

USE OF INTERNET IN THE SELLING OF HANDICRAFTS: TURKISH MEERSCHAUM PRODUCTS

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ABSTRACT

Web technologies and the opportunities which they provide are there to use and present knowledge and exchange of information. It affects the whole economy, levels of education, politics and public management from production to trade, health to publishing, and tourism to entertainment. Especially in areas of marketing; there are online shops which advertise products and services on the online environments. Today's businesses have no geographic borders and consumers are recognized as the whole world. Especially small sized firms use technological opportunities and by using Internet they can reach consumers and other firms easily. This study deals with the contribution of Internet to the selling of Meerschaum handicraft products.

Meerschaum is a craft identified with city of Eskiřehir Turkey, is an artisanship that requires experience, skill, and patience. Marketing success of these handicraft products is important both economically and for continuation of this art form. Meerschaum artisans producing handcrafted products such as jewelry and souvenirs need to be able to supply according to the quantity, quality, design, price and delivery requirements of the buyers. This is not an easy job for small handicraft producers, who may be located in rural areas far from commercial centers. With Internet small handicraft producers can enter many markets without having to invest heavily and spend resources, and in these markets they have the chance to provide high-quality products. This study attempts to examine the effect of web marketing on the selling of Meerschaum handicraft products. Ways to increase meerschaum handicraft sales will also be discussed using Internet.

Keywords: Internet, Marketing, Handicraft, Meerschaum

1. INTRODUCTION

The developments in communication technologies presented the businesses to establish mutual and direct contact with consumers through web pages and e-mails. Businesses are able to directly engage in promotion of their business using the websites, accessing information on the target audience, while also maintaining more sustained communication with the media. Internet is also one of the cheapest methods of communication. Internet makes it possible to reach the entire globe simultaneously, providing 24/7 promotion and service opportunities. It is also a highly effective and economical tool for investigating the consumers' demands and needs (Sabuncuoğlu, 2007).

The content management of websites is greatly significant for businesses. This relates to ensuring the visitors re-visit the website. This can be ensured by automatically refreshing the contents. Today, millions of websites are in existence and the businesses offer increasingly more impressive examples of such. Consumers log into a website to find information. If the information on offer is valuable, the consumers spend more time on the website and expose themselves to marketing messages for longer durations. Once the consumer's attention is caught, the business must show them what they can do (Levinson and Hanley, 2006).

Internet paved the way for new businesses with small capitals to access marketing opportunities all around the globe. As an example; Clos La Chance Wines a local wine business in the United States, started the business as a virtual vineyard. Later, the business purchased grapes and hired the vine production sites and stores of other vineyards, outsourced the vine-making skills, labels, bottles and corks, selling products only through Internet (Kotler, 2003). Currently, the number of Internet users globally is estimated as way over 1 billion.

To sum up, Internet modifies the consumer demands and needs, restructuring the markets. It rapidly diverts the concepts of product, service, business and market and, viewed from the business perspective, Internet means the new product development periods are reduced, requiring the rapid renewal of marketing mix components such as pricing, distribution and marketing communications. On the other hand, the marketing structures show frequent changes, making it increasingly more difficult for the businesses to achieve competitive superiority and maintain market shares. This phenomenon naturally relates closely to the marketing of handicraft products as well. Therefore, this study investigates the effects of Internet in *handicraft product* marketing.

2. IMPORTANCE OF INTERNET IN THE MARKETING OF HANDICRAFT PRODUCTS

Today's social, political, cultural, financial and technological developments and changes are pushing the businesses to compete increasingly in the global competitive environment. While creating opportunities for some

businesses, such changes also constitute a threat to others. Transforming these changes into opportunities is only possible through proper marketing management for small, large or any other size of business. At this point, it is of significance for the businesses to analyze these changes and developments in all aspects, preparing and implementing marketing activities in line with the business objectives. Particularly in the current environment of fierce competition, it is possible to find consumers with unlimited needs and out-of-the-ordinary expectations. It is important for the businesses to determine and evaluate the demands and needs of such consumers of a different type. Only through such methods, can the businesses develop active marketing strategies to influence the decision-making process of consumers.

