.

Hotel sites evaluated

Applying the incremental website performance measurement technique, the study quantitatively evaluates the performance of hotel websites in terms of the richness of

the information they contain. This was achieved by developing an information quality evaluation approach that measures a hotel website's performance, and was developed based on a conceptual framework of five hotel website components, including facilities information, customer contact information, reservations information, surrounding area information, and management of website.

Thirty-nine website attributes were further set up on the basis of these five components. The components and attributes were modified from published articles in the hospitality and tourism literature that examine websites¹⁷ and then validated by a panel of senior hotel executives in Hong Kong. The research process was then divided into three stages, rating the importance of hotel website attributes, measuring the website attributes, and producing a performance score.

The research commenced by surveying the perceptions of 46 hotel customers with online experience, many of whom were also hotel practitioners, on the importance attributes. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the 39 attributes in five components; a mean score was calculated for each attribute. In order to reflect a weighted value of importance for further analysis, the mean score was then transformed to an average weighted score.

A rating scale was then developed using the 39 attributes in five components. The scale was modified to a detailed checklist with a

five-point judgmental rating level for each attribute. A score of website attributes was then produced using the developed checklist. To more accurately represent managers' perceptions, the average weighted score of importance and the score of website attributes were combined to form an overall score of performance which indicated the performance of the website in the context of the selected attributes and dimensions. The score of performance was then multiplied by a factor to transform the score from a five-point scale to a commonly used 100-point scale.

The final stage of the research was to evaluate the performance of the websites of all 80 member hotels of the Hong Kong Hotels Association in 2001. This last stage also compared and contrasted website performance among different categories of hotels.

Hypotheses tested

Six hypotheses were developed to explore and examine the contents of hotel websites. This section discusses the establishment of these hypotheses.

Internet users can go online at any time and access any information that they wish. Similarly, hospitality service/product suppliers can display service/product information on their websites for global customers to view and purchase.⁸ This study is, therefore, to test the performance among different hotel categories in providing information about their facilities on the website. Hypothesis 1 (Ho1) was thus developed as follows:

- **Ho1:** There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in providing online information on hotel facilities.

Hospitality and tourism researchers have agreed that the Internet allows suppliers to set up a direct link of communications with their customers. The website thus enables hotels to overcome communications barriers and establish a dialogue directly with online guests.¹⁹ The channel provides a useful tool for suppliers to implement micro marketing and customer relationship marketing. Additionally, electronic inquiry forms are available on the web for customers; hotels can therefore reply to inquiries directly via e-mail. In this way, a good customer relationship is developed and the relationship contributes to the building of customer loyalty.²⁰ The study tests the performance of different categories of hotels in customer communications information on websites. Hypothesis 2 (Ho2) was then developed, as follows:

- **Ho2:** There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in providing online customer contact information.

The Marriott was one of the first hotel chains to start utilizing the Internet not merely for promotion but also for making reservations to its 1,000 hotels around the world by accessing the TravelWeb website in 1996.²¹ Similarly, many

airlines have introduced online reservations systems to allow the purchase of tickets directly from the Internet.²² It has been commented that well-designed online reservations services with useful information provided to customers before purchasing can help increase the sales volume and improve the hotels' reputations. This study will therefore also test the performance of different hotel categories in providing reservations information on the sites. Hence, Hypothesis 3 (Ho3) was developed, as follows:

- **Ho3:** There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in providing online reservations information.

In a study conducted by Chu, it was found that Internet users expect to get travel/destination-related information from airline/travel websites.²³ The same study also revealed that customers want to have a one-stop service provided by an airline/travel website. Specifically, the customers wanted to have better itinerary planning, and wanted information about such things as transportation and major attractions in a city. For this reason, another objective of this study is to test the performance among different hotel categories in providing information about a hotel's surrounding area on the website. Hypothesis 4 (Ho4) was then developed, as follows:

- **Ho4:** There are no significant differences among different

hotel categories in providing online information about a hotel's surrounding area.

Gilbert and Powell-Perry stated that a website is potentially a strategic information center for the hotel industry, and hotels generally have provided detailed descriptions and images of most of their facilities.²⁴ To maintain the overall quality of a hotel website, management of the website is a crucial aspect for hotels to remain competitive. Hypothesis 5 (Ho5) was then developed to test the performance among different hotel categories in managing their websites.

- **Ho5:** There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in the management of their websites.

The Internet is an ideal medium for tourism marketing as it allows travel suppliers to set up a direct link of communications with customers and eliminates unequal barriers for customers and suppliers.²⁵ As a result, companies with different backgrounds can compete with each other equally. Therefore, it is important to test the overall performance among different hotel categories in their hotel websites. Hypothesis 6 (Ho6) was thus developed as:

- **Ho6:** There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in website performance.

Scores vary greatly

Primary and secondary data were collected and a total of 80 Hong Kong hotel websites were then assessed with a Pentium III personal computer. Overall performance scores among hotel classes are shown in Tables 1 to 3. Websites in each hotel category have a wide range of performance scores. In general, websites of luxury hotels received higher scores than mid-priced hotels, which in turn outperformed their economy counterparts. The overall website performance for luxury (High Tariff A in Hong Kong's local classification), mid-priced (High Tariff B in local classification), and economy (Medium Tariff in local classification) hotels were 64.22, 51.45, and 34.99, respectively.

