

## SUCCESSFUL FACTORS FOR A TRAVEL WEB SITE: PERCEPTIONS OF ON-LINE PURCHASERS IN HONG KONG

Rob Law  
James Wong

*The Hong Kong Polytechnic University*

---

*With the increasing popularity of on-line traveling, many studies have been stating numerous competitive advantages for setting up a travel Web site. However, the number of published articles that scrutinize the view of on-line travel purchasers on the factors for a successful travel Web site appears to be very limited. This research note reports on a study about investigating how on-line travel purchasers in Hong Kong view these successful factors. Empirical evidence from a large-scale omnibus survey indicates that 22.5% of the Hong Kong participants had visited one or more travel Web sites and that 6.54% of these e-travelers were also on-line travel purchasers. In general, e-buyers consider "secure payment methods" and "specifically designed for travelers in Asia Pacific" as the most and least important factors, respectively, for a successful travel Web site.*

---

**KEYWORDS:** *Internet; travel Web sites; successful factors; Hong Kong.*

Existing articles in the travel and tourism literature have emphasized the importance of e-commerce and the Internet in travel and tourism. For travel suppliers, the Internet provides a method whereby they can sell their services and products globally to potential travelers at any time (Bernstein & Awe, 1999; Connolly, Olsen, & Moore, 1998; Lubetkin, 1999). These suppliers can remotely control their servers to display service and product information at the electronic speed of computer networks. The benefits for suppliers to successfully launch a travel Web site include lower distribution costs, better revenues, and a larger market share (Cano & Prentice, 1998; Kasavana, Knutson, & Polonowski, 1997; Mader, 1999). However, Christian (2001) has argued that the expenditure on a Web-marketing channel could be much lower than the return. For travelers, the Internet allows them to communicate directly with travel suppliers to request information

---

*Authors' Note: The authors wish to acknowledge the financial support provided by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the provision of methodology details for the survey from Dr. Bob McKercher, coordinator of the hospitality domestic survey.*

*Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, Vol. 27, No. 1, February 2003, 118-124

DOI: 10.1177/1096348002238884

© 2003 International Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education

and to purchase products and services at any time and location (Law, 2000). However, the number of published articles that investigate how on-line purchasers view the successful factors of a travel Web site has been very limited. The lack of previous studies on travelers' views of these underlying factors is particularly true in Hong Kong. Chu (2001) found that Internet users in Hong Kong prefer a travel Web site to be informative, interactive, and attractive. However, his study was based on focus group interviews with Internet users in Hong Kong, not on-line travel purchasers. Because these general Internet users are not necessarily on-line travel purchasers, their views cannot be generalized to the travel and tourism context.

The study of on-line purchasers' perceptions is important because these perceptions have a direct impact on travel suppliers' business return. Weber and Roehl (1999) profiled the traveler purchasing behavior on the World Wide Web, but their study's methodology is biased because the sampling selection was made purely based on on-line users. The samples thus shift toward experienced and frequent users, leading to debatable results. In view of the growing popularity of the Internet in travel and tourism in the Asia-Pacific region, both in general and in particular, this exploratory research makes an initial attempt to determine and analyze the successful factors that are perceived to be important by on-line Hong Kong travel purchasers. In this article, e-travelers are defined as Hong Kong residents who have visited at least one travel Web site. These e-travelers may not necessarily have purchased travel-related products and/or services on-line. In addition, on-line Hong Kong travel purchasers are defined as Hong Kong residents who have purchased some services and/or products from one or more travel Web sites. In other words, on-line travel purchasers are "e-buyers," whereas e-travelers are "e-lookers."

Having discussed the research background and motivation, the next section of this article describes the methodology and findings for investigating on-line travelers' perceptions of the successful factors for a travel Web site. In particular, findings from this research are compared and contrasted with similar studies in the travel and tourism literature. Finally, a concluding section summarizes this article and offers possibilities for future research.

