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More information, stronger effectiveness? Different group package tour advertising components on web page

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Abstract

Empirical evidence concerning how group package tourists react to the different combinations of advertising components is scant, leaving unresolved issues in an important research arena. Therefore, the specific purpose of the present study is to identify the optimal numbers and combinations of advertising components on travel web pages and their contributions to advertising effectiveness. An experimental design was employed; sixteen experimental groups were surveyed. In total, 843 student informants participated in the study. The results found that informants will reflect different degrees of advertising effectiveness in response to different combinations of advertising components; and more components will induce a better attitude towards-the-ad and greater inclination to purchase. In addition, when the number of advertising components is increased, an inverted "U" curve of advertising effectiveness won't be observed, but the hypothesis of a partially curvilinear response can be accepted. Finally, some implications of these findings for travel managers and designers of travel-related web pages are discussed, along with some areas requiring further research.

Keywords: Advertising components; Advertising effectiveness; Information overload; Group package tour

1. Introduction

The Internet is used by an ever-increasing number of people worldwide. Tourism-related services emerge as a leading product category to be promoted and distributed through the Internet (Connolly et al., 1998; Sussmann and Baker, 1996). According to Institute for Information Industry, travel constitutes the largest share of the B2C market, travel products are the most popular online products, enjoying almost half of the B2C market (FIND, 2004). Capella and Greco (1987) report that travel services constitute a high involvement product, and tourists are likely to spend significant time engaging in an external search for information. During the search for information about a product or service, the function of advertising is to inform and persuade the undecided consumer. Advertising effectiveness is thus associated with the way the consumer subsequently processes the content of the advertisement (Ducoffe, 1996).

The prior studies on advertising components of web page advertising were concentrated on several perspectives. For example, Bruner and Kumar (2000) once discussed two kinds of web pages: simple pages containing a link and a title; and complex pages containing animated graphics, hotlinks, video, and photos. Their conclusion was that complex web pages may increase viewers' interest, but also often had a negative effect on viewers' attitude-toward-the-website. Diaper and Waelend (2000) compared different components of web pages (i) text; (ii) text and graphics; and (iii) text and animated graphic in relation to viewers' information extraction ability. Their experiment supports the idea that experienced web users are not distracted by surrounding graphics. Web page graphics, animated graphics or otherwise, do not greatly affect viewers'

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web experiences or their ability to extract information from web pages.

Although these studies described provide useful information for understanding the advertising components on web pages, only single advertising component or a number of advertising components were taken into consideration. To the knowledge of the authors, there have been no studies that have considered taking all the advertising components (e.g., text, graphics, animated graphics, links, hyperlinks, and video) used in group package tour (hereafter abbreviated GPT) product on the web page as stimuli and to examine the effects of their different combinations on the advertising effectiveness of the typical travel web page.

Regarding the association of advertising effectiveness with the number of components used in a particular web page, there are two contradictory propositions. First, using more different components on a web page will get more consumers' attention and increase the advertising effectiveness. Fleming (1997) pointed out that competition to make use of broadband connections and create attractive sites is tempting designers to use more graphic images, more blinking text, more animation, and more full-motion video in order to attract attention. Due to the continuing development of the Internet, there is a tendency for web page to be more complex than before.

On the other hand, a reverse proposition is also noted. That is, employing more different components into a web page may possibly make a negative impression on the consumer. For example, Lee and Lee (2004) indicated that increasing the number of attributes significantly imposed information overload on informants and could lead to negative effect on choice quality. Furthermore, Zhang (2000) also stated that animated graphics can have a detrimental effect on web users' information seeking ability and information extraction task performance. Therefore, for web designers, Zhang suggested to keep the basic and minimize graphical animation and try to make colors less bright.

In short, it remains an open question whether travel advertising effectiveness actually increases along with the number of components on the GPT web page. Will simpler web page design with fewer GPT adverting components actually generate better advertising effectiveness? Or will the adverting effectiveness respond to complexity with the familiar inverted "U" curve as Schroder and Suedfeld (1971) predict, based on an idea called "information overload".

Empirical evidence concerning how customers react to this situation is scant, leaving unresolved issues in an important research arena. Therefore, the specific purpose of the present study is to identify the optimal numbers and combinations of advertising components on GPT web page in relation to its advertising effectiveness.

2. Hypotheses

Researchers argue that certain combinations of web page components have a positive impact on consumers' attitude towards the ad, brand and purchase intentions (Stevenson et al., 2000). When people are surfing a web page, additional components and visual devices will catch their attention and increase their interest. Accordingly, the multimedia aspect could make the experience more fun and stimulating, thus holding the attention of the consumer longer (Anderson, 1999). On the other hand, research has also indicated that having too many sensory stimuli on the travel destination website could negatively influence the amount of time and money spent by the consumer, and also affect the website's advertising effectiveness. They further emphasized that adopting a minimalist approach to the design of the home page with eye-catching but appropriate graphics and categories that draw the web surfer further into the site appears to be more effective (Rosen and Purinton, 2004). To solve these inconsistent findings, we reason that different web page of GPT advertising components should have a different experience on customer attitudes and purchase intentions. Thus, it is hypothesized:

H_{1a}. Informants have a different attitude towards-the-ad for different combinations of GPT advertising components.

H_{1b}. Informants have a different attitude towards-the-brand for different combinations of GPT advertising components.

H_{1c}. Informants have different purchase intentions for different combinations of GPT advertising components.

Huang (2000) examines two dimensions of information load and found that greater information loads have certain effects on consumers' exploratory and shopping behavior. For example, the novelty dimension kept consumers exploring the shopping sites, whereas the complexity dimension had the potential to induce impulse purchases. Jacoby (1977) indicates that the flexibility of integration involved in information processing will increase as the environment becomes richer (presents more diverse information) until an optimal level of functioning is reached. If the complexity of the information environment is increased beyond this point, the level of integration involved in performance begins to decrease. Accordingly, we therefore expect that as the number of different components in a GPT web page increases, its' adverting effectiveness would be likely to exhibit a familiar inverted "U" curve, thus, it is posited that:

H_2. When the number of advertising components and combination increase, it will result in inverted "U" curve of advertising effectiveness.

3. Method

The study applies an experimental design and as the previous study indicates this approach is useful for assessing advertising effectiveness (Woodside, 1990). For selecting destination and itinerary of GPT, Mainland China and 5-day itinerary to Beijing were chosen. This framing is used because Mainland China is the number one outbound travel destination for Taiwanese, which accounted for 34.2% of the outbound travel population and a 5-day itinerary of Beijing is the most popular GPT in practice (Tourism Bureau, 2004).