Having collected the necessary data for evaluation, a comparison of the attributes' performance among the three hotel categories was conducted and the mean score was used to measure the performance of the websites. One Way ANOVA and Post Hoc (Tukey) tests were used to compare the performance scores of the hotel websites. Empirical results showed significant differences in all dimensions of website attributes and in total score among different hotel categories. The websites of luxury hotels generally scored significantly higher than those of hotels in other categories (see Table 4). The results were consistent with prior studies, which stated that luxury and upscale hotels adopted

Table 1
Results of website performance for luxury hotels

Hotel Code	Facilities Information	Customer Contact Information	Reservations Information	Surrounding Area Information	Management of Website	Overall Performance
8	66.98	68.16	88.99	99.42	100	81.28
4	90.14	76.98	94.40	63.13	57.52	79.94
9	66.98	45.10	88.99	99.42	100	76.80
15	53.81	57.49	89.23	90.14	65.71	68.81
11	50.65	57.49	85.98	99.42	65.71	68.40
12	49.98	57.49	89.23	90.14	65.71	67.64
16	72.54	50.35	84.23	62.78	50.64	66.12
7	77.44	43.42	79.85	68.41	50.64	66.09
10	71.61	59.81	76.38	47.10	57.52	64.91
2	68.17	61.23	84.77	28.26	57.52	63.40
1	65.73	71.74	60.13	51.36	57.52	62.52
13	53.56	68.16	76.38	41.22	50.64	59.19
14	73.31	43.42	71.57	39.68	50.64	59.18
17	59.58	45.10	76.38	51.10	53.54	58.31
5	50.66	76.94	78.31	54.26	21.07	57.72
18	64.04	38.16	72.24	45.65	50.64	56.27
6	49.86	62.91	75.58	28.26	43.75	54.08
3	51.43	38.16	44.62	36.87	50.64	45.31
Average Score	63.14	56.78	78.74	60.92	58.30	64.22

Table 2
Results of website performance for mid-priced hotels

Hotel Code	Facilities Information	Customer Contact Information	Reservations Information	Surrounding Area Information	Management of Website	Overall Performance
15	64.38	53.10	83.74	73.42	61.38	67.11
4	88.41	47.16	75.17	42.32	39.67	64.00
6	67.48	60.13	70.66	38.06	50.64	60.23
20	64.32	39.13	78.39	46.75	50.64	58.02
22	55.25	51.42	78.39	40.20	50.64	56.75
3	62.74	61.23	65.84	28.26	50.64	56.64
21	57.38	43.42	71.83	41.30	50.64	54.59
17	47.04	66.49	71.80	28.26	52.57	54.43
12	48.33	45.10	72.58	51.10	50.64	53.62
9	46.90	43.20	78.67	28.26	66.33	53.41
18	49.13	45.10	76.38	45.65	43.75	52.91
13	45.77	45.10	72.58	51.10	50.64	52.84
16	62.51	66.49	36.93	37.30	50.64	52.61
28	64.88	43.42	38.00	45.57	66.33	52.56
26	51.38	59.45	69.81	9.42	59.45	52.46
11	44.19	45.10	72.58	51.10	50.64	52.36
23	48.37	51.42	73.13	31.16	50.64	52.29
25	44.77	43.42	68.32	45.65	59.45	51.89
5	63.72	53.13	75.05	9.16	27.96	51.35
1	59.53	66.27	28.19	59.80	40.86	51.34
7	52.65	54.88	60.91	14.70	50.64	49.44
14	45.24	61.23	51.20	18.46	59.45	48.16
27	47.25	59.45	36.68	26.72	59.45	46.42
8	42.08	54.20	69.88	0.00	52.57	46.31
24	55.26	51.42	40.02	17.94	50.64	45.52
10	37.64	46.17	68.55	18.46	50.64	45.30
2	47.59	31.10	61.28	19.22	49.67	43.81
29	40.10	61.23	33.68	9.42	59.45	41.61
19	33.77	38.16	13.06	4.90	43.75	27.80
Average Score	52.57	51.77	61.92	31.58	51.70	51.45