Globalization and increasing competition constitute a threat to the marketing of products with local properties and handicrafts. Furthermore, the handicrafts are negatively influenced by the recent, intensive use of technology in production systems. Internet should not be ignored in the marketing of handicraft products in particular. Internet, if used properly and accurately, can provide significant benefits to the businesses producing this type of goods. Large and mass production holds the competitive advantage due to various reasons including its strong capital structure. Internet can, herein, play an important role in rendering the producers and businesses of handicraft products competitive. Gaining huge momentum following World War II, technological advancements, culture and social norms began to alter numerous paradigms. While causing structural transformations in various social systems ranging from family structure to national administrations and health services, such technological changes also command significant effects on the traditional commerce. Today, Internet is a tool deserving significant attention from all businesses, whether traditional or modern, small or large. Technological advancements causing a change of paradigm on the society and culture as well as the Internet in particular, must be assessed from this perspective. Countless businesses utilize the Internet to offer a wide range of products and services, operating through a more direct and instant communications with the consumers and other businesses. In this process, Internet has become a very significant tool of competition. Globalization particularly has negative effects on the businesses seeking to produce and sell handicraft products. Hence, Internet is a highly significant marketing tool for the businesses producing handicraft products to achieve competitiveness.

In particular, businesses operating in large and international markets, through greater financial strength, ability to disperse risks, creating market recognition and reliability, providing variety in products and services (Karalar, 2009), usually achieve superiority over businesses producing folk products through small and medium scale production. At this stage, Internet plays an important role in allowing the businesses producing folk products to attain competitiveness. small and medium sized businesses can achieve greater success via Internet using their flexibility, simple management,

ability to produce special services and products, establishing personal relations and greater capacity in the areas requiring particular hand crafts. Below is a summary of the change in the marketing mix caused by the Internet:

Product Strategy: Through Internet, businesses started to utilize this tool that increases sales opportunities, finding solutions to shortcoming stocks and operational insufficiencies and even facilitating consumer operations. Thanks to businesses marketing products through Internet, consumers are able to select the desired products sorted by price or quality, even comparing products while shopping. Multiple competing products appear on the screen while ordering a product and associated products are displayed as a reminder (Meyers and Lubliner, 2003).

Pricing Strategy: Since more competitors are globally active and investigating is faster and easier through Internet, product prices take a lower share of the total income due to reduced prices and stock-building opportunities increased, the demand flexibility of products also rises, by comparison to traditional markets. Although non-price factors gain increasing importance in modern marketing culture, the price still preserves its significance in the marketing mix. Pricing is a dynamic process. Businesses trading online should consider the position they want to reach, their costs, target market and competitors.

Distribution Strategy: This is the process of delivering online purchases to the buyers. Transportation and delivery is usually undertaken by cargo businesses. The reliability of a business trading on the Internet is directly proportional to the complete and timely delivery of the product. Taking from the vendor, labeling, barcoding, added gift note, distribution and delivery of products sold on the Internet are all realized through e-logistics companies. Businesses selling products on the Internet track orders through order numbers and both the supplier and the customer are informed of the order number. Thus, the end user and the business can track the order online by typing in the order number. Internet eliminates physical presentation. As a result, the distribution activities have lower costs and are more effective. Internet can be defined as a distribution channel capable of reaching almost every corner of the world.

Marketing Communication Strategy: Marketing communication, which can be defined in the simplest sense as activities and efforts to increase sales, is an important factor in the success of a business. Internet provides significant innovations in terms of multimedia applications and commercial use. The features combining text, graphics and motion video led the advertisement-based websites to emerge as an Internet-based business model.

2.1. Benefits and Challenges of Internet in the Marketing of Handicraft Products

Internet upholds an important role of reducing costs and increasing efficiency. For instance, a business using barcode readers in the check, stock control and similar activities and conducting operations electronically is able to

track the products in its inventory and sale trends using computers, dispatching consumer orders simultaneously. Businesses also relay new orders to the business automatically through computer networks. The manufacturing business receives the order form through computer and automatically relays the relevant information to sales, production, distribution and accounting departments. The transactions conducted by computers reduce the staffing requirements of several processes to minimum, providing significant savings in staffing costs. Since the computers conduct sensitive transactions, issues emerging from orders between businesses are also reduced (Etzel et al., 2001). Computer-assisted, meticulous and timely orders also reduce the required storage area, pulling the ordering and storage costs down. In addition, the trends towards purchased goods are tracked, which may facilitate the decision-making for selecting and ordering new products that are attractive to consumers (Say n and Fazlıođlu, 2000).

There are certain hindrances on the use of Internet by the businesses producing handicrafts. The fundamental issue on the use of Internet is the fact the business owners are not informed about the benefits that can be attained (Bozkurt, 2000). Despite the fact that computers are cheaper, the software suitable for business processes are expensive, which causes timidity towards the use of Internet. Another issue of significance is the lack of qualified personnel to use computers.

