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INVESTIGATING THE DILEMMAS OF ONLINE TRAVEL AGENCIES IN INDIA: AN EXPLORATORY VIEW

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Tourism researchers have emphasized the importance of the internet on travel and tourism. As a result, the travel industry has witnessed a gradual shift from traditional travel agencies to recent Online Travel Agencies (OTA). OTAs are more like an online booking resource/website that can provide full service solution to make travel arrangements. Today, the online travel industry is the driving force in the e-commerce segment and its importance is likely to increase in the future. The paper is aimed at analyzing online travel agencies and also to assess the various challenges faced by them. The objectives were achieved by the review of documented sources and paper was built upon the analysis of current situation prevailing in Indian market in context to Online Travel Agencies. The paper concluded with the recommendations for the online travel agencies to overcome the challenges faced by them.

Keywords: Online travel agencies, Online travel market, Drivers and challenges

INTRODUCTION

Tourism researchers have emphasized the importance of the internet on travel and tourism. The emergence of new tourism services and products, coupled with a rapid increase in tourism demand, has driven the wide-scale adoption of IT in general, and in particular, the Internet as an electronic intermediary. As a result, the travel industry has witnessed a gradual shift from traditional travel agencies to recent Online Travel Agencies (OTA).

The rapid growth of the travel industry requires sophisticated Information Technologies (ITs) for managing the increasing volume and quality of tourism traffic (Law *et al.*, 2004). Prior studies have indicated that modern travelers demand more high quality travel services, products, information, and value for their money (Lubetkin, 1999; Samenfink, 1999; and Christian, 2001). In other words, the Internet serves as a new communication and distribution channel for e-travelers and suppliers of travel services and

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products. This new channel also enables tourism businesses to improve their competitiveness and performance.

OTAs are more like an online booking resource/ website that can provide full service solution to make travel arrangements. For tourism suppliers, the Internet provides a way for them to sell their products globally to potential travelers at any time. These suppliers can remotely control their servers to display information on services/ products at an electronic speed (Inkpen, 1998; and Law, 2000). For travelers, the Internet allows them to communicate directly with tourism suppliers to request information, and to purchase products/services at any time and any place (Olmeda and Sheldon, 2001).

Indian online travel market is growing at a steady rate due to increase in awareness coupled with confidence among the customers to make online transactions. The Indian customer is aware about online travel portals and is ready to pay for the convenience and better service. Today, the online travel industry is the driving force in the e-commerce segment and its importance is likely to increase in the future. Various offers and deals from the OTAs have made the market very lucrative for the customers, thus driving competition (Netscribes India Pvt. Ltd., 2012).

Online Travel Agencies in India: Theoretical Perspective

An online travel agency is more like an online booking resource. It can be any website that one can visit to make travel arrangements. These agencies enables to do multiple searches for flights, hotel rooms, car rentals etc. and also allows to place order online very convenient from one's desk at home or workplace.

Online travel agencies are helpful in many ways as these provide an opportunity to explore various options such as flights, hotels, car rentals, vacation packages, cruises, deals and destinations, maps, business travels, etc. for travel at one spot. Also, the user gets exposed to options that they may not have thought of before. Therefore broadening their horizons of what type of travel arrangements are available to them. Another pro for using an online travel agent website is the wide variety of products that they offer. Not only a customer can browse airfare, car rental, and hotel options but travel insurance, airport shuttles, and tour tickets are also available for purchase. This is very helpful to an online travel planner, as they can cover most of their travel planning needs in one visit to these online travel agencies. After booking a confirmation on a travel website, the customer will receive an email with confirmations and contact information. The information that is provided to the customer usually includes information about e-tickets, car rental, policies (or where to go to look for the policies), and provides information on what to do if the travel plans change. All of this information is available right at the fingertips of the travel planning consumer.

When travel moved online, consumers found it more efficient to book hotels and flights on travel agencies. At this time, the website was just like the traditional agency where they provide almost the same service. As time is gone, this type of website provides more and more services, even seems to replace the traditional travel agency. Nowadays, a typical travel site has the following categories:

- Flights

- Hotels

- Car Rentals

- Vacation Packages

- Cruises

- Deals and Destinations

- Maps

- Business Travel

OBJECTIVES

The paper is aimed at analyzing current status of online travel agencies identifying its trends and drivers in online market and also to assess the various challenges faced by them.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The paper is focused on understanding the scope of Online Travel Agencies and various challenges faced. The paper is built upon the analysis of current situation prevailing in Indian market in context to Online Travel Agencies. Data for this study were drawn from a review of documented sources, consisting primarily of management research papers from reputed journals, marketing surveys, several corporate websites and media reports in this context. The paper will provide recommendations for the Online Travel Agencies prevailing in the market to overcome the challenges faced by them.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Internet Users and Penetration in India

Internet penetration in India remains quite low, at just under 9% of the population, but due to the country's massive population, it trails only the US and China in terms of total internet users, according to a eMarketer report, December 2012.

