SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING FOR TOURIST DESTINATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet has redefined the tourism industry in a number of important ways (Werthner & Klein, 1999). On the demand side, most travelers rely on the Internet to look for information as part of the trip planning effort (USTA, 2011), whereas on the supply side, tourism businesses and organizations have adopted the Internet as one of the primary communication channels for gaining and retaining visitors (Buhalís & Law, 2008; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2000). Indeed, reports by the U. S. Travel Association indicate that search engines are becoming one of the most important channels used by a huge majority of online U.S. travelers for vacation planning (USTA, 2011). Additionally, studies indicate that the generation of online traffic to hospitality websites has led to substantial number of direct bookings (Hopkins, 2008; Prescott, 2006). It was estimated that the value of the North America search engine marketing industry was worth US$16.6 billion in 2010 (eConsultancy, 2010). Thus, search engine marketing has emerged as one of the most important strategic tools for marketing tourism destinations.

Search engines not only provide opportunities for tourism destinations and businesses to engage their potential visitors, but also pose many challenges. However, research on SEM is limited in both the marketing and tourism literature (Beckwith, 2003; Ho & Liu, 2005; Moran & Hunt, 2005; Pan, Litvin, & O’Donnell, 2007; Sen, 2005; Xiang, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009). Existing studies of search engines are mostly conducted within the computer science and information science fields, and focus primarily on the technical designs of search engines as information retrieval systems. Perhaps most important, it is argued that dynamic relationships exist between the search
engine, tourism and other businesses, and the traveler as the search engine user. And, these dynamics of online search have not been well documented, let alone incorporated into SEM practices. From the destination marketing perspective, a series of important questions remain unanswered such as: How can a destination compete with other similar businesses knowing that they will probably adopt similar online marketing strategies? And, how does a destination marketing organization (DMO) compete on search engine visibility given that search engines are constantly changing their algorithms?

With these questions in mind, the goal of this chapter is to synthesize the recent literature related to search engine marketing in general and for tourism specifically. This chapter is organized as follows. The following section is based upon an article by Pan, Xiang, Law and Fesenmaier (2011) which critically reviews the literature related to the three key “actors” and their dynamic relationships in SEM, namely search engines, online travelers as search engine users, and the online tourism domain. In the next section, a model is discussed to look at SEM at the behavioral level by outlining the process wherein travelers use a search engine for trip planning. Based upon these studies six key lessons for successful SEM practice as well as implications for research and development are discussed.

THE STRUCTURE OF SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING

Search engines are developed to provide access to the huge amount of information on the Internet by crawling, indexing, retrieving, and representing relevant information for users based upon unique algorithms. Generally, Search Engine Marketing (SEM) is defined as a form of marketing on the Internet whereby businesses and organizations seek to gain visibility on search engine results pages (SERPs) through paid or non-paid means
There are several forms of SEM, including (see Table 1): 1) organic search-based techniques, i.e. search engine optimization, which involves employing methods that help improve the ranking of a website when a user types in relevant keywords in a search engine. These techniques include creating an efficient website structure, providing appropriate web content, and managing inbound and outbound links to other sites; 2) paid inclusion, which means paying search engine companies for inclusion of the site in their organic listings; and, 3) search engine advertising, or paid placement, which implies buying display positions at the paid listing area of a search engine or its content network. Google AdWords and Microsoft AdCenter are the two most popular programs wherein paid placement listings are shown as “Sponsored Links”.