2.2. Meerschaum as an Example for the Marketing of Handicraft Products

There are two methods in the marketing of handicraft products, which are direct sale and indirect sale. These methods provide certain advantages and disadvantages over the other. Entrepreneurs should accurately select the method to utilize depending on the type of handicraft in practice – whether it is seasonal or not, unique features of the region and location where the handicraft is performed as well as the definite target consumer group. The leading advantage of indirect sale is that it eliminates the risk of failing to sell the product, since the business is based on orders. On the other hand, the advantage of direct sale is a more flexible pricing policy and design variety (KGD, 2008). Internet, a tool that can be used with ease in direct marketing, can become an important competition tool for this type of products.

At this point, discussing the current situation of the sector and the benefits of using Internet in marketing activities for meerschaum, also known as sepiolite, a traditional handicraft, will be useful for materializing the issue. Sepiolite is globally known as “Meerschaum” which means sea foam (due to porous form and low density of the mineral) in German. It is convenient for carving and engraving due to its suitable density. Meerschaum is used in the making of various decorative and figurative objects, in addition to tobacco pipes. In Turkey, objects and tools were

made of meerschaum, used by people in daily life during the 17th Century. However, the first making and use of meerschaum tobacco pipe is believed to date back to 1725 – 1750 period. When Briar pipes were not yet known and used in the world, meerschaum and clay pipes existed. Meerschaum, used to make tobacco pipes, pipes, water pipes etc. in Eskişehir, is also used in the making of pots-cups, boxes, noggin and statues <http://pipoevi.com/turkiyede-luletasi-ekonomisi/>. Meerschaum businesses and producers in Eskişehir and Turkey are usually owned by families. Due to the increasing lack of raw materials, the number of craftsmen registered as members to Eskişehir Meerschaum Handicraft Chamber dropped from the past 300 to the current 50. Although there are businesses striving to grow as well as highly skilled meerschaum artists, they are in need of institutionalizing. Entrepreneurs that improve themselves in the making of tobacco pipes in particular can establish small businesses and initiate trading immediately. Therefore, the sector is formed solely by small businesses, rendering efficient and regular growth impossible for the sector.

In addition to holding 70% of the global meerschaum reserves, Turkey also houses the highest quality meerschaum deposits. Furthermore, Turkey is the unrivalled leader of unprocessed meerschaum exports in the world. Viewing the meerschaum product exports, 70% of the meerschaum products is exported to USA, in addition to exports to Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, Austria and other European countries as well as China, Japan and Malaysia. Meerschaum tobacco pipes are leading on the list of exported products, followed by prayer beads, jewelry and ornaments. However, the craftsmen produce personal effigies and statues to provide variety in meerschaum objects in conjunction with technological advancements, wherein the artist produces miniature statues of people by looking at their photographs (Taşlıgil and Şahin, 2011).

3. METHOD

In this study, aiming to evaluate the websites of meerschaum businesses, all of the 15 meerschaum businesses in Eskişehir, which maintain a business website, constitute the population of the study. This study investigates the websites of all businesses due to the low count of meerschaum businesses maintaining a website, as well as time and finance challenges, in order to minimize the loss of information. In addition, these products are sold on general sale sites such as www.alibaba.com and www.gittigidiyor.com and such websites are not included in the scope of this study.

The websites of meerschaum businesses were examined through the content analysis to identify the extent to which the business utilizes the means offered by the website, as well as certain features of the websites and marketing activities, in order to reveal the current situation in Internet usage. The study draws from Lee and Littrell (2003) and Çiçek, Demirel and Onat (2010)'s study; other sources on the issue were also examined to make additions. The study

method is content analysis, which is a qualitative research method. The content analysis is a numerical, unbiased and statistical analysis intended to measure the variables in a text (Bayram and Yayl , 2009). In other words, content analysis transforms written or oral text or symbol into numbers, to achieve interpretation through the resulting number; i.e., transforming the number back into words (Çiçek et al., 2010). Eight categories were used for analyzing websites, which are business information (period of active business, location etc.), product information (product size, number of constituent parts), cultural information (country, culture, artisan etc.), types of crafts information (mineral, wooden, metal etc.), crafts media information (jewelry, household objects, garments etc.), transaction and fulfillment information (price, transport, delivery etc.), use of image and video (multimedia using) of the product, updating the site and availability in other languages. Before conducting the analysis, the coding was checked for reliability.

4. RESULTS

For the purpose of determining whether the websites of meerschaum businesses are utilized effectively in terms of marketing; the sites were examined under the titles of business information, product information, cultural information, type and use of handicraft, type of payment, multimedia usage, updating and availability of content in other languages and the results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Findings on the Website Features of Meerschaum Businesses

	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
	Yes	No
Business Information	6 (%40)	9 (%60)
Product Information	6 (%40)	9 (%60)
Cultural Information	3 (%20)	12 (%80)
Types of Crafts and Crafts Media	6 (%40)	9 (%60)
Transaction and Fulfillment	3 (%20)	12 (%80)
Multimedia Using	8 (%53)	7 (%47)
Updating	6 (%40)	9 (%60)
Other Language	7 (%47)	8 (%53)

In terms of information on the business information of meerschaum businesses' websites were examined with respect to various aspects such as the business history, mission and information on the management. Examination of the business information on meerschaum businesses' websites revealed that 40% of the analyzed businesses provide

information on the business and its history and information on the entrepreneur. However, none of the businesses provide information their organizational charts on the websites.

Assessment of the information on the meerschaum businesses' web sites reveals that 40% of the website provides product information such as the size of the product and the number of constituent parts. It is observed that a low number of the websites of businesses provide information on the artisans (20%) and cultural information such as the making of the product. Cultural information includes the processing of the product and meerschaum mine, its historical development, symbolic meanings of products, details on the products and the making of the products. Furthermore, information on significant and famous artisans, biographies and images of the making are available.

The percentage of information on the types of crafts and crafts media available on the websites is 40%. Businesses indicate the usage features of the products such as jewelry and ornament, as well as other products used in the products along with the meerschaum mineral, such as metals and silver.

Only 20% of meerschaum businesses take orders online. This indicates that the website is mostly used for promotional purposes and taking offline orders, since all of the businesses provide phone number and contact information for orders and special productions in their websites. 40% of the businesses' websites are updated. This makes it possible to offer up-to-date information, ensuring a greater number of users to visit the site and remain loyal to the respective business's website. 47% of the websites of meerschaum businesses included in the study provide services in a second language (English). This is particularly significant for attracting foreign clients and promotion.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigates the use of Internet in the marketing of handicrafts by conducting website content analysis of meerschaum businesses. Accurate design of a website bears significance for market achievement. Today, the products relating to handicrafts are popularized via the mass media. This may, at some point, be considered as technology being substituted by oral tradition. Handicrafts have begun to accord to new tools of communication and new technological media, briefly, to new conditions. This phenomenon also influences the marketing of handicraft products. Therefore, the websites of 15 businesses engaged in meerschaum businesses that maintain a website were evaluated in terms of website marketing activities.

The meerschaum businesses examined in this study do offer some active marketing on the Internet. But these businesses should utilize Internet more effectively to establish faster and cheaper communications with domestic and foreign clients and should not refrain from investing in this area. The rate of direct sales on the examined websites is

very low. However, the websites offer price information of the products and phone orders are mainly preferred. The properties, sizes, production methods, usage areas of the products are available in written and visual form, although the use of videos is highly limited. The artisan that processes the raw material is of great significance in handicraft production, wherein such displays occasionally take an artistic form, drawing the consumer's interest, perhaps more than the product itself. For this reason, it would provide major benefits to add videos of the processing and production phases on the website in particular.

It is important to ensure that the users of handicraft products communicate with each other and share their experiences. Providing such options on the websites is an effective method of promotion. The businesses should not only use the technology properly, but also cooperate with other businesses as needed, to take the upper hand in national and international competition.

To conclude, the market dynamics and tendencies are not properly investigated and known, which prevents the small businesses from engaging in product diversification and promotion in a professional sense. Our study also shows that the use of Internet in sufficient and qualified manner for marketing is lacking. In short, although the meerschaum market has the possibility to grow and gain greater international recognition, this possibility fails to reach fruition, as the small businesses comprising the sector fail to use the Internet properly, most of whom do not render promotion in foreign languages and fail to take the necessary steps towards institutionalizing.

In today's challenging competition environment, small businesses utilize the Internet intensively and establish their websites due to its benefits. However, the majority of these businesses lack information as to the level of success of their websites. Consequently, the handicraft businesses have to design their websites properly from the first moment, assess the site in regular intervals and make improvements in shortcoming aspects, as is the case for the businesses in all other sectors.

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