

DIGITAL MARKETING DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS KHON KAEN MICE CITY OF THAILAND

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Abstract

Khon Kaen is a city in northeastern region of Thailand that has been promoted to be MICE tourism city by Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (TCEB). The city's economy is larger which the hub of trade, investment, infrastructure systems, transportation and industrial development. The author has proposed objectives of this research were to study and analysis digital marketing development in Khon Kaen MICE city. The population and samples comprises; 1) authorities and enterprises 2) organizers/host organizers and owners of meeting, incentive, convention and exhibition; 3) entrepreneurs that associated with the MICE industry in Khon Kaen Province by using in-depth interviews to collect the data from 19 interviewees and 4) participants or MICE travelers who attend MICE activities in Khon Kaen Province by using questionnaire to collect the data. The participants were divided into MICE in meetings/incentives 376 person and in exhibition 34 persons.

The findings reveal that the current situation of authorities and enterprises that involved in the MICE industry in Khon Kaen Province is rather less developing in digital marketing and lack of knowledges and skills in digital marketing tools that can be used in communications and public relations to MICE traveler and can be analyzed that digital marketing tools. This study is also able to propose a plan to develop digital marketing to become Khon Kaen MICE City and consistent with the plans and policies of province and the country.

Keywords: Digital marketing development, digital marketing tools, MICE industry, MICE city.

INTRODUCTION

Restructuring the service sector in Thailand is essential. This is because the sector has continued to play an important role in creating added value, particularly in businesses with high potentials. It has promoted environmentally responsible production that is based on creativity and innovation and will continue to do so in the future. Furthermore, by supporting research and development, the service sector has brought a competitive advantage to businesses by encouraging them to be more creative, as well as by promoting the application of knowledge and new technology, and by investing in businesses with high growth potential. Competitive advantages should be sought in geographical locations, biodiversity, culture, and in that which is uniquely Thai. Moreover, these competitive advantages should

be fully exploited in the international markets, such as in tourism, healthcare services, logistical services, the film industry, and in the Meeting, Incentive, Convention, and Exhibition (MICE) Industry (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2011).

Meeting, Incentive, Convention, and Exhibition are known as the MICE industry. Currently, MICE industry, as a part of service industry, is a key factor in the development of the Thai economy since a large number of MICE travelers are business visitors who have high purchasing power. The average expenditures made by MICE travelers were about 2-3 times higher than normal tourists. In 2013, there were 1,013,502 MICE travelers in Thailand, contributing to a huge income of over 88,485 million baht (Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau, 2014).

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Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (also known as TCEB) is a public organization tasked with developing and promoting businesses in the MICE industry. TCEB has a major role in offering strategic direction to the MICE industry. In Thailand, there is a project called MICE City which is aimed at promoting MICE destinations in order to effectively create MICE activities in many regions, such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, Phuket, and Khon Kaen (Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau, 2013). Khon Kaen is the major commercial center of Issan, Thailand's Northeastern region. It is the center for trade, investment, logistics, as well as the center for industry development in this region. According to statistical data, it was revealed that in 2013 there were 688,000 MICE travelers to Khon Kaen, creating an income of 600 million Baht (Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau, 2014). Nevertheless, in 2014, Khon Kaen was selected as one of the Smarter Cities by IBM who organized the Khon Kaen MICE City Development Project (or a city of meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions). MICE travelers tend to consume digital media and in order to respond to their needs, the integration of innovations and modern technology should be applied (IBM, 2013).

Through online resources, the Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (a Public Organization) has managed the digital marketing strategy in order to promote the image and the potential of Thailand as a MICE Destination with MICE Cities. To reach the MICE domestic and international target groups, there must be cooperation among the business sectors in the MICE Industry through digital marketing activities, such as MICE organizers, domestic and international trade alliances, entrepreneurs, and MICE travelers. This must be accomplished in order to support the private organizations to reach their target groups effectively (Thai Bangkok News, 2014), and to correspondingly restructure policies in the service sectors in Thailand. Cooperation is essential since it plays an important role in creating added value, particularly in businesses with high potential, and in promoting environmentally responsible production that is based on creativity and innovation. It is important to build the competitive advantage of businesses to be more creative by supporting research and development and by promoting the application of

knowledge and new technology, so as to support free trade and global markets (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2011).

