THE SEARCH ENGINE VISIBILITY OF QUEENSLAND VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES' WEBSITES

Yuquan Shi, University of New South Wales, yuquan.shi@student.unsw.edu.au

ABSTRACT

The search engine visibility of a website is very important in bringing traffic and building brand recognition online. This study examined the search engine visibility of websites from 68 Queensland visitor information centres (VICs) on three of the most popular search engines: Google, Yahoo!, & MSN. The majority of examined VIC websites were found to have low search engine visibility, which meant users may have had difficulty in finding them. It shows that, for Queensland VICs, how to make their websites truly part of their business strategies has not been subject to management analysis and discussion.

Keywords: Visitor Information Centre, Search Engine Visibility, Search Engine Marketing, Internet, Website, Australia

INTRODUCTION

Australian visitor information centres (VICs) are one major information resource for both domestic and international visitors before arrival and during their visit. The majority of Australian VICs have built their own websites because websites have been seen as the most effective advertising and marketing tools [13, 24]. Queensland is the most popular destination region in Australia and VICs make a significant economic contribution to Queensland's tourism industry. Hence, this research chooses to examine the search engine visibility of VIC websites in Queensland. It presents VIC operators with an opportunity to become aware of the current status of their websites' visibility. The results of this study may provide VIC operators with information about what they need to do in order to improve the visibility of their websites and thus to make their websites more effective as advertising and marketing tools. Recommendations based on the research findings can be very helpful to State tourism agencies' efforts to develop and implement accreditation programs or policies for VICs.

SEARCH ENGINE VISIBILITY

The search engine visibility (visibility) of a website concerns how a website appears in the search engine results pages [4]. For the purposes of this study, a search engine is defined as a program that allows users to search documents for specified keywords on the World Wide Web (Web) and returns a list of the documents in which the keywords were found [26, 27], for example, Google, MSN, and Yahoo!.

The importance of search engine visibility cannot be ignored if a company wants to focus on the marketing advantage that the Internet and the website can bring to it. The fact that over 550 million searches were made in 2003 on the Internet every day (as cited in [14]) makes search the second most popular activity on the Internet after email usage [5]. Research suggests that search engines are responsible for generating more than 80% of the new visits to a website (as cited in [25]) and 59% of websites receive more than half of their traffic from search engine referrals (as cited in [18]), and it was widely accepted that site traffic is very important to any business [1, 6]. Moreover, search engines drive qualified traffic for less cost. According to a March 2003 report by Piper Jaffray, online search is the most cost-effective direct-marketing method. The average cost per lead from search is US$0.29, far less than e-mail (US$0.50), the Yellow Pages (US$1.18), banner ads (US$2.00) and direct mail (US$9.94) (as cited in [19]). All the figures strongly support that maximizing a website's search engine visibility can be a powerful part of an online marketing plan.

Within the tourism domain, research studies show that consumers rely on search engines for travel research and decisions. According to InsightExpress (2003; as cited in [7]), 60% of Internet consumers use a search engine in the research and buying process for travel and 70% of consumers who traveled in the past year found search engines important in the decision-making process. When consumers perform travel-related tasks online, they use search engines to research specific destinations (70%), to compare airfares (66%), to compare hotel rates (63%), to locate travel sites (58%), to compare rental car rates (43%), and to research cruises (34%). More recently, according to the Travelers' Use of the Internet, 2005 Edition, released by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), 64% of the travelers use search engines for travel planning (as cited in [3]). In addition, this TIA 2005 report shows that the most

effective online marketing techniques that trigger a consumer response are unsponsored search engine results (36 percent) (as cited in [3]). All these figures clearly demonstrate the importance of visibility for tourism related organizations.

A website's search engine visibility is usually measured by a website's rank, which is defined as the position in which a particular web page or website is listed in a search engine's organic, crawler-based results [20]. Both Holliday [9] and Kaaya [12] measured visibility by noting whether a website was listed within the top 10 search engine results. Miller [15] used the top 20 results as the standard, and Ham [8] used the top 60 results. Because most of the major search engines provide searchers with 10 results per page, and users usually do not review more than the first page of search results [10, 11, 17], it seems that using the criteria of whether a website is listed within the top 10 results, as the measurement of visibility, is more reasonable. However, the method that measures visibility by merely noting whether a website was listed in the top 10 search engine results has drawbacks. It does not distinguish the differences in position among the top 10 results; but the first result should get more visits than the 10th, all other factors

being equal. Moreover, this top-10 method does not take the quality of search results into consideration. Even if a website is listed in the top 10 results, the result itself may not be good. According to Dinham [5], a good search result should have a clear descriptive title, act as obvious branding, and provide an accurate call to action.

