

INTEGRATED WEB SYSTEMS AS STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS FOR (SUCCESSFULLY) BRANDING THE RURAL BOARDING HOUSES

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Abstract: For the past 15 years, mostly in the context of raising the financing volume for the rural environment, the number of rural boarding houses has been expanding exponentially. This increase has failed yet to be correlated with efficient marketing solutions, the development itself happened rather through actions defined by an intuitive nature. Within the rural tourism the brands have not reached their peak potential for appealing to the tourists' interest and growth. Although there are clear signs of an obvious evolution in the culture of promotion, there is also noticeable that digital technologies are not fully employed in building the brands of the rural boarding houses. In the context of the current competition environment the virtual presence is a necessary term for having visibility, constant audience and also a must have for increasing the tourists' number, all indispensable elements for successfully running this type of business. Although the contemporary evolution of technologies has a high degree of unpredictability which forces the boarding houses to appeal to creative solutions for maintaining and developing the brand, there is still possible to identify a series of strategic approaches of the digital technologies, depending on certain predictable parameters linked to issues such as audience psychology, cultural context, aesthetical determinations of the environments, accessibility, usability, efficiency of broadcasting the message. A likely solution for such a strategic approach is given by the integrated web systems. An integrated web system serves as a technology centered on a web product whose functions are expanded and improved by other technologies which may be either digital or non-digital. This study addresses mainly to the owners of boarding houses who intend to develop their brands and suggests a few practical solutions for successfully implementing the integrated web systems which best characterize their spectrum of activities. The solutions introduced here contain practical directions for the construction of a site, its integration in social media and in a promotional package. Starting from the current offers in the market of digital technologies we also present a cost analysis for implementing the above suggested technologies.

Key words: branding, rural boarding house, integrated web solutions, rural development

Classification JEL: Z32, O18, M31

INTRODUCTION

The Paradox of the Rural Tourism

In the matter of the promotion discourse for one's own business the rural boarding house faces a paradox: it is forced by its own nature to convey a traditional message but also, at the same time, it has to address to quite a sophisticated tourist community with a behaviour rather defined by urban concepts regarding life quality, with a high cognitive standard and last but not least, with greater and greater expectations to what concerns the unique character of the whole visiting experience.

Concurrently this paradox is doubled by the fact that the actual local data from the rural tourism find their best promotion and communication solution in virtualizing their own identity. The rural boarding house, in its material data, should come up with a digital translation to better communicate and appeal to an increasing number of more and more demanding tourists.

Digital Durability and Sustainability

Nevertheless, for reasons concerning mentalities or financial possibilities, the digital technologies are not used at their maximum capacity in the marketing of the tourist boarding houses. For that purpose we are facing at least two negative approaches:

1. The owner of a boarding house chooses a cheap digital solution which is partial and does not characterize the particular aspects of the rural boarding house. We could say that such

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an approach lacks digital durability, mostly due to the faulty transmission of the message, blocks the communication openings, fails to catch the interest of the users and, consequently, does not provide continuity for the web.

2. The owner of a boarding house chooses an efficient digital solution which provides all the necessary applications but does not employ the digital tools at their full capacity. He/ She does not have a recurring online presence, both visible and predictable, does not use the technologies available in an integrated formula and does not update the message in accordance with the behavioural variations of the users. Such a pattern does not use all the resources in a strategic manner, so it is only fair to conclude that it breaks the digital sustainability.

Hence we can acknowledge digital sustainability and durability as two parameters which can be easily taken into consideration in the digital marketing of the rural boarding house.

Integrated web systems as solutions for digital sustainability and durability

An integrated web system represents a technology centered on a web product whose functions are expanded and improved by other technologies which may be either digital or non-digital.

The integration relation may occur at the level of digital technologies (between a presentation site and a social media account, for example), but also, between a digital technology and a non-digital product (such as between a site and a presentation brochure). The integration can be done by simply passing from one product to another, by using logo and other significant marks, by correlating messages, by using a common set of representative colours for the values broadcast, by reposting apps of a message from the presentation site to the social media account (or the other way around), by automatization of apps for posts, by QR apps and so on.

At the same time, it is necessary to mention that we cannot yet speak about an integrated web system where a site or a presentation web application does not exist in the system's reference center. The central site provides vitality and coherence to the boarding house's brand, while the integration function brings digital durability and sustainability for the whole system.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present article derives from understanding the problems of the digital technologies in promoting the brand of rural boarding house. These matters have been addressed through careful analysis, assessment and interpretation of the brand, especially on the rural boarding houses from Târgu-Neamț tourist area. A good deal of these data can be found in the RDRP database as *Accommodation Units (Unități de cazare* <http://rdrp.acadiasi.org/node/247>).