Table 1. Forms of SEM

The phenomenon of searching on the Internet has attracted numerous studies in computer science, information sciences, and human computer interaction with the focus on the technological aspects as well as user behaviors of searching (Brin & Page, 1998; Jansen & Molina, 2006; Jansen & Spink, 2005a). The existing literature related to SEM can be organized according to the “actors” that define the components of search engine marketing: 1) the search engine, defined as the online tools which algorithmically index, organize, and retrieve relevant web documents and, according to user queries, present those documents in a pre-defined format (Gendler, Ellis, Chang, & Davis, 2005; Sen, 2005); 2) the travel information searcher, defined as those travelers who are planning trips or gathering travel-related information on the Internet (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006);
and, 3) the online tourism domain, defined as the collection of links, domain names, and web pages that that contain texts, images, and audio/video files related to travel and tourism (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Xiang, Wöber, & Fesenmaier, 2008). The following three sections review this research with the goal of identifying the underlying structure and dynamics of search engine marketing.

**The Search Engine**

Metaphorically, search engines can be thought of as the “Hubble Telescope of the Internet” in that they enable travelers to gain access to billions of web pages that comprise the online tourism domain (Xiang, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009; Xiang, Wöber, & Fesenmaier, 2008). The major part of the search engine interface is used to display those results based on the internal ranking (i.e., organic listing) (see Figure 1). In addition, major search engines such as Google, display paid advertisements on the top and right side of major result page, ranked by businesses’ bidding price on clicks and the quality of pages, which is termed a “Paid Listing.” Paid listings can also appear blended with organic listings for certain search engines, as they do in Baidu.com (the most popular search engine in mainland China) and Bing.com. However, the two companies separated the two types of results under pressure from the public in recent years (Back, 2009; Schwartz, 2009).

In 2012, Google had 66% of online search volumes, followed by Bing and Yahoo! (comScore, 2012). Among the components of search engines, the algorithm a search engine uses to rank web pages in organic listings is most important in determining
which web pages to display and in what order. The rank of a web page for certain queries on most popular search engines determines their online visibility to a large extent (Pan, Hembrooke, Joachims, Lorigo, Gay, & Granka, 2007). Given a query, almost all search engines use certain characteristics of web pages and link structure to rank the web pages (Levine, 2000). The characteristics of web pages include: 1) whether or not the keywords are in the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) of that page; 2) the frequency and size of the keywords on a web page; 3) the keywords in the link anchor text, i.e., pieces of text which contain a link. Usually web authors imbed meaningful link anchors to provide the user indications of the content on the linked page. Search engines view link anchors as good summaries of linked pages; 4) alternative text for images, i.e., the text associated with images; and, 5) meta-tags, keywords in Titles and Descriptions embedded on a given web page (Cai, Feng, & Breiter, 2004). Some search engines further incorporate the link structure of the web to determine the importance of web pages (Brin & Page, 1998). A web page with many inbound links will be considered more valuable and important and, thus, having a higher importance compared to the ones with fewer inbound links. In addition, search engines use an iterative process to determine the quality of links (Brin & Page, 1998; Langville & Meyer, 2006; Levene, 2006). Other criteria affecting page ranking include age of the site and the frequency of updating (Malaga, 2007; Sullivan, 2006), page loading time, and the popularity of the page (Fish, 2009).

In general, link structures, web page content, frequency of updating, the loading time, and the implicit feedbacks in the form of click behavior from users are all determining factors in the ranking of search results. Still, indexing, ranking, and
representing the enormous amount of information on the Internet is a huge challenge for search engines. While the most popular search engine, Google, currently claims to index more than one trillion web pages (Google, 2008), the entire information space on the Internet can only be covered in small parts by a single search engine (Levene, 2006). The “deep web” pages such as those buried in the databases and dynamic pages are not indexable by many search engines and, thus, are inaccessible to users who query a search engine (Bergman, 2001; Lawrence & Giles, 1999).

**The Travel Information Searcher**

While travelers may use search engines at different stages of their trip, a majority of them find search engines particularly helpful in serving their trip planning purposes (TIA, 2008; USTA, 2011). Studies have shown that the process of using a search engine consists of two major cognitive steps including query formulation and search results evaluation. Search queries have been studied extensively in fields such as information sciences as well as travel and tourism (Jansen & Pooch, 2001; Jansen & Spink, 2005b; Jansen, Spink, & Saracevic, 2000; Pan et al., 2007; Pan, Litvin, & O’Donnell, 2007; Xiang & Pan, 2011).