According to the 2013 survey of Thailand E-Commerce conducted by the National Statistical Office, the results revealed that in the tourism industry, the value of E-Commerce is worth 744,419 million Baht or 81% of the overall value of E-Commerce in Thailand. Based on internet user statistics in 2013, it was estimated that there were 26,150,473 million internet users in Thailand (Office of The Electronic Transactions Commission, 2013). Hence, for researchers, who are interested in conducting research related to digital marketing analysis with respect to Khon Kaen MICE City, the information retrieved from the current study can be used as guidelines regarding digital marketing development for Khon Kaen MICE city. Moreover, this can be an important mechanism for developing the city's economy.

OBJECTIVES

To study the development of digital marketing in Khon Kaen MICE City, Thailand.

To analyze the development of digital marketing in Khon Kaen MICE City, Thailand.

To suggest guidelines for the development of digital marketing in Khon Kaen MICE city, Thailand.

CONCEPTS AND RELEVANT THEORIES

In the study of digital marketing development towards Khon Kaen MICE City, Thailand, researchers have investigated related concepts, theories, and documents as basic sources of information and as guidelines for research. The topics were divided as follows:

MICE Industry

MICE is an acronym for Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions. The International Congress and Convention Association and The Asian Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus-AACVB defines MICE as a tourism business with aims for meetings, incentive travel, conventions, and exhibitions (Boonlert Jittangwatana, 2014) which consists of four main types of businesses:

- Meeting or M refers to businesses that organize meetings at international, national, or regional levels. It is a specific meeting or a planned meeting, such as annual general meeting or board meeting which aims for the success in business, cultural matters, or education (MC Media Group International, 2013)
- Incentive or I refers to incentive travel as a reward for employees or for their effective work throughout the year (International Congress and Convention Association, 2013) and is used to promote workers' motivation and their royalty towards organization (Sandro Formica and Joseph Goldblatt, 2005)
- Conventions or C refers to businesses that organize international congresses and conventions for organizations in the same or similar fields. This is to promote cooperation in solving problems or in exchanging information or opinions. It is normally held in the form of an International Congress and Convention (International Congress and Convention Association, 2013).
- Exhibition or E refers to businesses that are related to holding exhibitions for selling or promoting products at the regional, national, and/or international levels. It is a planned and systematically organized event with a combination of Visual Art and Marketing for target customers (Watanaporn Kuansuwan, 2004).

In conclusion, MICE Business is a part of the tourism industry which consists of 4 main businesses: Meetings (M), Incentives (I), Conventions (C), and Exhibitions (E).

Digital Marketing Development

The Definitions of Digital Marketing Development

Digital Marketing Development refers to the development of technology that depends upon the creativity of communication used with customers. It is a modern way of communicating which helps marketing personnel to make the proper decisions in

order to reach digital marketing target groups, who are in related businesses or have similar branding of products. In addition, it helps in meeting the customers' expectations (Damian Ryan & Calvin Jones, 2012). The characteristics of Digital Marketing Development are divided into 2 groups: Firstly, Pull Digital Marketing Strategy refers to a strategic development in which customers select information by themselves, such as communication, marketing offerings, etc. To meet the customers' needs in terms of demographics, digital marketing tools, such as Search Engine Optimization, Viral Marketing, Social Media Marketing, and Email Marketing are applied (Boundless, n.d.). Secondly, Push Digital Marketing Strategy refers to strategic development in which marketing personnel communicate and provide information to customers through Websites and Line. Furthermore, digital marketing tools, such as Search Engine Advertising (SEA), demonstrations, and Free Trials can also be applied (Henry Adaso, 2013).

