

# ABSTRACT

An analysis of the literature on web marketing of hotel websites reveals the potential of the World Wide Web (the Web) to enable small hotels to compete with international chain hotels in the global marketplace. However, the literature also emphasizes the importance of branding in determining consumer choice. Thus the Web presents an inherent dilemma for small (independent and multiple independent) hotels unless they effectively utilize the unique characteristics of the Web to positively enhance their images in the mind of customer, i.e. to build their brands. However, little attention has been paid to how a website can be used to build a hotel brand – an issue which is critically important to the survival of small hotels and the focus of this thesis.

This constructionist study adopts a phenomenological perspective to evolve a model for the evaluation of small hotels' websites in terms of their brand-building capacity and identifies 28 consumer-relevant features grouped into a pyramid of six considerations (accessibility; information; credibility; e-commerce; immediacy; customer relationship). Each feature is codified in terms of good, satisfactory and sub-optimal performance into an EXCEL spreadsheet set up to produce a radar plot for visual presentation of the results. From this, areas of weakness in website design can be determined and remedial action prioritized.

The thesis then examines a case study of small Egyptian hotels and their exploitation of the Web as a strategic marketing tool. This is achieved through evaluating Egyptian hotel websites and interviewing Egyptian hotel marketers and web designers. The results of the evaluation of the websites show that: most of these hotels websites performed 'satisfactory' and 'sub-optimal' on many of the evaluated website design features; they are not designed as part of an integrated marketing strategy and therefore the Egyptian small hotels in this study do not exploit the unique characteristics of the Web to best advantage and face a branding dilemma in the global marketplace.

The thesis concludes that there are considerable opportunities for enhancing the understanding of the potential of the Web to build the hotel brand and makes recommendations as to priorities for focus.