Search queries are short strings of words or terms that reflect a user’s goals, information needs, search intent, as well as his/her search strategies. Studies in information science, consumer behavior, and tourism have explored the characteristics of search engine queries such as the length and depth of search, types of search, and changes of search characteristics over time. For example, a typical web session is around 15 minutes; 47% of users only search once during a session; about 20% to 29% of queries only contain one term; in the United States, around 11%-20% of user queries contained
logical operators; users only view a few result pages, mostly the first page (73% of users) (Jansen & Spink, 2005b; Jansen, Spink, & Saracevic, 2000). Search queries reflect users’ goals including navigational goals (looking for a specific web page), informational goals (trying to obtain a piece of information), and transactional goals (carrying out certain action) (Jansen & Molina, 2006). Recently, Jansen et al (2008) found that users’ queries in general are largely informational (81%), followed by navigational tasks (10%) and transactional tasks (9%).

In travel and tourism, recent studies indicate that travelers’ questions tend to be short, consisting of less than four keywords; and, most travelers do not go beyond the results provided on the second page. As a result, only a relatively small number of websites are visible to the traveler though millions of potential web pages were found (Xiang, Wöber, & Fesenmaier, 2008). Pan et al.’s (2007) study also indicates that searchers in the US usually focus on cities as the geographical boundary instead of states or countries; and, travelers often combine their searches for accommodations with other aspects of the trip, including dining, attractions, destinations, or transportation. In addition, this study indicates that there are strong associations between place names (particularly city names) and a specific hotel and a hotel brand. Xiang et al.(2009) found that there are relatively few distinct words in travel queries beyond “hotel” and “attractions,” indicating that there is a “long tail” of words that represent travelers’ heterogeneous information needs and their own mental images of the tourism experience and the idiosyncratic nature of place.

Researchers have also studied users’ interaction with the search engine interface and it was found that the interface of search engines and the rank of web pages
significantly influence which search results are chosen. For example, Henzinger (2007) found that the majority of search engine users do not look beyond the first three pages of search results. Pan et al. (2007) found that the position of organic search results influences users’ perception of relevance in a non-linear way. Some studies also show that users are more likely to trust organic listings and organic listings have a higher conversion rate (Jansen & Resnick, 2005; MarketingSherpa, 2005). Last, Kim and Fesenmaier (2008) found that the words included in search engines results have the potential to significantly affect one’s overall evaluation of a destination website.

The Online Tourism Domain

A domain can be defined as a collection of all informational entities about a specific subject (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Wöber, 2006; Xiang, Wöber, & Fesenmaier, 2008). In the context of the Internet, a domain is the collection of links, domain names, and Web pages that contain texts, images, and audio/video files stored in hypertext formats. Therefore, the online tourism domain is comprised of all informational entities that are related to travel. Werthner and Klein (1999) proposed a conceptual framework to delineate the interaction between the consumer and the industry suppliers with the Internet playing a facilitating and mediating role. From an information search perspective, Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) used the term “online tourism information space” to describe the collection of hypertextual content available for travel information searchers. More recently, Xiang et al. (2008) conceptualized the online tourism domain based upon the integration of a number of theoretical perspectives in tourism studies including: 1) the industry perspective with the focus on the composition of the supply of tourism on the Internet (Leiper, 1979, 2008; Smith, 1994); 2) the symbolic representation
perspective describing the representation of tourism products and related experiences provided by the industry in various forms (Cohen & Cooper, 1986; Dann, 1997; Leiper, 1990); 3) the travel behavior perspective including the activities and the supporting systems at different stages of the travel experience (Crompton, 1992; Pearce, 1982; Woodside & Dubelaar, 2002); and, 4) the travel information search perspective emphasizing the information sought to support travel experiences (e.g., Fodness & Murray, 1998; Gursoy & McLeary, 2004; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