Digital Marketing Tools

Digital Marketing Tools refers to the ways of marketing communications is aimed for responding to customers' needs. Digital Marketing Tools must be adapted to suit the behaviors of the target groups that keep changing from time to time. The following are the list of Digital Marketing Tools.

- Online Public Relations refers to both the Brand and the Product. It is a Two-way Communication which is able to present information by using messages, visuals, sounds, videos, and graphics through various forms of online sources such as Websites, Facebook, and YouTube (E-commerce Division, 2015).
- Websites and Landing Pages refers to the development of websites that can be applied in digital marketing. Target customers, hence, are able to receive information about the company, its location, and its telephone number, and can receive advertisements & special promotions (Jennifer Kyrnin, 2015).
- Content Marketing refers to the use of outstanding information about the organization in order to attract the target group. It can build a positive attitude

- towards the product brand by utilizing marketing tools, such as E-Newsletters, Blogs, and Websites (Suranart Niamcome, 2014).
- E-mail Marketing refers to a way of communicating with the target customers by sending newsletters related to promotions and special discounts via e-mail. It increases a number of visits to the website and promotes the circulation (Dan Forootan, 2014). Search Engine Optimization-SEO refers to tools that are used in the process of Search Engine Optimization, Website Design, and Website Promotion to consistence with the working process of Search Engines, such as Google. It could also develop the ranking of the website so that it can become a leading one (Suradej Kongdee, n.d.).
 - Social Media Marketing refers to tools that use Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter for promoting an organization's websites which can rapidly reach target customers (Apisilp Trunganont, 2011).
 - Online Video and Viral Marketing refers to the building of Brand Awareness through videos or online sources. This communication is appropriate for new or unknown products (Komjak Kamthornpasinee, 2014).
 - Mobile and Apps Marketing refers to digital marketing through electronic devices, such as mobile phones or tablets. Various forms have been developed, such as applications for organizations that have a modern look and are attractive. The abilities of products or services are presented directly to target customers which will increase their confidence in brand and will allow the information to reach them more quickly (Pakorn Pannachet, 2015).
 - Infographics refers to graphic design that provide clear content or information that is easy to understand. Infographics should be easily understood by target customers without further explanations from presence the presenter (Margaret Rouse, 2012).
- Return on Investment refers to a tool used to evaluate the return on an investment. This technique presents the results of different marketing techniques which can be used for strategic planning or for adapting the plan to cohere with the future budget. To summarize, Digital marketing tools offer benefits for strategic planning in terms of marketing analysis and planning, so as to drive the business towards its goals, to promote marketing communications, and to meet the needs of its target customers (Nattapon Yai Pairoj, 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Both Qualitative Research and Quantitative Research were applied in the current study which cohered to the objectives of the study. Data collection was divided into 2 types:

1) Primary Data

The in-depth Interview was an individual interview which was used with three sample groups which were as follows:

- Authorities and Organizations: Eight samples were selected by using Purposive Sampling.
- Organizers/Host Organizers: 2 samples were chosen by Convenience Sampling based upon their permission.
- Entrepreneurs Associated with the MICE Industry in Khon Kaen Province: Purposive sampling and Snowball Sampling techniques were used to select the samples. In accordance with the primary data collection, there were a total of 12 sampling groups.
 - Questionnaires were distributed to 400 MICE travelers who were attending MICE activities in Khon Kaen Province. The samples were selected by using Convenience Sampling and were categorized by MICE

activities in Khon Kaen Province as follows:

- Meetings & Incentives
- Conventions
- Exhibitions

Descriptive Statistics were used to describe the frequency distribution data. Percentage, mean score, and standard deviation were used to analyze the statistical data. Also, data from the rating scale questionnaire was analyzed.

2) Secondary Data

In order to gather information related to the current study, the researchers have studied concepts, theories, and relevant research from various sources, such as books, journals, theses, and other relevant research studies that had been conducted in Thailand and abroad. Online information was also retrieved through Internet.