Table 3
Results of website performance for economy hotels

Hotel Code	Facilities Information	Customer Contact Information	Reservations Information	Surrounding Area Information	Management of Website	Overall Performance
1	34.83	47.84	79.53	18.46	49.67	46.97
8	37.78	51.45	75.59	9.42	50.64	46.66
11	39.02	54.88	64.16	13.59	50.64	45.82
6	43.01	47.81	56.37	18.46	57.52	45.69
4	42.19	54.20	63.93	18.12	33.97	44.70
30	36.94	38.16	67.48	13.77	59.45	44.00
31	36.64	38.16	67.48	13.77	59.45	43.91
15	41.31	38.16	76.38	4.90	43.75	43.68
14	33.35	61.23	60.31	4.90	50.64	43.32
5	32.84	46.17	70.12	9.42	47.74	42.51
29	32.76	47.84	69.88	0.00	43.75	40.89
2	46.36	38.04	35.54	19.22	57.52	40.45
32	25.81	38.16	73.13	9.42	50.64	39.89
7	34.59	38.16	45.01	64.49	23.00	39.80
9	23.37	43.42	69.09	4.90	50.64	38.69
18	23.26	46.20	27.40	41.30	52.57	35.45
33	34.00	38.16	20.62	26.81	59.45	34.81
16	48.06	46.17	6.50	28.26	33.97	33.99
12	25.66	38.16	38.07	14.70	52.57	33.33
22	30.74	38.16	22.19	19.22	59.45	33.12
24	28.20	58.45	23.87	0.00	52.57	33.02
3	27.47	38.16	65.23	18.46	4.41	32.96
19	18.66	38.16	38.13	18.46	52.57	31.71
21	29.34	47.84	22.19	19.22	29.88	30.12
27	27.85	38.16	10.29	19.22	59.45	29.69
23	25.78	43.42	28.03	0.00	43.75	28.92
25	35.41	38.16	36.53	4.90	11.29	28.43
10	32.34	24.75	34.88	9.42	29.88	27.95
17	23.19	38.16	14.37	0.00	52.57	25.51
13	17.32	23.13	28.73	4.90	51.59	24.39
26	12.86	38.16	13.60	9.42	43.75	22.13
28	23.46	30.13	9.81	9.42	14.19	18.54
20	18.77	8.03	6.50	4.90	33.97	14.47
Average Score	30.75	40.64	42.40	14.31	44.26	34.99

Table 4
Summary of hypothesis testing results

Research Hypotheses	Significant Results
Ho1: There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in providing online information about hotel facilities.	Luxury hotels > Mid-priced hotels, Economy hotels Mid-priced hotels > Economy hotels
Ho2: There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in providing online customer contact information.	Luxury hotels, Mid-priced hotels > Economy hotels
Ho3: There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in providing online reservations information.	Luxury hotels > Mid-priced hotels, Economy hotels Mid-priced hotels > Economy hotels
Ho4: There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in providing online information about a hotel's surrounding area.	Luxury hotels > Mid-priced hotels, Economy hotels Mid-priced hotels > Economy hotels
Ho5: There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in the management of their websites.	Luxury hotels > Economy hotels
Ho6: There are no significant differences among different hotel categories in website performance.	Luxury hotels > Mid-priced hotels, Economy hotels Mid-priced hotels > Economy hotels

more information technology than economy and budget hotels.²⁶ Furthermore, Morrison, et al., commented that many small hotels did not effectively use their websites and did not realize the advantages of the Internet.²⁷

Performance is measured

Most previous studies focused on the availability of common features on hotel websites and did not provide detailed insights into measuring the performance of a website. The current study makes

an initial attempt to use a more sophisticated approach to measure the performance of websites by including the views of hotel practitioners and returning a total performance score. This study has provided empirical evidence that the approach that has been developed can be used as a good framework for measuring the performance of hotel websites. Empirical results of this research show that the most comprehensive hotel websites are in the luxury category; luxury hotels used Internet functions and Internet

marketing values more effectively.

This study will offer important insights for hospitality marketers and practitioners. Apparently hotels require a framework that can bridge the gap between simply connecting to the web and harnessing its power for competitive advantages.²⁸ Jeong and Lambert commented that improving customers' perceptions of the effectiveness of hotel websites and maintaining their positive attitude toward hotel websites are the key factors that keep them using the sites.²⁹ Internet users want to get timely, accurate, relevant, and important information such as location maps, room rates, room availability, and online responses to their decisions to purchase. These attributes should be incorporated into a hotel's Internet marketing efforts to gain competitive advantages in a customer-focused cyber business market.

As revealed in Tables 1 to 3, hotels in general and the economy properties in particular need to rework their websites on the dimensions which received low performance scores. Additionally, hoteliers have to determine the groups of potential customers that are valuable for their website efforts in order to have a large impact on business, and hence to maximize commercial benefits. Working closely with web designers, hotel managers should actively examine the feasibility of applying some existing business practices such as using mapping to build web presentations as

suggested by Emercik, et al.,³⁰ or following the dimensions and attributes of quality criteria for website excellence.³¹

Research on hotel websites in the context of hospitality and tourism is in an early stage. Therefore, more work should be done to further improve the approach used in this study. Future research can repeat this study with another group of respondents, and make comparisons by hotel size, hotel chains, or group affiliations. Future studies can also be extended to other travel and tourism websites, and the impact of hotel websites on the purchase decisions of customers is another area for future research. Lastly, the actual ways of how hotels can build sites that will improve their performance rating and the associated business return certainly deserve future research efforts.

The hotel industry has been facing continuous competitions and challenges which always have a large impact on existing sales and marketing strategies. To remain competitive, hotels need to apply new marketing skills to meet new changes and requirements. The Internet can certainly serve as an effective marketing channel to provide a good opportunity to develop new strategies for success.³²

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