Wöber (2006) examined one very important aspect of the tourism domain, i.e., the visibility of tourism enterprises, particularly destination marketing organizations and individual hotel operations in Europe. His study indicates that many tourism websites suffer from very low rankings, which makes it extremely difficult for online travelers to directly access individual tourism websites. Xiang et al.’s (2008) analysis of the tourism domain suggests that the representation of the tourism industry through one of the most important interfaces, i.e., a search engine, is extremely rich, reflecting the idiosyncratic nature of destinations and travelers’ heterogeneous information needs. In addition, their study demonstrated that popular search engines largely define the representation of the domain and, thus, shape the way online travelers and tourism suppliers use the internet.

The online tourism domain was traditionally seen as primarily comprised the so-called “tourism industries”. However, with the growth of consumer/user generated content, travelers are now playing an increasingly important role as information providers on the Internet. A recent study conducted by Xiang and Gretzel (2010) shows that social media constitute a substantial part of the search results in search engines, indicating that search engines likely direct travelers to social media sites. Their study confirms the
The growing importance of social media in online tourism wherein tourism businesses have little control.

**The Dynamics of the Search Triad**

The Search Triad, as shown in Figure 2, describes the interactions among the three parties that may have different goals, objectives, expectations, as well as their specific behaviors. They form a dialectic structure in which the behavior of each “actor” is determined by the strategies and behavior of other “actors,” and their behavior will potentially change the strategies of others and, ultimately will lead to changes in the structure and balance of the system (Giddens, 1976). Specifically, from the standpoint of the search engines, their role is to provide users relevant information on a given query in order to gain and retain loyal users to their company. They continue to modify the algorithms and interfaces based on a better understanding of users’ search behavior and online tourism information. They also need to continuously explore ways to attract businesses to market with them, and at the same time, combat with businesses that misuse of SEO and paid listings. From the perspective of the information searcher, travelers seek the most relevant information in order to plan their trips and as such, their search behavior is affected by their understanding, learning, and overall trust toward search engines, knowledge of online tourism domain, image of the destination, and the goals for their trip planning activities. These aspects of search behavior adapt to changing search engine algorithms and related technologies, the representation of relevant search results and increasing amount of travel information. Finally, from perspective of the tourism businesses and organizations, they have to adapt to the changes brought about by both evolving technology and travelers as they seek to gain visibility and further customers on
search engines. They must adopt a series of search engine practices as part of their strategy to gain a competitive advantage online.

Figure 2. The SEM Triad

Various studies have demonstrated this dynamic and co-evolving relationship. Users are adapting to changing search engines with their changing behavior. For example, from 1997 to 2001, an analysis on search engine transaction log from Excite showed that there were significant decreases in the percentages of searches on topics such as entertainment and pornography, and significant increase in searches for commerce and people (Jansen, Spink, & Pedersen, 2005). Another study (Jansen & Spink, 2005b) analyzed nine transaction log data from various search engines; their results showed that recent search engine users used simpler queries and viewed fewer result pages. They explain this phenomenon by search engines’ algorithmic enhancements. A similar study (Malaga, 2007) analyzed AltaVista search engine log from 1998 to 2002, and showed that recent users spent more time in one search session, type in more keywords in a query, viewed more result pages, and had broader search topics in 2002. The differences might be due to the different search engines analyzed. These studies indicated that users are changing their search behavior in relation to available information on the Web and the different and enhanced search algorithms.