RESULTS

In the study of Digital Marketing Development as it relates to Khon Kaen MICE City of Thailand, the researchers have gathered information from interviews, questionnaires, and from secondary data. The results of the study have been divided into two parts: 1) the Qualitative data and 2) the Quantitative data.

The results of the qualitative data were retrieved from in-depth Interviews with authorities and organizations involved in the MICE industry, host organizers, and entrepreneurs who are associated with the MICE industry, such as meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions in Khon Kaen Province. The results revealed that the tools, which had been used in the strategic development of digital marketing with respect to Khon Kaen MICE city, had consisted of the following:

1) Online Public Relations

It was revealed that government sectors and private organizations in Khon Kaen Province had been only partially using Online Public Relations in the digital marketing of the MICE industry. As a vendor, Khon Kaen should increase the standard of services for MICE travelers or for buyers. Online Public Relations

should be aimed at promoting the readiness of becoming MICE city through various online digital media.

2) Websites & Landing Pages

It was found that there was a lack of websites that had been developed for the MICE industry in Khon Kaen Province. Both the governmental sectors and the private organizations had tended to develop their websites without categorizing the information that was related to the MICE industry. Regardless, there is no updated information among organizations in Khon Kaen Province.

3) Content Marketing

It was also shown that the content marketing in Khon Kaen was not outstanding. There was a scarcity of information that was being used to promote MICE industry with respect to commerce, logistics, and tourism. Moreover, Khon Kaen does have the potential to become a regional MICE hub and has the ability to use the city's database to promote information through online sources, such as websites, applications, and social networks.

4) E-mail Marketing

In Khon Kaen Province, E-mail Marketing in MICE Industry is rarely used. E-mail is mostly used for sending communications between the government and private organizations. In terms of business, there has been the use of E-mail Marketing for the purpose of publicizing. For instance, businesses, such as hotels, have applied E-mail Marketing to communicate with their target customers.

5) Search Engine Optimization-SEO

With respect to Khon Kaen Province, the results showed that there had been no use of this tool, which can develop the rank of a website to become a leading one for MICE Industry. This could represent a possible result of a lack of development of websites related to Khon Kaen MICE Industry.

6) Social Media Marketing

The research found that there has been the development of Social Media Marketing on Facebook and Twitter, which promotes the MICE industry, by the Khon Kaen Office of the Tourism Authority of

Thailand (TAT) which advertises Khon Kaen tourist attractions to MICE travelers.

7) Online Video Promotion

There exists online video promotion of the Khon Kaen MICE Industry. Although online videos are being used by governmental sectors and public organizations, a lack of integration and connectivity still remains.

8) Mobile and Apps Marketing

With respect to Mobile and Apps Marketing, the Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (Public Organization) has developed an application for promoting the Khon Kaen MICE industry named, “MICE KKC”. MICE travelers, who use mobile phones or tablets with IOS or Android, are able to download information with a choice of two languages: Thai or English.

9) Infographics

The results regarding Infographics showed that in Khon Kaen Province there has been no development of Infographics to promote the city to MICE travelers.

10) Return on Investment

From the perspective of return on investment, it can be seen that the governmental sectors in Khon Kaen have not yet applied a digital marketing tool to measure return on investment with respect to advertising the MICE industry. Conversely, by applying a digital marketing tool in the hotel business, there is an evaluation for return on investment in the MICE industry. However, the return cannot be measured as a sum of money.

With respect to digital marketing tools, the points of view of the participants in MICE activities towards digital marketing regarding Khon Kaen MICE City were observed. When the following nine aspects were taken into consideration, the overall quantitative results retrieved from MICE travelers to Khon Kaen Province were high at = 3.62:

MICE travelers highly agreed that Search Engine Optimization is important with the average (= 3.69). The highest aspect was the convenience of searching

for websites related to the Khon Kaen MICE industry, whereas the lowest average went to the ability to find websites related to Khon Kaen MICE industry in search engines, such as Google.

MICE travelers also agreed that Infographics are important at high level with the average (= 3.68). The highest average went to the design and information shown in the infographics. While the ability to find infographics related to Khon Kaen MICE industry was the lowest.