Internet users and penetration in India, 2011-2016:

- 2011: 83.2 million (7.0% of the population; +31.4% change)

- 2012: 107.3 million (8.9% of the population; +28.8% change)

- 2013: 133.1 million (10.9% of the population; +24.1% change)

- 2014: 155.8 million (12.6% of the population; +17.1% change)

- 2015: 175.2 million (12.5% of the population; +14.0% change)

- 2016: 193.8 million (15.3% of the population; +10.6% change)

As internet users in India have become more familiar with the web, its role in consumers' lives has expanded and changed. The internet vies more and more for consumers' attention, not only when looking for information and communicating with friends and family, but also for purposes of entertainment, taking eyes away from TV, as well as other traditional media.

The study found that, among all BRIC countries, India had the sharpest growth in unique website visitors between 2011 and 2012, at 41%, more than double the growth rate in second-place Russia. And India's online growth still has some distance to go before it hits a ceiling, since most of its online category stats are low when compared to global averages.

The number of people going online in India grew from 53 million in July 2010 to 73 million in June 2011, according to ViziSense.eMarketer estimates that in 2012 the number of internet users in India will hit 107.3 million, and climb to 193.8 million by 2016 (eMarketer, August 2012).

S. No.	Country	Internet Users (in million)	Percentage Change (as Compared to Last Year)
1	China	36	5%
2	India	62.6	41%
3	Russia	59	20%
4	Brazil	52	6%

Table 1: Internet Uusers in BRIC, July 2012

Note: (eMarketer, September 2012).

Internet penetration in India will remain in the single digits in the forthcoming years, according to estimates by eMarketer. But even with low penetration, 103.6 million people will go online in 2012, and the number of users is expected to more than double to 221.6 million by 2015 (eMarketer, February 2012).

Online Travel Market in India

Travel has long held a dominant position in the online ecommerce market in India, and will account for 83% of all online sales in the country in 2012, according to eMarketer forecasts (2012). Among travel sites, Indian Railways had the greatest reach at 19.2% in July 2012, reflecting the dominance of domestic travel among India's burgeoning middle class. But home grown online travel agents were also gaining presence, with MakeMyTrip recording 11.6% reach, and 8.3% reach for Yatra Online.

Top ten travel sites among internet users in India, ranked by reach, July 2012 (% reach):

1. Indian Railways:　　　　　　　19.2%
2. MakeMyTrip:　　　　　　　　11.6%
3. Yatra Online:　　　　　　　　8.3%
4. Jet Airways:　　　　　　　　　4.6%
5. TripAdvisor Media Group:　　3.9%
6. Indian Rail Info:　　　　　　　3.2%
7. Cleartrip:　　　　　　　　　　3.0%
8. Expedia:　　　　　　　　　　2.9%
9. Travora Media:　　　　　　　2.6%
10. Must See India:　　　　　　　2.3%

(eMarketer, September 2012)

The 20% most active of all unique visitors to the travel category - defined as "heavy online travelers" - account for the lion's share of both travel category visits and time spent on travel websites. Heavy online travelers accounted for nearly 60% of visits to the Indian online travel category in December 2010 and more than 75% of time spent. This active group of Indian online travel shoppers is an attractive target for travel companies aiming to turn lookers into bookers.

Only a handful of Indian travel websites have succeeded in attracting a significant share of India's heavy online traveler population. Rail websites have the highest penetration of heavy online travelers, followed by the leading Indian OTAs: MakeMyTrip, Yatra and Cleartrip. This shortlist of successful suitors attracts a significantly larger share of India's most active online travelers compared to both global OTA brands and airlines (PhoCusWright, June 2011).As more of India's population accesses the internet, the share of Indians capable of shopping for and booking travel online will continue to grow.

Top sites in the travel category by unique visitors, April 2011 (Total India - Age 15+, Home or work locations):

Total Internet Audience: 43,269,000 (+13% compared to April 2010)

Travel Category: 18,517,000 (+32%)

1. Indian Railways: 8,399,000 (+8%)

2. MakeMyTrip: 3,864,000 (+63%)

3. Yatra Online: 3,520,000 (+82%)

4. ClearTrip.com: 2,147,000 (+80%)

5. Expedia Inc: 1,832,000 (+12%)

6. TravelAdNetwork: 1,456,000 (+78%)

7. Mustseeindia.com: 1,049,000 (+138%)

8. Indiarailinfo.com: 922,000 (+42%)

9. Redbus.in: 807,000 (+99%)

10. HolidayIQ.com: 725,000 (+60%)

Of the 7.1 million people visiting the top three OTAs, MakeMyTrip, Yatra Online and ClearTrip.com, in April, more than 2 million users (29%) visited two or more of the three sites in April 2011. The remaining 71% of visitors checked in at only one of the three sites during the month demonstrating relatively strong brand loyalty among the top players (comScore, June 2011). Travel sites now attract more than a third of India's total internet population, as more consumers are turning to the web to fulfill their travel planning and booking needs, according to a report by comScore.

Travel was the first industry to garner significant digital sales in India, and according to the Internet & Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and Indian Market Research Bureau (IMRB). International, it remains by far the biggest segment of B2C ecommerce sales. Totaling $345.44 billion INR ($6.44 billion) in 2012, online travel sales accounted for nearly three-quarters of all B2C ecommerce sales, as noted by the IAMAI and IMRB's "Digital Commerce" report from May 2013.

While other types of ecommerce are gaining steam in India, online travel sales are still rising

Table 2: B2C eCommerce Share in India, by Segment December 2009 to December 2010 (% of Total)

Year	Travel Industry (in %)	Non-Travel Industry (in %)
2009	78	22
2010	78	22
2011	76	24
2012	73	27
2013	77	29

fast, estimated to increase by $103.63 billion INR ($1.9 billion) in 2013, a greater raw increase than for total e-tailing sales, which is by far the largest not-travel category. The IAMAI/IMRB report noted that transit tickets-air, rail and bus-comprised 97% of all online travel sales in 2012, with this category heavily dominated by domestic air tickets (50% of all online travel sales) and rail passes (39%). Only 2% of all online sales came for lodging accommodations, which means there's still plenty of room for growth in online hotel bookings.

India is to enjoy a five-year Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 30.6% for online travel sales for 2010-2016, according to eMarketer (2012).

India's digital travel sales (which include online, tablet and smartphone bookings) will nearly double between the end of 2012 and 2016, according to eMarketer's estimates. It will

Table 3: Online Travel Sales in India, by Category, 2012 (in INR)

S. No.	Category	Online Travel Sales (in billion)	Total Contribution
1	Domestic Air Tickets	173.35	50%
2	Railway Tickets	136.39	39%
3	International Air Tickets	19.26	6%
4	Hotel Bookings	7	2%
5	Bus Tickets	6.41	2%
6	Tour Packages/Travel Insurance	3.03	1%
	Total	**345.44**	

Source: Adapted from eMarketer (2012)

increase from $9.61 billion in 2012 to $18.65 billion by 2016 (eMarketer, February 2013).

Consumers have been slow to adopt ecommerce generally, but travel is the exception. Online travel purchasing makes up more than three-quarters of overall ecommerce sales in India. India will be the fastest-growing online travel sales market during 2011-2016.

Online travel sales CAGR in selected countries, 2011-2016:

- India: 30.6%

- South Korea: 19.8%

- Brazil: 18.2%

- China: 14.1%

- Russia: 9.8%

- Australia: 7.4%

- US: 7.2%

(eMarketer, September 2012)

Online buyers in India spend nearly five times more on leisure and unmanaged business travel than they spend on retail purchases. Business-to-consumer ecommerce sales in India (including travel) will reach $13.8 billion in 2012, with online travel sales accounting for $11.5 billion, or 83%, of the total, according to eMarketer, July 2012.

Online travel sales in India, 2010-2016

- 2010: $5.37 billion (+68.9%)

- 2011: $8.05 billion (+50.0%)

- 2012: $11.50 billion (+42.8%)

- 2013: $15.84 billion (+37.7%)

- 2014: $20.45 billion (+29.1%)

- 2015: $25.68 billion (+25.6%)

- 2016: $30.61 billion (+19.2%)

eMarketer expects online travel to maintain its dominance over ecommerce sales in India because the category's momentum will outpace that of retail ecommerce throughout the forecast period, which runs through 2016. For example, in 2012, retail ecommerce (excluding travel) is expected to increase 26.3% to $2.3 billion, compared to online travel, which will grow 42.8%, even despite the travel segment's already well-established status (eMarketer, July 2012).

OTAs are playing a major role in driving online travel growth. Traffic to OTAs grew faster than that to the airline and hotel supplier categories, increasing 65% from 4Q09-4Q10. In 4Q10, OTAs attracted more than double the unique monthly visitors as airlines, and nearly seven times more than hotel websites. Led by New Delhi's MakeMyTrip, the top OTAs in India,Yatra and Cleartrip round out the top three, with the latter attracting over three times as many monthly unique visitors as the most popular global competitor-Travelocity India. But the global OTAs should not be counted out. Monthly unique visitors to Travelocity India grew more than 250% from 4Q09-4Q10, while traffic to Expedia India, the seventh most-trafficked OTA, more than doubled (PhoCusWright, April 2011).

Trends in OTAs in India

Trendsidentified are consolidation amongst players, focus on hotels and tours, one-stop solution, merging online and offline modes, creating an online ecosystem and global expansion. There is an emergence of value added services among various OTAs including discount vouchers to woo customers and gather a large market share. Emergence of corporate packages is another trend identified. Many OTAs are following a hybrid model constituting online

and offline stores to penetrate the market even further. OTAs are also moving towards better technology so as to cater to the increased traffic and offer a user friendly experience to its clients. They are also becoming more responsible and addressing customer queries and complaints swiftly through social media interfaces. It has been identified that OTAs are also a means of information verification and cross checking among customers.


Figure 1: Trends Identified

Note: Adapted from: RedSeer Consulting (2010).

Drivers of OTA in India

Drivers include factors such as proliferation of the internet, especially broadband, which has increased online traffic considerably. Rising disposable income has also acted as a driver for online travel portals. Indian railways online portal has proved to be extremely efficient and user friendly, instilling confidence among people to book tickets online. Other drivers identified include rise in low cost airlines which has paved a way to travel by air for the large middle class segment in India thus increasing traffic to these online portals. Secure payment mechanisms have given people the desired confidence to carry out transactions online. On the other hand tremendous rise in medical tourism has led to influx of foreign
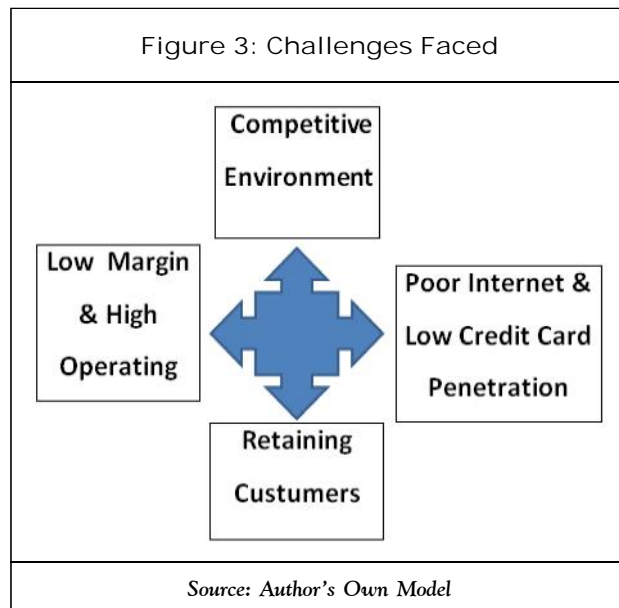

Figure 2: Drivers of OTAs

Note: Adapted from: RedSeer Consulting (2010).
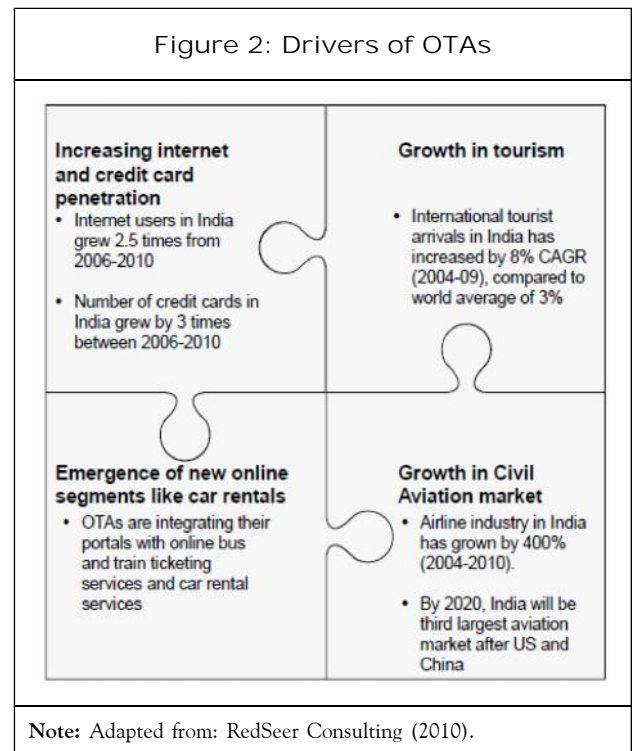
travelers to India which again gives rise to increased traffic.