From the information provider’s perspective, tourism businesses and organizations have been taking advantage of the knowledge of ranking algorithms and trying to reach to the top on SERPs. They are in the forms of either legitimate format of SEM, endorsed by major search engines, or more malevolent types, in the form of search
engine spamming or Google bombing (Bar-Ilan, 2007). On one hand, industry cases have shown the successful SEM practices by destinations and tourism businesses (Brusha, 2009; Google, 2007). On the other hand, knowledgeable information providers, including common users and businesses, have been trying to use a variety of techniques for their own advantage, which might be against search engine use policies (Chaffey, 2009). For example, Google bombing is a collective behavior by Internet users to change the positions of their web pages on Google by malicious hyperlinking (Sen, 2005). For example, the home page of the previous president George W. Bush of the United States used to be the top Google result for the query “miserable failure” due to the collective behavior of a number of right-wing bloggers when they hyperlinked his homepage with those keywords as text anchors (Bar-Ilan, 2007). In addition, one common mistake businesses and organizations make relates to keyword stuffing, which is placing too many keywords in the tags (Bar-Ilan 2004).

Search engines are also tweaking their algorithms to combat businesses' misuses and adapt to changing user behavior. For example, Google adjusts their algorithms to stop search engine “bombs” (eMarketer 2007). Search engines fought keyword spamming by decreasing the weight applied to each keyword (Bar-Ilan 2004). When facing more sophisticated users, Google have altered their interfaces, such as introducing Universal Search (blending images, blogs, videos and other formats of results together in SERP) and search filters, allowing users to slice and dice results (Google 2007a, 2009). The emerging Web 2.0 in terms of social media places a more and more important role, since search engines have granted those site more weights (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Recently, Google made a landmark change on their algorithm, termed Google Panda, in
which PageRank was downgraded in importance while it gave more weights to new websites and social media sites (McCullagh, 2011).

In general, dynamic and co-evolving relationships exist among travel information searchers, tourism businesses, and the search engines, as three actors in this search system. However, search engines are only the technology which facilitates and mediates the connection between travelers and tourism businesses; travel information searchers, as users, are the central actor. Thus, discovering information needs of travelers and the way they express them in queries, and representing the tourism products honestly online and building the trust will be the unchanging communication philosophy for destination marketing organizations and other tourism businesses (Urban, Sultan, & Qualls, 2000). This philosophy should be the guiding principle to survive in the dynamic and evolving search engine world.

A FRAMEWORK FOR THE USE OF SEARCH ENGINES FOR TRAVEL PLANNING

Search engine results provide essential clues about the traveler, the destination website and the destination itself. Recent research by Fesenmaier, Xiang, Pan, and Law (2011) suggests that the use of a search engine by travelers can be described in three stages, where the first stage, namely Pre-Search Conditions, reflect travelers’ use of (or preference for) various types of information as well as the perceived usefulness of the various travel tools (i.e., types of websites) available on the Internet. The second stage, namely Search Process, describes the basic strategies travelers use to navigate through the Internet to find relevant information in order to make various travel decisions. These strategies act as “frames” within which the information accessed through use of search engines is evaluated (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2001; Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000). The third
stage, i.e., Post-Search Evaluation, focuses on the overall evaluation of search engines. Importantly, this stage of use not only results in overall evaluation (i.e., satisfied vs. not satisfied), but also attitude formation toward search engine use for travel planning (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Finally, this third stage prepares one for future use of search engine for trip planning, and is therefore linked to the first stage in the overall process. It is argued that an in-depth understanding of these relationships is essential as destination marketers seek to optimize the conversion rate between seeing the search result and actually choosing to visit the destination website. The following provides a brief summary of the three stages of search.

Pre-Search Conditions

Figure 3 suggests that two constructs in Stage 1 determine, to a large extent, whether or not the traveller regularly uses a search engine as part of the online travel planning process. These constructs are the various types of information used (Fodness & Murray, 1998; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998; Vogt, Fesenmaier, & MacKay, 1993) and the perceived usefulness of the various tools/websites (Jansen & Molina, 2006). Information search tasks can be measured by the types of information travellers typically use when planning a pleasure trip including information about destinations, attractions, accommodations, car rental information, and/or choosing routes. The perceived usefulness of various travel tools/websites, including travel agency sites, travel company sites, travel magazines, virtual communities, focuses on the ability of the Internet to support the travel planning effort. IT can be measured by the perceived usefulness of the
various types of online tools/websites. Thus, one might expect that travellers with different information needs and their assessment of the various Internet travel planning tools to differ significantly in their use of search engines. Further, the interaction of these two constructs, search for travel information and use of various types of websites, enables one to gain experience, knowledge, and understanding necessary to evaluate the relative usefulness of search engines in helping find information necessary.