In terms of Social Media Marketing, MICE travelers highly agreed at the average (= 3.67). The aspect with the highest average was the Subscribed Channel of the Khon Kaen MICE Industry that could be found through Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. On the other hand, the aspect with the least satisfaction was the Public Relations of Khon Kaen MICE industry through other Social Network.

It was clearly seen that Mice travelers agreed that Content Marketing is important with the average (= 3.66). The highest average went to the completeness of the information. While the marketing experienced with Khon Kaen MICE industry was the lowest.

Mice travelers agreed that Online Public Relations is important with the high average of (= 3.62). While the highest average was the benefit of contents towards Khon Kaen MICE travelers, the online experience with the Khon Kaen MICE industry was the least.

In terms of E-mail Marketing, MICE travelers highly agreed with its importance at the average (= 3.60). The aspect with the highest average was the convenience of communication or receiving E-newsletters that show related MICE activities. On the other hand, the aspects with the lowest averages were: 1) the way of receiving information and 2) Public Relations information for the Khon Kaen MICE industry through E-mail.

For Mobile and Apps Marketing, MICE travelers highly agreed with its importance at the average (= 3.57). The aspect with the highest average was the ability to download applications related to Khon Kaen MICE industry through smartphones or tablets. On the other hand, the aspect with the least average

was information retrieval through applications related to the Khon Kaen MICE industry on mobile phones.

Mice travelers totally agreed that the Websites and Landing Pages are important with the average (= 3.57). The highest average went to the connectivity of information in the website. The appropriateness of information in the website had the lowest average.

With respect to Online Video and Viral Marketing, MICE travelers highly agreed with its importance with the average (= 3.49). The highest average went to the ability of Online Video as a knowledge source. While information retrieval related to Khon Kaen MICE industry through Online Video had the lowest average.

Having analyzed of the level of agreement retrieved from MICE travelers regarding the importance of each of the digital marketing tools in Khon Kaen MICE industry, the results can be arranged according to statistical data as follows: 1) Search Engine Optimization-SEO, 2) Infographics, 3) Social Media Marketing, 4) Content Marketing, 5) Online Public Relation, 6) E-mail Marketing, 7) Mobile and Apps Marketing, 8) Websites and Landing Pages, and 9) Online Video and Viral Marketing.

DISCUSSION

According to data analysis, it was revealed that the development of digital marketing towards Khon Kaen MICE City corresponds with concepts, theories, and relevant studies as follows:

From the standpoint of both the governmental sectors and private organizations, Online Public Relations were rarely used in digitally marketing the MICE industry in Khon Kaen Province. As a vendor, Khon Kaen should increase the standard of services for MICE travelers and other customers. Online Public Relations aims to promote the readiness of becoming a MICE city through various online digital media. The Office of The Electronic Transactions Commission (2013) also mentioned the process of distributing information as Public Relations – PR strategies through various forms of online sources from sender to receiver.

In terms of Websites and Landing Pages, it was found that there had been a lack of development of websites

for the MICE industry in Khon Kaen Province. Both governmental sectors and private organizations have tended to develop their websites without categorizing the information that is related to the MICE industry. Nevertheless, in Khon Kaen Province, there is no updated information among organizations. This result conforms to the study of Jennifer Kyrnin (2015) in which she presented the development of websites in order to reach target groups.

The Content Marketing in Khon Kaen was not outstanding. The use of information to promote the MICE industry such as commerce, logistics, and tourism was rare. Furthermore, Khon Kaen has the potential to become a regional MICE hub, and the city's database could be used to promote information through online sources such as websites, applications, or social networks. This is directly related to a study by Suranart Niamcome (2014) regarding the use of Content Marketing to attract the target group.

In Khon Kaen Province, E-mail Marketing in MICE industry has rarely been used. E-mail has mostly been used for communicating between the government and private organizations. In terms of business, E-mail Marketing has been mainly utilized to publicize businesses, such as hotels which have applied E-mail Marketing to communicate with their target customers. This coheres with the work of Dan Forootan (2014) who has promoted the use of E-mail Marketing or E-Newsletters as a way of providing news and promotions to customers.