## METHOD AND FINDINGS

In December 2000, a large-scale hospitality domestic survey was conducted on the outbound pleasure travel of Hong Kong residents. The target population of the survey included adults who were at least 18 years old and were Hong Kong residents. A modified random-digit-dialing sampling approach was used to select the interviewees. During the research period, a two-stage approach was used to generate the sample of telephone numbers. In the first stage, a random sample of telephone numbers was generated from the latest published English telephone directory in the year 1999. In the second stage, the last two digits of each sampled telephone number were truncated (there are eight digits in a Hong Kong telephone number) and then concatenated with two independently generated random digits to form the new number. In total, 7,883 telephone numbers were dialed. In the end,

**Table 1**  
**Profile of Respondents**

Variable	Number and Percentage of Respondents Who Have Visited Any Travel Web Sites				$\chi^2$	df	p
	Yes		No				
	n	%	n	%			
Gender (N = 952)							
Male	102	23.3	336	76.7	0.304	1	.581
Female	112	21.8	402	78.2			
Age (n = 940)					57.388	5	.000*
25 or younger	53	35.8	95	64.2			
26 to 35	77	30.9	172	69.1			
36 to 45	61	21.6	221	78.4			
46 to 55	14	10.5	120	89.6			
56 to 65	4	5.9	64	94.1			
66 or older	3	5.1	56	94.9			
Education (n = 943)					159.322	4	.000*
No high school diploma	27	7.1	354	92.9			
High school diploma	75	21.3	278	78.8			
Some college or university	10	50.0	10	50.0			
College or university degree	89	51.5	84	48.6			
Postgraduate degree	10	62.5	6	37.5			
Income (in dollars; n = 726)					101.424	7	.000*
9,999 or less	4	4.3	89	95.7			
10,000-19,999	18	8.9	185	91.1			
20,000-29,999	39	25.5	114	74.5			
30,000-39,999	33	29.7	78	70.3			
40,000-49,999	27	40.3	40	59.7			
50,000-59,999	13	44.8	16	55.2			
60,000-69,999	6	42.9	8	57.1			
70,000 or more	32	57.1	24	42.9			

Note: Some respondents did not provide information for certain variables (i.e., gender), leading to an unequal number of respondents among the variables. Monetary values are expressed in Hong Kong dollars.

\*Significant at  $p < .05$ .

952 (12.1%) Hong Kong residents successfully completed telephone interviews. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents who had and had not visited any travel Web sites.

Among the 952 participants, 214 (22.5%) had visited at least one travel Web site. Among these e-travelers, 102 were males and 112 were females, with other respondents not indicating gender. No significant difference was found between male and female e-travelers in terms of visiting travel Web sites. This finding is similar to Bonn, Furr, and Susskind's (1998) study, which states that the propensity to use the Internet to search for travel-related information shows no gender differences.

However, the older the people were, the less likely they were to be e-travelers. Empirical evidence of a chi-square test indicated a significant difference among

the age groups in terms of travel Web site visiting. Younger generations are normally information technology literate, and therefore, young people have a higher propensity to visit travel Web sites. In an earlier study, Schonland and Williams (1996) found that most of the travel Web site users are young.

In contrast to the findings about the age groups of e-travelers, the popularity of travel Web site visiting showed an upward trend for both rising income levels and education levels (see Table 1). Similarly, the percentage of travel Web site visits revealed an upward trend for the education levels, as follows: 7.1% had less than a high school education, 21.3% completed high school, 50.0% had some college or university, 51.5% completed a college or university degree, and 62.5% had a post-graduate degree. Statistical analyses indicated the existence of significant differences between travel Web site visiting and both income and education levels. These findings are consistent with prior studies in the travel and tourism literature (Bonn et al., 1998; Weber & Roehl, 1999).