The main objective of this study is to suggest integrated web systems as efficient digital tools in promoting the brand of the rural boarding house. To that purpose, the present study underlines the necessary features of the rural boarding house to provide their owners and web developers as well a general view upon the object of their collaboration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Possible scenarios for implementing an integrated web system

As previously noticed, an integrated web system serves as a technology focused on a web product whose functions are expanded and improved by other technologies which may be both digital and non-digital.

Starting from this minimal definition of the integrated web systems we would like to include in our agenda a few scenarios which may prove helpful for the rural boarding houses. For that purpose we shall analyze the fundamental elements of an integrated web system and the ways in which they are influenced by the basic elements of the boarding house's brand. In other words we shall analyze the name of the boarding house, the name of the web domain chosen for the presentation site, the identity elements of the brand (logo, slogan, mission, identical colour set, personalized design), the

presentation site, social media accounts, printed promotional materials and a series of suggestions regarding all these elements.

As main example we shall choose Drumul Plutașilor boarding house from Neamț county. The structure of this system includes the following:

- a presentation site (www.drumulplutasilor.ro);
- affiliations to certain accommodation platforms (booking.com)
- a Facebook account (www.facebook.com/drumulplutasilor);
- Google Maps and Google My Maps integration;
- printed promotional materials (tri-fold brochure, business card, wall calendar, presentation folder, personalized letterheads, street billboards for direction);
- video clips done by different persons or institutions which are free and open to the public.

The Name of the Boarding House

When the business is at its very beginning or a rebranding is necessary, choosing the name of the boarding house is an opportunity which should be treated accordingly and making use of many creative resources. At the risk of sounding repetitive, a few specifications are in order, so the name of the boarding house should be chosen in accordance with the following principles:

1. *It should be unique.* We can all agree with the fact that the name of a business must be unique, but, often, the singularity of the name is not properly checked. The variations wanted can be easily verified by a simple on-line search. Sometimes the temptations to take advantage of already well-known brands can be quite seductive and consequently determine favoring a close name or, worse, alike. Even though there are some advantages on short term, such an approach creates confusion and draws negative effects on long term. However, these tactics convey lack of honesty, which is presently sanctioned by the tourist community.

2. *It should be as representative as possible* for both boarding house and region where it is located. Needless to say that a name such as *The Cabin in the Woods* is not emblematic for the seaside tourism, no matter how creative it could seem at the time. The representativity can be accomplished by referring to a few specific elements of local geography or culture. At the same time, the obvious references are to be avoided as they are used by many other boarding houses from the same region. Names such as *Bucovina (Bukovina)* or *Mestecăniș (Birchwoods)* are names at anyone's hand and cause confusion sometimes.

3. *It should be as simple, easily transmissible and memorized as possible.* The boarding houses need avoiding long names, acronyms which are difficult to pronounce, unknown words (regionalisms, archaisms or highly-particular neologisms). Where it is possible, it would be ideal to choose words without diacritics to avoid a series of complications which can occur during web developing or when choosing special fonts for the promotional materials.

4. *It should be easily inserted in a logo.* A name which refers to actual visual elements can have a simple creative graphic translation. The abstracts words may prove intricate in designing a logo.

5. *It should have a free equivalent web domain.* Regardless how stylistically speaking is the name choice, the name of the boarding house must pass the web domain test. In other words, we should have the possibility to purchase an equivalent web domain with the chosen name. Here a few aspects call our attention.

- the first one comes under the ideal extension issue. Although it is true that .ro extension are more visible in Romania, while .com extensions are more visible aut, the suggestion to pick one of them in accordance with what type of tourists we would like to appeal to is not exactly just. On the contrary. A tourist who will choose to spend a holiday in Romania is going to contextualize his/her on-line searches in the Romanian on-line media. Namely it will be automatically directed to sites with .ro extension. Therefore our suggestion is to purchase domains with .ro extension. They may be purchased directly from ROTLD national authority (Romanian Top LevelDomain - <http://www.rotld.ro/>) or from third-party (mainly, web hosting services). If we choose ROTLD or

other well-known firms on the market, the purchase procedures of a domain grant data confidentiality and have a high security level. We do not recommend purchasing more extensions or correspondent names for redirecting. These practices no longer have the directing effect they used to have a decade ago. A domain name with .ro extension costs somewhere between 230 and 250 lei for unlimited period of time.

- the second aspect is about the options we have when the name of the domain is not available. For this particular case there are three solutions: looking for a web domain with a different extension (.org, .info, .com, .eu, etc); adding another word or phrase (if, for example, bucovina.ro is not available, it can be searched for pensiuneabucovina.ro); purchasing the domain from the current owner (this could be a very expensive solution). Generally, the extensions different from .ro cost somewhere between 9 and 12 euros + VAT annually.

About the above mentioned recommendations we would like to specify by referring to the example previously proposed. Drumul Plutașilor boarding house should have had a different name, one referring to mountain flowers, but the owners realized that the singularity degree was not exactly high and chose Drumul Plutașilor (The Rafters's Watercourse), unique, representative for their location, apparently oxymoronic, exciting, easily memorized and with a simple graphic translation (their logo shows an actual rafter).

Defining one's own identity

The identification of a boarding house naturally starts from its name but it does not stop here, as formulating one's identity should rely on the following strategies:

- **Defining and communicating the values promoted by the boarding house.** For example: traditionalism or modernism, local gastronomy, leisure time and relaxation or, on the contrary, leisure time through dynamic outdoor activities. These values should be clearly formulated as they represent the ideological component of the boarding house mission and also specified in all the promotional materials. Ideally, all the promoted values should be written as a narration (story as it is now known in marketing) which expresses the identity message. The rhetorical impact can be huge and the mnemonic character can also lead to a better recollection of the boarding house in the tourists' memories.
- **Integration in the regional brand where the rural boarding house is located.** The rural boarding house should also have an integrating discourse in the geography and culture of the hosting region. The key elements of the local patrimony should be present in both presentation site and printed promotional materials. Between the brand of the boarding house and that of the region there is a strong connection, an interchangeable bond. The two brands contribute each to the development and visibility of each other and, consequently, to stimulating the interest for the regional tourism. These matters are so well correlated that even the negative aspects go from one brand to another.
- **Identity and honesty.** The attitude towards one's identity should be a sincere, transparent one in accordance with the available resources. Any distortion can lead to the brand erosion with negative effects for the business.

About the identity issue, Drumul Plutașilor boarding house, for example, has chosen a mission that conveys local traditional values complemented by various *outdoor* activities. The name of the boarding house and all these values are formulated, at an identity level, in a story which refers to a local historical fact: the watercourse of the rafters on Bistrița river, from Vatra Dornei to Galați. The historical fact to which the reference is made is loaded with concepts such as preserving the traditions, adventure, honesty, friendship, communion with nature. The message sent is documented by photo and video materials uploaded on the presentation site and Facebook account. Thus we are dealing with a simple, direct, familiar and transparent message that is in accordance with the available resources.

Other defining elements for the brand of the boarding house

Besides name, there are other elements which bring their vital contributions in defining the identity and finding the place of the boarding houses' brand on the market: logo, slogan, personalized design, design colour set, fonts.

These should be in accordance with the mission of the boarding house and used as much as possible but without irritating the audience. Our recommendation is to call on a design specialized firm, mainly due to the fact that these sort of elements have a long usability in promoting the boarding house.

The integration of these elements on the presentation site should take into consideration the following suggestions: the site title should correspond with the name of the boarding house's brand and appear as text format on the site, for a better optimization with the search engines (the sites in which the name appears as picture format has a lower impact when indexing the brand of that site).

The slogan should be simple, different from the other competitors' slogans, also unforgettable and should avoid the wooden language of tourist propaganda and express with maximum transparency the brand of the boarding house. It should appear on the first page of the presentation site, in the letterheads of the social media accounts, in the tri-folded brochures, on calendars, also on the banners used, street billboards, on the personalized letterheads and, if possible, on the business card itself.

About the web design and design of the printed materials, they should be correlated with the colour set used by content and fonts. Ideally the correlation strategy should also include the design of the boarding house. A set of maximum 3 colours (with hue variations) is generally recommended. To get more inspired one could appeal to specialized sites such as Adobe Color CC (<https://color.adobe.com/create/color-wheel>). In the matter of fonts, again a set of maximum 3 fonts (ideally 2) is recommended by professional graphic designers.