Regarding Search Engine Optimization-SEO in Khon Kaen Province for the MICE industry, there has been no use of this tool to develop the rank of the website to be a leading one, such as in Google. This could be the result of the lack of development of websites that are related to Khon Kaen's MICE Industry. Suradej Kongdee (n.d.) has made mention of Search Engine Optimization-SEO. However, since there has been a lack of development regarding websites featuring the MICE Industry in Khon Kaen Province, websites, that promote the MICE Industry, have not been directly developed.

In terms of Social Media Marketing, it was found that social media marketing development does exist and that in order to advertise Khon Kaen's tourist attractions to MICE travelers, the MICE industry is

being promoted via Facebook and Twitter by the Khon Kaen Office of The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). Similarly, Apisilp Trunganont (2011) has mentioned Social Media Marketing with respect to promoting Khon Kaen tourist attractions to build awareness to MICE travelers via Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter.

There is an Online Video and Viral Marketing which promotes the Khon Kaen MICE industry. The results cohere with the study of Komjak Kamthornpasinee (2014) that mentioned Video Marketing for Brand Awareness to target group through online sources. Although there are online videos being used by the governmental sectors and by public organizations, there still remains a lack of integration and connectivity.

In terms of Mobile and Apps Marketing, the Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (Public Organization) has developed an application that promotes the Khon Kaen MICE industry named, "MICE KKC". MICE travelers who use mobile phones or tablets with IOS or Android are able to download and choose one of two languages: Thai or English. A similar study by Pakorn Pannachet (2015), conducted research related to mobile devices, such as mobile phones or tablets with developed applications.

The results regarding Infographics showed that there has been no infographic development that has been used to promote the city to MICE travelers in Khon Kaen Province. This corresponds to a study by Margaret Rouse (2012) which mentioned that infographics could be easily understood by MICE travelers.

In terms of receiving Return on Investment and in regard to of advertising for MICE industry, it has been seen that the governmental sectors in Khon Kaen have not yet applied a digital marketing tool to measure the Return on Investment. Conversely, in hotel business, there is an evaluation of return on investment by applying digital marketing tools to the MICE industry, but it cannot be measured a return in sum of money. This relates to a 2014 study conducted by Nattapon Yai Paijor regarding the return on investment in digital marketing for strategic planning for making future investments.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

According to the study of digital marketing development with respect to Khon Kaen MICE City, the results revealed that digital marketing in MICE industry in Khon Kaen Province has not yet been conscientiously developed. A lack of cooperation from both the governmental sectors and from private organizations regarding the development of digital marketing or the use of digital marketing tools in Khon Kaen province was discovered. Moreover, there was no single organization, which responds to and/or promotes MICE activities for both governmental sectors and the local private organizations in Khon Kaen Province. It is important to respond to the changing needs of MICE travelers. However, entrepreneurs that are associated with the MICE industry and the tourism industry in Khon Kaen have not realized the importance of the development and the application of digital marketing tools, such as 1) Search Engine Optimization-SEO, 2) Infographics, 3) Social Media Marketing, 4) Content Marketing, 5) Online Public Relations, 6) E-mail Marketing, 7) Mobile and Apps Marketing, 8) Websites and Landing Pages, 9) Online Videos and Viral Marketing, and 10) Return on Investment.

Suggestions

- 1) The study of tourism branding should be carried out in order to promote the development of marketing for the MICE Industry in Khon Kaen Province.
- 2) In order that the most effective tools for Khon Kaen Province may be used, it is worth studying the effects of digital marketing tools on the MICE Industry in Khon Kaen Province.
- 3) Regarding digital marketing for Khon Kaen MICE City, it is essential that related research be conducted for both supply and demand, so that the needs of the potential customers or people, who wish to participate in MICE activities in Khon Kaen Province, can be met.

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