**The Search Process**

The process of search within the context of travel planning shapes the strategies used in evaluating search engine results (Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Also, following Jeng and Fesenmaier (2002), Pan and Fesenmaier (2000), and Hwang et al. (2009), the degree of specificity (i.e., general vs. specific) of the planning task also affects the way one evaluates search engine results. For example, a person having already decided to visit a particular destination might use an online travel agency in order to arrange the flight or use a company hotel website to book accommodations (i.e., a very specific task). However, if a person is undecided about a specific destination and is seeking information about alternative destinations, that person might use a travel community website or an online magazine to learn about potentially interesting places to visit.

Thus, an online search engine user (i.e., travel planner) will differ significantly in terms the keywords entered into the search engine as well as the number of search results considered. Recent studies by Pan et al. (2006)), Pan, Litvin, and O’Donnell (2007) and Xiang et al. (2008) indicate that search strategies (i.e., keywords and number of search results) differ significantly depending upon the nature of task (i.e., facet of the trip being
considered and level of specificity) and user goals. For example, when a traveler has already decided the destination and seeks information about attractions to visit or a hotel to stay, he/she would use the name of the destination as the keyword within a search engine; the number search results he/she would evaluate would be limited. However, if the person perceives greater flexibility in the place to visit or the activities to participate, he/she might search much further among the search engine results.

**Post Search Evaluation**

Four constructs define the third stage of a search process, the evaluation stage. First, the online travel planner forms an overall evaluation of search engines use for travel planning, reflected in a general satisfaction measure (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Also, the experience is translated into attitudes towards search engines in terms of trust, ease of use, and their efficacy in supporting the travel planning process (Gefen, Karahanna, & W., 2003; Gretzel, Fesenmaier, & O’Leary, 2006; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Thus, a person who is very satisfied with her/his use of search engines would consider search engines as trustworthy, easy to use, and the search results enable the traveler to make better decisions. On the other hand, dissatisfied users might see search engines as untrustworthy, difficult to use, and/or not very effective in helping them plan a trip. Finally, studies suggest that these evaluations and resulting attitudes shape the perceptions that travelers have of the Internet and travel planning tools as well the use of search engines.

**Closing the Circle: Linking Post-Search Evaluation and Pre-Search Conditions**

The results of Fesenmaier, et al. (2010) indicate that extremely satisfied users with general search engines are more likely to search for information about a particular
destination (83%), hotel prices or places to stay (72%), and things to do at the destination (61%); beyond this, no correlation exists between information search strategies for travel planning and satisfaction with general search engines. Interestingly, the extremely satisfied search engine users consistently perceived other types of online planning tools to be significantly more useful in finding online travel information than those who were not satisfied. These differences were consistent for most of the tools/websites considered. However, the reverse was true for those using travel guidebook sites such as Fodors or Lonely Planet; in this case, extremely unsatisfied search engine users were more likely to consider this tools essential and/or very useful.

SIX KEY LESSONS FOR EFFECTIVE SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING FOR TOURIST DESTINATIONS

With the increasing importance of search in travelers’ access to information, tourist destinations and businesses must find better ways to adapt to the fast paced change in the environment. Search engine marketing comes to the fore to serve this purpose. However, a successful SEM program requires a deep understanding of the dynamics in SEM in tourism. This section synthesizes existing literature related to this topic. The proposed search triad model provides a comprehensive understanding of the foundations of SEM and offers important managerial implications for online tourism marketing as well as the construction of theories that describe the relationships between the three parties.