In order to address the above-mentioned problems, a 0 to 100 point search engine visibility index framework is created in this research. As shown in Figure 1, a maximum of fifty points are awarded to a web page according to its position in the search results: the 1st position gets 50 points, the 2nd gets 49 points, and so on, until the 10th gets 41 points. Fifty points are awarded to a web page if its appearance in the search results satisfies all three above-mentioned "good search result" criteria. The search engine visibility index score of a web page is calculated by adding all the points together. A VIC with a score equal to 0 is rated as 'invisible'; a VIC with a visibility score between 41 – 50 is rated as 'semi-visible'; a VIC with a visibility score between 91 – 100 is rated as 'visible'.
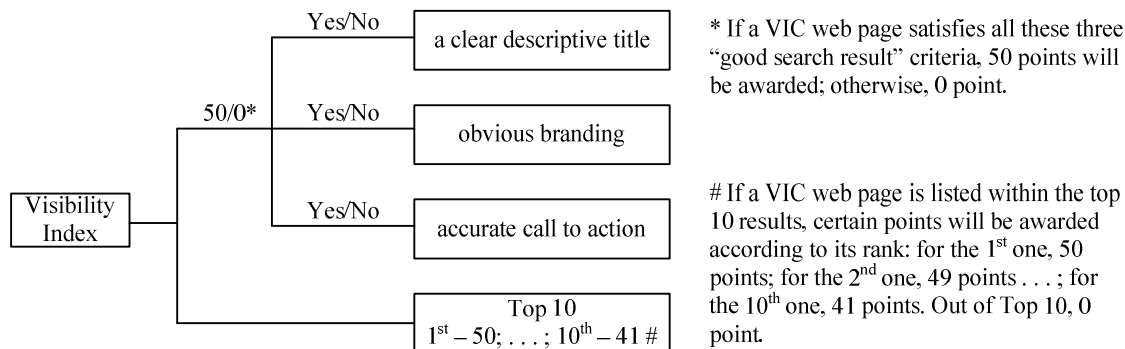

Figure 1. Visibility Index Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

On September 30, 2005, there were a total of 69 different VIC websites listed on the official Queensland Holidays website (http://www.queenslandholidays.com.au), established by Tourism Queensland—a statutory authority of Queensland. However, one site was under construction, so only 68 websites were examined in this study.

Three search engines— Google (http://www.google.com), Yahoo! (http://www.yahoo.com) & MSN (http://www.msn.com) —were selected for this

study because they are the most popular ones [22]. The examination procedure was straightforward. For each VIC, the author performed two searches using the terms "X visitor information centre" and "X tourist information" through each of the three search engines (without the quotation marks when searching), where X denoted city or place names. The search term "X visitor information centre" represents the typical way the VICs are named in Australia. The search term "X tourist information" represents one of the popular tourism-related search terms on the Internet. After each search, the rank of the first VIC page listed in the top 10 results was recorded. Next, whether the appearance of a VIC's web page in the search results satisfied all three "good search result"

criteria, was determined by two associate researchers. When they had different opinions, they made a decision together by reaching consensus. The visibility index score of each VIC website for each search term was then calculated.

All the examinations and evaluations were conducted on Internet Explorer 6.0 (IE) running under Windows XP Professional with Service Pack 2. The default setting of each search engine was used because users generally just use the default setting of software [21]. All the searches were done on October 1, 2005. The rationale for this "same day" approach was to reduce the likelihood of changes to the search engine's indexes influencing the results of the study [2]. Some VIC websites or web pages may have been redesigned or updated since.

RESULTS

Table 1. Summary of Top 10 Listed VICs

	X Visitor Information Centre		X Tourist Information	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Google	33	48.5	23	33.8
Yahoo!	30	44.1	30	44.1
MSN	40	58.8	34	50.0
Average	34.3	50.5	29	42.6

(n=68)

Table 1 shows the summary of the top-10-listed VICs in the search results by Google, Yahoo!, & MSN on the two search terms. In all three search engines, on average, around 50% of the VICs were listed in the top 10 results on search term "X visitor information centre" and only around 43% were listed in the top 10 results on search term "X tourist information."

On search term "X visitor information centre," 19 of the 33 Google top-10-listed VIC web pages, 15 of the 30 Yahoo! top-10-listed VIC web pages, and 20 of the 40 MSN top-10-listed VIC web pages were judged as good search results; others were not judged as good search results because their displayed titles either were unclear or failed to act as obvious branding. For example, the displayed title of Cunnamulla VIC (http://www.paroo.info/) in Google is "http://www.paroo.info/." From this title, searchers cannot judge what this website is about: whether it is a VIC website and which VIC it belongs to. Only 8 out of the 68 VICs achieved "visible" rating in all the three search engines on search term "X visitor information centre." However, 21 out of the 68 VICs were rated "invisible" in all the three search engines.

On search term "X tourist information," 12 of the 23 Google top-10-listed VIC web pages, 17 of the 30 Yahoo! top-10-listed VIC web pages, and 12 of the 34 MSN top-10-listed VIC web pages were judged as good search results; others were not judged as good search results because their displayed titles either were unclear or failed to act as obvious branding. For example, the displayed title of Mackay VIC (http://www.mackayregion.com) in Yahoo! is "Mackay - Home." This title is unclear because searchers cannot judge whether this website provides Mackay tourist information by simply looking at this title. There are only 8 out of the 68 VICs being rated "visible" in all the three search engines. However, 26 out of the 68 VICs were rated "invisible" in all three search engines.

When considering the ratings of the 68 VICs on both of the two search terms across all three search engines, none of them achieved six "visible" ratings; however, 14 of the 68 VICs got six "invisible" ratings. The best four performers which achieved five "visible" ratings are Kronosaurus Korner VIC (www.kronosauruskorner.com.au), Redlands VIC (www.redlandstourism.com), South Burnett VIC (www.tourism.southburnett.com.au), and Wondai VIC (www.wondai.qld.gov.au).

DISCUSSION

This study found that overall, Queensland VICs had low visibility on Google, Yahoo!, & MSN on search terms "X visitor information centre" and "X tourist information." This means that users may have had difficulty in finding Queensland VIC websites when they search using the two terms on three most popular search engines. If few people can find and thus use VIC websites, all efforts and resources invested on those websites would be worth little. This research study thus clearly demonstrates the sheer necessity for Queensland VICs to pay attention to the visibility issue of their websites.

The low visibility of the majority top-10-listed VIC web pages were caused by their titles, either being unclear or non-branding, or both. In either case, the users are unlikely to click on such a page title. It is thus important to write an effective page title for every VIC web page: the title must be descriptive, its meaning must be clear even when out of a specific context, and it must contain the primary keywords of the page. Moreover, in all three search engines, on average, near half of the top-10-listed VIC pages left their META Description tags blank. However, the Description tag of a web page is important because some major search engines take it into account when

determining the ranking of a web page and it is often displayed in the search results as a brief abstract of the contents of a page. Hence, VICs should always write a keyword-rich, readable, and click-worthy Description tag for every web page.

In order to explore the strategic value of VIC websites, one of the most important issues to be addressed by State tourism agencies is the incorporation of website quality issues into their VIC accreditation policies. State tourism agencies throughout Australia currently develop and implement accreditation programs or policies for VICs. Tourism Queensland has developed the Queensland Visitor Information Centre Signage Policy (QVICS Policy) [23] in line with the accreditation initiative. A new yellow on blue italicized "i" symbol has been developed and trademarked to distinguish VICs that meet the eligibility criteria and standards of the QVICS Policy. Currently, the QVICS Policy does not require a VIC to have a website in order to be eligible for the "i" symbol. However, if a VIC does have a website, should the website automatically be eligible for the "i" symbol if the VIC satisfies the standards of the current QVICS Policy? Although the answer is open to discussion, the issues of how to monitor and control the quality of VIC websites should not be ignored. The QVICS Policy should include a set of standards to address the quality issues of VIC websites, such as visibility. State tourism agencies should look into this issue in no time in order to embrace the benefits brought on by the Web. Other important issues that should be addressed by State tourism agencies include, but are not limited to, (1) providing guidelines to assist VICs to design and build their websites to meet industry standards, (2) having a clear human resource strategy to help VICs to deal with increasingly complicated website development and online marketing, and (3) allocating special funds to VICs for their website development & internet marketing initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the visibility issue of Queensland VIC websites has been generally overlooked. The majority of the Queensland VIC websites failed to achieve a top-ten position in Google, Yahoo!, or MSN on search terms "X visitor information centre" and "X tourist information"; those that had achieved a top-ten position often failed to be user-friendly in the search engine results and thus were not rated as "visible." Hence, it highlights the importance of being both search-engine-friendly

and user-friendly for a website to achieve a high search engine visibility.

Queensland VICs treat their websites as part of their business strategies [16]. However, this research found that visibility, a vital part of any online strategy, had been ignored by Queensland VICs. It shows that how to make their websites truly part of their business strategies has not been subject to management analysis and discussion. It also reflects that Queensland State tourism agencies may lack a clear concept of their role in cyberspace when facing the irresistible trend of adopting Internet technologies, because there are no standards to control the quality of VIC websites in the QVICS Policy.

The low visibility issue of Queensland VIC websites poses several challenges to both VICs and State tourism agencies in the new Internet era. The first one is organizational knowledge. The management-level decision-makers of those organizations should at least have a baseline understanding of search, search engines, and visibility; otherwise it is unlikely that a good search engine marketing strategy could be developed.

The second challenge is how to integrate search engine marketing strategy with other online and offline marketing strategies. An integrated marketing strategy will drive tactical implementations for maximum marketing impact, growth, and performance.

The third challenge is organizational data. The organizations have to decide what kind of data they need to collect and how this data should be managed. Quality organizational data allows organizations to optimize their search engine marketing strategies, to have more accurate forecasts, and to make better ROI (return on investment) decisions.

Future research can apply the visibility index framework (as shown in Figure 1) to other types of websites rather than VIC websites to draw a broader picture of whether and where the search engine visibility issue is being overlooked; in turn, fine-tuning the visibility index framework.

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