Challenges Ahead

With the advent of the internet, the growth of e-Commerce and trend towards online services in travel and tourism, the traditional way of meeting each traveler's needs becomes unsustainable. The key indicator of performance of an organization *i.e.* relationship quality and customer loyalty, cannot be ignored. As global competition increases and product differentiation becomes increasingly difficult, Online Travel Agencies (OTA) have begun moving from a product centric to customer-centric strategy. The interactivity of Internet technology brings with it a range of challenges for the marketer aiming to build customer relationships. It is argued that in Internet market the competitive environment is close to pure competition, and that the seller has no market power.Customers are more aware and empowered than before. Therefore, the success

Figure 3: Challenges Faced

Competitive Environment

Low Margin & High Operating

Poor Internet & Low Credit Card Penetration

Retaining Custmers

Source: Author's Own Model

of OTAs is not guaranteed despite of its significant growth potential in India. Rather, it is contingent upon understanding complex consumer shopping behavior and the unique factors impacting individual travel segments and channels. In this scenario, establishing e-loyalty and maintain quality relationship in a major challenge for these online travel agencies. In addition, limited awareness about portals adds to the woes. Low margins and high operating costs are also the major challenges along with poor internet and lower credit card penetration in market, particularly in rural market.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the complex consumer shopping behavior and the unique factors that affect travel segments and channel, Relationship Marketing is the key to overcome the above said challenges. Relationship marketing is a long-term approach aimed at delivering long-term value to customers with long-term customer satisfaction as the main indicator of success (Murphy *et al.*, 2005). It has also been proved that relationship marketing can improve

productivity as more effective and efficient marketing practices are used (Jain and Jain, 2005). Relationship marketing has focused on the importance of loyalty and retention with the inclusion of customer lifetime values as a key metric (Gay *et al.*, 2012). The fundamental values underpinning relationship marketing were studied during the 1990's and it was found that trust and confidence were the two primary reasons for customer's willingness to build relationships with businesses. Loyalty and customer satisfaction were also found to be two determining elements of customer relationships (Murphy *et al.*, 2007). By creating customer loyalty, the scene can be set for improving and enhancing mutually profitable and long-term relationships. Research also shows that customer satisfaction is a more reliable indicator of a customer's intent to buy again than service quality. More satisfied customers will supposedly stay loyal and more and more frequently than their other less loyal counterparts (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996). It is also believed that the long-term competitive advantage and success of an organization can only be attained by building emotionally satisfying and bonding relationships with customers (Jain and Jain, 2006).

Morgan and Hunt (1994) thought that relationship quality is the key point of successful relationship marketing strategy. Palmatier *et al.* (2006) observed that most previous research has conceptualized the effects of relationship marketing on outcomes as fully mediated by one or more of the relational constructs of trust, commitment, relationship satisfaction, and/or relationship quality. Therefore, OTA should look into developing relationship marketing strategies and must focus on establishing relationship quality and e-loyalty to retain customers.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, OTAs provide various travel options in one spot and also exposed the travelers to the options that they may not have thought of before. Hence, it broadens their horizon of what type of travel arrangements are available to them and enables them make a right decision. Another pro for using an online travel agent website is the wide variety of products that they offer. Not only can a customer browse airfare, car rental, and hotel options, travel insurance, airport shuttles, and tour tickets are also available for purchase. This is very helpful to an online travel planner, as they can cover most of their travel planning needs in one visit to a website. Despite facing a myriad of challenges from within and outside the travel industry, India remains among the fastest growing travel markets in the Asia Pacific region, according to a PhoCusWright Global and Asia Pacific Edition report (PhoCusWright, June 2013). However, this can be achieved by improving relationship quality and maintaining loyal customers by implementing relationship marketing strategies.

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