Somewhat unexpectedly, only 14 of the 214 e-travelers (6.54%) had purchased some services or products from travel Web sites. The percentage of on-line travel purchasers was lower than the percentage of on-line purchasers in general (20%), as noted in other studies (Phau & Poon, 2000; Phillips, 2001). Apparently, although many Hong Kong travelers are turning to the Internet to search for related information, most of them still purchase their travel itineraries via traditional distribution channels. During the interviews, the on-line travel purchasers were requested to rate the importance of 12 attributes for a successful travel Web site on a 5-point, Likert-type scale. Table 2 lists the overall rating of these attributes.

The attributes listed in Table 2 were developed on the basis of prior studies on travel Web sites and destination marketing systems (Buhalis & Spada, 2000; Law & Chen, 2000; Weber & Roehl, 1999). An additional attribute related to the specific nature of Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region was also included. In general, the on-line Hong Kong travel purchasers perceived most of the attributes as important, having attained means of more than 3. In particular, the three most important factors (with a mean of at least 4.0) that contribute to a successful Web site, according to the on-line purchasers, were "secure payment methods," "different price ranges for products/services," and "user-friendly system." This outcome is in accordance with Law and Leung's (2000) and Lang's (2000) studies, which identified Internet security, price ranges, and user friendliness as the most critical factors for consumers to choose to purchase on the Internet. However, the attribute "presentation style such as background color and attractive photos" received a mean of 3, indicating that the on-line travel purchasers were generally indifferent toward a Web site's presentation. This is in contrast to Sweeney's (2000) claim, which stated that the presentation style is one of the most essential factors for designing such a Web site. A future study can investigate whether this indifference to presentation style is culturally oriented for the direct and fast-moving Hong Kong residents or whether it is a general behavior pattern among all travelers. Furthermore, the mean for the attribute "specifically designed for travelers in Asia Pacific" was 2.54. This implied that the on-line Hong Kong travel purchasers did not prefer a regional-based travel Web site. Again, a future study can examine in detail the qualitative aspect of having this preference.

**Table 2**  
**Important Attributes for a Successful Travel Web Site**

Attribute	Valid <i>n</i>	<i>M</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>SD</i>
Secure payment methods	14	4.29	1.07
Different price ranges for products/services	14	4.07	0.83
User-friendly system	13	4.00	0.58
Rapid information searching	14	3.86	0.53
On-line booking and confirmation	13	3.85	0.90
Comprehensive destination information	14	3.71	1.20
Availability of help functions (e.g., toll-free phone numbers)	14	3.64	0.50
Provision of related virtual links (e.g., airlines, hotels)	14	3.64	0.84
Late availability information for products/services	14	3.57	0.76
Availability of virtual tours/video files of destination	14	3.14	0.77
Presentation style (e.g., background color, photos)	14	3.00	0.88
Specifically designed for Asia-Pacific travelers	13	2.54	0.66

Note: One respondent did not answer three of the questions.

a. The scale is as follows: 1 = *very unimportant*, 2 = *unimportant*, 3 = *neither important nor unimportant*, 4 = *important*, and 5 = *very important*.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the general characteristics of e-travelers and non-e-travelers in Hong Kong have been discussed and analyzed. More importantly, the on-line Hong Kong travel purchasers' perceptions of the successful factors for a Web site have been examined. The contribution of this research is, therefore, twofold. First, it shows that the e-travelers' profile in Hong Kong, a cosmopolitan city in China, mainly matches the corresponding results found by other studies in the Western countries. This indicates similarities between e-travelers with different geographical or cultural backgrounds. More important, empirical findings of the study show that there are opportunities for potential growth and development for on-line travel purchase in Hong Kong. Although the small number of on-line travel purchasers makes it difficult to perform sophisticated statistical analyses, the perception of these e-buyers does offer an initial insight into the issue of on-line purchasers' behavior.