As described in the model, the three parties in the search triad all have different goals and perspectives; that is, they may compete and co-operate with each other at the same time. This system’s perspective requires destination marketing organizations to
adopt new ways of thinking. However, certain rules stay unchanged, i.e., the need to understand the traveler, the way travelers express their needs in queries, and honestly representing one’s products and making the connections with travelers’ needs. Based on this understanding, the following key lessons are considered essential for a destination marketing organization to be competitive in search engine marketing. These are: 1. Understanding user queries, 2. SERP design, 3. Keyword targeting, 4. Micro targeting, 5. Competitive analysis, and 6. Monitoring. Each of these lessons is discussed as follows.

Key Lesson #1. Understanding User Queries. To merely study and understand the information needs of potential customers is not sufficient; one also needs to understand how travelers translate these needs into queries. Additionally, it is important to recognize the fact that queries vary depending on many factors including an individual’s knowledge and experience, decision making stage, Internet use experience, etc. With a good understanding of how travelers develop queries, online marketers can link the words used by tourists with product offerings, and even alter or design new products.

Key Lesson #2. SERP Design. Search results (i.e., snippets) are short advertisements that represent “first contact” with a potential visitor on a search engine, and establish a first impression of the destination. Thus, the snippets should be deliberately designed to fit within the strategic communication goals of the tourism organization. Additionally, one would expect that the words/terms used within the queries should relate directly (i.e., be included within) to the SERP’s as they serve to reinforce the relevance of the website. Importantly, the way search engines create snippets from a site vary substantially;
therefore, carefully monitoring the results of search engine is crucial to effectively control the messages conveyed by the search engine.

*Key Lesson #3. Keyword Targeting.* Search queries for a destination follows a long tail shape: a few keywords have tremendous search volumes while a large amount of niche keywords are searched infrequently. For popular keywords in the “head” of the distribution curve such as the word “hotels” or the name of a destination, the cost for both organic results and paid listing will be very high. Thus, DMOs should focus on complementing and/or strengthening the range of opportunities within the destination. For example in most American cities, “hotels” is the most frequently used tourism-related search word associated with a destination and many top results for these queries are from major online travel agencies or online review sites such as expedia.com, hotels.com, or tripadvisor.com; many searches for a destination will also have a Wikipedia entry as one of the top results. In order to be effective, a sensible approach for a tourism destination is to provide additional resources beyond hotel reservations including offering opportunities to visit local attractions, alternative routes to the city, and etc.

*Key Lesson #4. Micro Targeting.* DMOs also need to be flexible in targeting the long tail because the niche keywords offer potentially substantial opportunities for tourism organizations to more effectively market to their target customer community. The long tail is represented by those niche geographic keywords more specific to a certain destination (such as “DuPont Circle Washington D.C.”) or seasonal keywords (such as “Cherry Blossom Washington D.C.” in the spring). Studies indicate that these words
offer DMOs the opportunity to gain premier positions in SERPs given their limited resources and huge competitions from the accommodation sector.

Key Lesson #5. Competitive Analysis. Given the dynamic relationships between the three actors, it is essential to anticipate similar approaches one's competitors might adopt. Those competitors are likely to bid on relevant keywords and adopt link campaigns targeting same organizations and bloggers. Indeed, a study conducted by Sen (2005) has shown that, when everyone is adopting search engine optimization on the same keywords, paid listing will give the businesses a competitive advantage. As such, destination marketing organizations need to differentiate themselves by adopting diverse SEM tactics or targeting different keywords. Organizations should avoid those keywords the dominating competitors in the marketplace will target and thus, avoid a heads-on rivalry for top positions. This strategy includes not only search engine optimization (SEO) to increase visibility in organic listings, but also the use of paid listings.