The presentation site. The reference center of the integrated web system

As we have previously brought to your attention, an integrated web system has as a reference center a presentation site. Further we shall present the problems which usually occur while constructing the web site of a boarding house. By the specific range of economic activities they provide, the rural boarding houses should have a presentation site which carries out certain marketing and communication objectives. We would like to insist mostly on the distinguishing elements of the rural boarding houses. The issues in question may appear technical at some point, but they could be included on the negotiation list with the web developers so the communication between the owner of the boarding house and the firm chosen for the site construction should be as efficient as possible for both parties. At the same time, the web developers with less experience in constructing sites for boarding houses can have a better understanding of the necessities which derive from the particular nature of these economic activities. To continue, we shall refer to the issue of online hosting, technical solutions for web development and particular necessities of the presentation sites of the rural boarding houses.

The construction of the presentation site. The issue of online hosting

The key element of an integrated web system is the presentation site. The first issue, right after finding the name of the domain which shall be used, is choosing an online hosting service.

From the geographical point of the digital media a site has to live somewhere. Contrary to the common intuition, a site does not live on its domain (its domain name). His digital name is merely an address (a friendly format actually) where we can find that certain site. A site lives in fact on a server. Therefore to exist in the online media, a site needs a physical presence on a server.

We do not recommend a site installation on one's own server. This solution may rise high security risks and more problems in terms of time consuming tasks, especially when running a boarding house.

But we do recommend the commercial solution, namely, purchasing space on a server provided by a firm specialized in online hosting. The costs are rather low (they start from a few euros

per month) and the benefits are great. In the case of a presentation site for the boarding house the cheapest hosting service is quite enough. If the site is frequently accessed and has a lot of social media content, there are options for hosting services with extra space and resources which are also not very expensive (starting from 20-30 euros per month). At the same time, the social media materials can be uploaded on specialized social sites (Youtube or Vimeo for videoclips, Flickr or 500px for images) to avoid raising the resource necessary. Their integration with the site of the boarding house is quite simple and attracts audience as well.

After choosing the online hosting solution, the next step should be electing the construction solution, of that technology best suited for the site construction.

The construction of the presentation site. Technical options

The worst option is, naturally, not having a presentation site. Some owners of boarding houses believe that simply adhering to an accommodation platform is good enough. But things are not as they appear. The web user, after identifying an accommodation platform, will try, quite frequently, to find extra information and will browse for a presentation site.

Another solution, not much happier, is given by the free, instant and so-called „ready in five minutes” sites. And the online media is literally invaded by these sort of offers. These types of sites, most often, are not exactly free and, however, provide little necessary applications for a modern presentation site of a rural boarding house.

An efficient solution means collaborating with the web development firms which offer personalized products built by their own employees. These are the sites with a high degree of personal touch, but they also come with a few disadvantages, namely, the owners of boarding houses are almost entirely dependent to that firms. Thus the maintenance has to be provided by the web developer chosen and it has always been tricky to transfer a partnership to another firm.

From our point of view, even if things are debateable, the best solution is given by partnerships with web developers who work with the so-called CMS - Content Management Systems, such as Wordpress, Drupal or Joomla (these are the most popular ones). These systems provide a lot of free online resources (extra apps, documentation, training, design patterns and models, etc). Furthermore the transition from one web developer to another can be done more easily, if there are problems with the first firm chosen. At the same time, the maintenance can be done by employees of the boarding house if they possess a minimal baggage of technical digital knowledge and skills.

Nevertheless we recommend to have a relationship built on mutual trust and respect with a serious web developer. Such firms, even if they might appear expensive, are specialized in web development and will come up with the best solutions of online promotion for the rural boarding houses.

The site of Drumul Plutașilor boarding house, which we have previously used for exemplification is built on Wordpress technology.

In the case of presentation sites which also have a blog we recommend the Wordpress technology, while in the cases of sites with apps requiring personalized databases (accommodation, booking, online payments, etc) we recommend the Drupal technology.

The construction of the presentation site. Structural principles

The web space is an environment which is largely determined by the same principles of living and communication as the moral principles in real life. Thus there are certain regulations which, if not respected, may lead to a dramatic shortage of audience. Certain recommendations are so important that, if not implemented, the search engines can restrict the visitors' access.

One of the key recommendations is the so-called principle of the reactive design (the design of the site adjusts itself to all display types). The Google search engine limits the sites which do not have a reactive design.

Another vital recommendation is about the principle of accessibility. The web space is an environment used by persons with disabilities as well. Their access cannot be done if the sites fail to implement certain applications (the possibility to minimize or maximize fonts, for instance).

Regarding the effective design of the site, at present there are two essential debates: parallax system or classical system? Minimalism or maximalism?

Generally, a parallax design appeals to technical tricks which create dynamic visual images producing perspective illusions of 2D or 3D type. For visitors the experience is one almost cinematic. Is it more useful a parallaxlike design or a classical one? To answer the question the following aspects should be underlined: the parallax design is beneficial to web users who surf the web with no real agenda in mind (without a precise informative objective) but can be quite inconvenient for those who try to access certain data. Then the parallax design gets annoying at the third or fourth access of the site (the element of surprise has already gone). Our recommendation is to use a mixed design where the classical formulas should prevail, keeping in mind that the site of a boarding house has both a presentation and informative role.

Minimalism or maximalism. Considering all the audience tendencies, we recommend the minimalist design but containing a lot of media elements for having a good grip on the audience. Nevertheless minimalism should not exclude the attention paid to details. Details in design are quite important.

Information, applications and functions necessary for the presentation site

The presentation site of a boarding house should contain at least the following information: the presentation of the boarding house and its integration in the region, the classification of the boarding house, the accommodation terms and facilities, tourist activities, prices in a transparent and clear format, travelling directions to the destination, tourist attractions in the area, data about tourist services in the area.

From the content point of view, the site of Drumul Plutașilor boarding house includes their presentation and integration in the region, classification, facilities (such as free wireless, rooms with bathrooms, free parking, breakfast included), outdoor tourist activities (hikings, canoeing, offroad, cycling, tourist assistance for visitors), accommodation prices, tourist attractions in the area, tourist information, travelling directions to the destination.

The presentation site of a boarding house should also include the following applications: SEO integration, geolocation, form or precise contact directions, photo galleries, QR apps, partition links for social media accounts, apps for multilingualism and internationalization. A blog is also recommended as an app which can advise the web users about the activities of the boarding house.

The presentation site of a boarding house should accomplish the following functionalities: a simple and coherent presentation of the identity and communication elements, a simple and intuitive navigation, a design which should respect the principles of a loose visualization of the site (non-aggressive contrasts, simple and readable, harmonious relations and so on).

Because it is highly significant we shall specify a few aspects regarding the navigation of a presentation site of a rural boarding house.

For that purpose it is advisable to respect a *pattern* largely engaged in the construction of the sites for boarding houses. As a rule, the main navigation menu has the following links: *Home*, *Accommodation*, *Tourist Activities*, *Contact*. With a few possible additions: *Blog*, *Media*, *Tourist Attractions*. Regarding the main menu it is generally recommended to use the term *Home* or the phrase *About Us* instead of *Home*, *First Page* or *Frontpage*.

To visualize the site on displays such as desktops, the text of the links from the main menu can be doubled by specific and standard icons. The graphical references can increase the navigation fluency.

In the case of the sites meant for boarding houses we do recommend to use secondary menus. The functionalities of the secondary menus should be taken over by other apps, for instance, photo galleries.

To visualize the site on tablets or mobile phones it is recommended to include the app „hamburger button” in the menu to allow the user to switch it on or off depending on the navigation intentions.

The Social Media Accounts

Regardless how frivolous the social media looks, at least Facebook offers three key advantages: holding the audience's attention, personalizing the communication in direct relationship with the audience, getting vital information about rival boarding houses. A presentation site is, generally, an immobile product in the field of communication. The only technology which can boost and dynamize a presentation site, except for the social media accounts, is the blog. Quite important and recommendable. With the observation note that a blog is quite a handful for persons who have poor or few skills in writing or in the production of media materials (photographies, video clips, etc). Whether we like or not, the social media accounts are nowadays the most important technology that brings audience and complex means of direct communications with the audience.

CONCLUSIONS

The integrated web systems are highly efficient digital tools for introducing the rural boarding house, for establishing an effective communication framework and even for managing the business. To implement all these mentioned above it is necessary for the owners of boarding houses to understand the mechanism on its whole and the indispensable functionalities in the case of the boarding houses. Cocurrently, the web developers and designers should know precisely the specific needs of a boarding house.

This study aims to make available a series of suggestions and recommendations meant to help the owners of rural boarding house, especially when dealing with web developers or designers.

At the same time, it opens the research theme *Digital Technologies for Branding the Rural Boarding House in Moldova and Bukovina* (<http://rdrp.acadiasi.org/node/143>), developed on Rural DevelopmentResearchPlatform. On the same platform there are many other suggestions which could not be inserted in the present study, due to scarcity of space.

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