Overall, this study has demonstrated the existence of a potential interest in e-travel and travel Web sites. Research outcomes may enrich the knowledge of practitioners in the Hong Kong travel and tourism industry toward establishing and/or maintaining their own travel Web sites. Considering the presence of numerous travel Web sites based in Hong Kong and overseas, it is worthwhile to further investigate whether the low percentage of on-line travel purchasers reflects either a large potential demand or an overabundance of travel Web sites. Another useful future research opportunity would be to scrutinize methods by which the e-lookers may be changed into e-buyers. Finally, with significant financial support, it would be worthwhile to revisit the issue in the future by increasing the sample size to have more data on e-buyers for in-depth statistical analysis.

## REFERENCES

- Bernstein, J., & Awe, S. C. (1999). "Wired travelers": Travel and tourism Web sites. *Reference Services Review*, 27(4), 364-375.
- Bonn, M. A., Furr, H. L., & Susskind, A. M. (1998). Using the Internet as a pleasure travel planning tool: An examination of the sociodemographic and behavioral characteristics among Internet users and nonusers. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 22(3), 303-317.
- Buhalis, D., & Spada, A. (2000). Destination management systems: Criteria for success—An exploratory research. *Information Technology & Tourism*, 3(1), 41-58.
- Cano, V., & Prentice, R. (1998). Opportunities for endearment to place through electronic "visiting": WWW home pages and the tourism promotion of Scotland. *Tourism Management*, 19(1), 67-74.
- Christian, R. (2001). Developing an on-line access strategy: Issues facing small to medium-sized tourism and hospitality enterprises. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 7(2), 170-178.
- Chu, R. (2001). What do on-line Hong Kong travelers look for on airline/travel Web sites? *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 20, 95-100.
- Connolly, D. J., Olsen, M. D., & Moore, R. G. (1998). The Internet as a distribution channel. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 39(4), 42-54.
- Kasavana, M. L., Knutson, B. J., & Polonowski, S. J. (1997). Netlurking: The future of hospitality Internet marketing. *Journal of Hospitality & Leisure Marketing*, 5(1), 31-44.
- Lang, T. C. (2000). The effect of the Internet on travel consumer purchasing behaviour and implications for travel agencies. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 6(4), 368-385.
- Law, R. (2000). Internet in travel and tourism—Part I. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 9(3), 65-71.
- Law, R., & Chen, F. (2000). Internet in travel and tourism—Part II: Expedia. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 9(4), 83-87.
- Law, R., & Leung, R. (2000). A study of airlines' on-line reservation services on the Internet. *Journal of Travel Research*, 39(2), 202-211.
- Lubetkin, M. (1999). Bed-and-breakfasts: Advertising and promotion. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 40(4), 84-90.
- Mader, R. (1999). Ecotourism research and promotion on the Web: Experiences and insights. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 11(2/3), 78-79.
- Phau, I., & Poon, S. M. (2000). Factors influencing the types of products and services purchased over the Internet. *Internet Research: Electronic Networking Applications and Policy*, 10(2), 102-113.
- Phillips, H. (2001, March 12). E-shoppers fork out HK\$926m on-line. *South China Morning Post*, p. B5.
- Schonland, A. M., & Williams, P. (1996). Using the Internet for travel and tourism survey research: Experiences from the Net Traveler Survey. *Journal of Travel Research*, 35(2), 81-87.
- Sweeney, S. (2000). *Internet marketing for your tourism business*. Gulf Breeze, FL: Maximum.
- Weber, K., & Roehl, W. (1999). Profiling people searching for and purchasing travel products on the World Wide Web. *Journal of Travel Research*, 37(3), 291-298.

**Submitted June 27, 2001**

**First Revision Submitted December 10, 2001**

**Final Revision Submitted April 18, 2002**

**Accepted July 15, 2002**

**Refereed Anonymously**

**Rob Law**, Ph.D., (e-mail: hmroblaw@polyu.edu.hk) is an associate professor in the School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR. **James Wong** (e-mail: hmjames@polyu.edu.hk) is a lecturer in the School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR.