

Chapter 15

Role of Internet in the Development of Medical Tourism Service in Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

Medical tourism is gaining importance through the last decades thanks to internationalization. in this area, internationalization has been facilitated by the internet revolution that enables instantaneous transmission of text, audio and visual data as well as graphics, which makes the medical consultation distance shorter and moreover reliable. a state of the art on internationalization, medical tourism and digital marketing has been presented. Furthermore, the authors, through a rich case study of the International Medical Embassy, examined the role played by the different digital marketing techniques in the development of medical tourism services in an emerging country such as Tunisia. based that, theoretical as well as practical recommendations are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Medical tourism is one of the fastest growing global health-care service industries (Medhekar and Newby, 2011). This partly resulted from healthcare globalization (Bookman & Bookman, 2007), and technology growth (Wan Normila, Azizah and Mahmud Sabri, 2012). The international healthcare marketplace emerged in the late 19th century when highly developed nations transferred medical care services offered to their own communities to the less developed areas of the world (Horowitz, Rosenswieig and Jones, 2007).

Digital marketing has been considered as an emerging area to be explored. Gilmore, Gallagher & Henry (2007) indicated that the firm could benefit from implementing digital marketing as a tool to enter

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new markets. Hence, adopting digital marketing may give emerging markets' companies new international opportunities and enable them to grow in the international markets (Škudienė, Auruškevičienė, Ivanauskienė and Ramonienė, 2014).

Digital marketing, as an innovative technology-based activity, has been considered as one of the main aspects of marketing practice that involves using the internet and other interactive technologies to create and mediate dialogue between the firm and its customers (Milley and Marcolin 2001). The popularity of digital marketing has tremendously increased in the last 15 years. Companies are investing heavily to promote their products & services via internet-based marketing (Hooda and Aggarwa, 2012). Digital Marketing adoption, just like other technologies, allows for boosting businesses in developing countries, thanks to the perceived potential of Internet and communication technologies to reduce transaction costs by bypassing some, if not all, of the intermediaries and facilitators of global e-business (Molla & Licker, 2005). One of the businesses affected by this change is medical tourism, as its growth has been facilitated by the rise of Internet use. It has also grown because of rapidly improving health care systems in some key countries, where new technologies have been adopted (Connell, 2006). Hence, integration of information and communications technology (ICT) has helped to create new service offerings and opportunities for the health industry. Information technology and particularly Internet communication are key factors in the development of medical tourism (Sarkar and Sarkar, 2010). Internet has become the must-media service available to promote and market medical and tourist services. Internet use allows consumers to gain access to health information, medical services beyond international borders (Lunt, Mannion and Exworthy, 2013; Snyder, Crooks, Adams, Kingsbury and Johnston, 2011) and to find services that are affordable, timely, or simply available (Horowitz, Rosensweig and Jones, 2007). Similarly, thanks to the various functions and features of web sites, Internet allows different players to offer tailored services and customized offers (Bauer, Grether, and Leach, 2002). Moreover, with internet, all the preliminary steps needed to contract medical tourism services, including a remote internet-based diagnosis of the medical procedure to be undertaken are ensured via Internet while the tourist-patient stays actually in contact with their doctor during their medico tourist stay.

The literature review shows that the use of Internet in B2C area needs more research (Loane, 2005), in particular in the context of medical tourism.

This chapter will focus on the contribution of ICT, Internet in particular, in internationalizing firms operating in the medical tourism sector. Our main aim is to show how Internet is used to enable firm internationalization, particularly in the medical tourism sector. The authors will try to determine the role of Internet in developing medical tourism in Tunisia. Through a qualitative approach using the single case study methodology "International Medical Embassy", we show how developing medical tourism is done through the use of digital marketing instruments, Internet in particular.

BACKGROUND

Theories and Models of SME Internationalization

Process Models

Internationalization of small firms has been explained from a number of perspectives. The first works that proposed the process models of internationalization were carried out in Nordic countries. Particularly, a

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