Key Lesson #6. Monitoring. It is essential for DMOs to keep track of the dynamics of search engine triad: the changing popularity and algorithms of search engines, the changing competitors on various tourism domains, and the changing behavior of travelers. Monitoring systems should be adopted to track these changes by assessing the ranking of each site, the changes in search volumes, and the sudden drop or increase of conversion rates. Thus, search engine marketing is a continuous effort, requiring constant evaluation after the initial SEO and paid listing campaign. The tools for monitoring the rankings and tracking website performance include analytics tools such as Google
Analytics and Google AdWords. With these tools, every user who clicked on a paid listing or website can be tracked and the DMOs or businesses could precisely monitor Return on Investment (ROI). Accurate data can reveal where visitors are visiting and what they are clicking on, which provides a wealth of information about businesses web pages and online advertising. In addition, tourism businesses need to better monitor the information sources from the third-party and social media websites such as tripadvisor.com and take advantage of them.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS IN SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING

Online marketing has been a focus of much research since the Internet became an important information source for travel marketing (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2000; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2006; Werthner & Klein, 1999; Werthner & Ricci, 2004). The increasing importance of search and dominance of search engines gives rise to the need for fresh thinking because the focus for online marketing has shifted from improving the usability of a website toward utilizing search engines to attract and influence online travelers. In addition, the continuous struggle between different players on the Internet has been evidenced by the threat posed by websites such as Facebook in that social media are gaining important grounds since their enormous amount of information that is not readily available for the search engines to index. This requires a paradigm shift that embraces a new set of notions including the social media for travel, the so-called Web 2.0, as well as the “search economy” and the “link economy”. Also, these trends demand a shift of marketing paradigm from delivering messages to influencing conversations between consumers and
business partners and stakeholders. More studies are crucial in exploring the third-party information sources created by the consumers and other information resources.

Additionally, the conception of the dynamic relationships in the search engine triad indicates that there is a need to develop new metrics that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of SEM programmes. For example, how should marketers define and measure the competitive space for a destination in the search context? How should the effectiveness of a tourism organization or business on search engines be measured? The metrics should include search volume for certain keywords, the ranking of a site or page on those keywords, and the conversion rates. The benchmarking metrics might be different from one business to another, depending on the goals and strategies of the DMO or businesses. For example, if transactions are one of the goals, the revenue generated from clicks directly from search engines will be one metric; if the goal is to forward clicks to the web pages of other local tourism businesses, then outbound links should be monitored and reported frequently.

Last, the performance of the businesses, the performance of competitor websites, and changes on the search engine algorithms should be monitored, tracked, and studied continuously. Since user behavior, information on the web, and search engine algorithms change constantly, the online experiment at one time might not hold or be relevant over a longer time period. Obviously, within the changing technology field any study of search engines is bound to be a snapshot of the current landscape. Many technological developments will continue to change. For example, the search engine Bing.com claims to be a “decision engine” by providing a search function specifically for travel and the boundaries between general search and specific travel search are blurred. Furthermore,
the popularity of social media sites and mobile applications has the potential to dramatically change this landscape. However, it seems that we are still far away from the day when technologies are sophisticated enough that they can adequately anticipate our information needs based on locations, preferences, and learned behavior, thus making search obsolete. As such, it is argued that search engines will continue to play a crucial, even dominant, role in helping travelers find information and connecting potential customers with the tourism industry.
REFERENCES


Figure 1. Google Search Engine Results Page: Keywords “new york hotels”
Figure 2. The Search Engine Marketing Triad
**Figure 3** A General Framework of the Use of a Search Engine for Travel Planning
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Payment Scheme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonpaid</td>
<td>Search Engine Optimization (SEO)</td>
<td>The process of improving the quality or quantity of traffic from search engines to a website</td>
<td>None paid to search engines</td>
<td>SEO practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paid Placement</td>
<td>Bidding on keywords on SERPs</td>
<td>Pay-per-click</td>
<td>Google AdWords, Yahoo! Precision March</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paid</td>
<td>Contextual Advertising</td>
<td>Pay to appear on relevant websites or web pages</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Paid Inclusion</td>
<td>Annual subscription fee to search engines to be included in their indices</td>
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