



ASSESSMENT OF BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF INTERNET MARKETING IN HOTELS IN THE TAMALE METROPOLIS

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to determine internet usage in some selected hotels in the Tamale metropolis. To achieve this purpose, data was collected from guests visiting the facility and management of the hotels during the period of the study with the use of questionnaire. A sample size of 80 respondents was obtained comprising 60 guests. A further 20, comprising of management of the various facilities were also contacted. The analyzed data was represented using bar charts, pie charts and tables. The study revealed that most of the hotels had internet devices and employs the internet as part of their marketing strategies. Another finding of the study was that hotels prefer word of mouth marketing to traditional and internet marketing. The hotels that employ internet services as part of their marketing strategy enjoy some benefits such as large customer outreach, customer satisfaction and improved communication with some challenges such as high cost in purchasing internet equipment and limited penetration of internet usage among domestic customers. The study therefore suggest that the hospitality industry should encourage the use of internet marketing in their facilities for the improvement of business performance as well as recruiting staff with ICT background in order to deliver quality service.

Keywords: Internet, Marketing Strategy, Internet Marketing, Internet Equipment, Customer Satisfaction.

Introduction

Internet as a global information system provides and makes use of accessible, either publicly or privately, high level services layered on the communication and related infrastructure described herein (Borgman, 2010). The internet was initially invented in the year 1960 mainly to protect the mainframe computer of the United States of America in cold war. Ultimately, scientists and specialists also used the internet in sharing their information about their findings (Jacko, 2012). The Personal Computers then came into being in the 1990s and since information sharing became important in our communities, towns, cities and countries, this brought about the Information age (Castells, 2010). An increase in computer users with a reduction in computer prices, accounts for the high number of people using the internet as their main distribution channel (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The

services that the internet provides can basically be characterized into two namely; the Communication and the Information services. The communication services allow the internet users to have a direct exchange of ideas and information and such services are the email and the Netnews. The information service on the other hand serves as a medium where users share and attain information that has been posted by other users (Gungor et.al. 2013). The internet is the most widely used media because the radio used thirty-eight years to reach out to five billion people, the television used thirteen years whereas the internet used only five years (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Three major forms of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have swayed the tourism industry for the past thirty years and these include the Central Reservation system (CRS) in the 70s, the Global Distribution System (GDS) in the 80s and finally the internet from the mid-nineties which

seems to have the greatest impact on the tourism industry (Guttentag, 2010). The internet was developed three decades ago and its main objective was for national defense (Lee et.al. 2012). The internet is now adopted in almost every aspect of our lives and is mostly used as a conduit for communication as well as a source of information in most businesses (Gushchina et.al. 2015). The terms online marketing, internet marketing and e-marketing are often interchanged but are considered as the same and throughout the world today, internet links millions of people and several networks from large to small, private, academic and commercial purposes (Onyeocha et.al. 2015). Marketing is an activity, set of institutions and processes that creates, communicates, delivers and exchanges offers that have value for customers, partners and the whole society (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 2013). Internet marketing involves the use of any available latest media associated with the ease of communicating with the target audience (Miller and Lammas, 2010). Internet marketing is most effective as compared to traditional methods of advertising products and services such as exhibition and T.V marketing (Gushchina et.al. 2015). Hospitality industries have been able to market their services through different models of communication channels such as mass marketing and customization, all through the internet as well as to target the needs and wants of their customers individually (Kotler, 2012). Though there are certain drawbacks associated with internet usage such as security and privacy issues especially in financial transactions, the number of organizations and companies that have adopted the internet in their services have greatly increased and the hospitality industry is of no exception to this change (Li and Jianjun, 2011)

The Role of Internet in Marketing

The internet serves as both a medium for marketing and a channel for communication and that makes it unique from the traditional means of marketing. Nevertheless, the internet serves as a medium where marketing research can be conducted throughout the world. A quick growth in the past years has made the internet to be a significant tool for worldwide marketing (Brennan, (2011). However, Internet marketing gives every company, either small or large the chance to do their business domestically or internationally with little cost

and less effort and also businesses achievements in the future can be determined and measured by using internet marketing (Terpstra, Foley and Sarathy, 2012). Internet marketing has substituted traditional marketing in three dimensional ways namely; Communication, Transaction and Distribution. The adoption of internet marketing in business saves time and minimizes costs that are associated with delivery and postage and it is also an option that requires that the service provider is cautious to ensure that the right message or information is sent to the right customer with the right price (Ekiz, and Babacan – Anatolia, 2012)

The main aim of using the internet in marketing is to create a suitable platform where sellers and buyers can transact businesses easily without much difficulty. As a result of its structure, internet services provide an ideal prospect for marketers to give offers and rebate at the last-minute, within short periods of planning that are targeted to specific customers (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). In the past years, traditional marketing was mainly used to transact business operations with little knowledge of the internet but currently, marketing co-operations have realized the need to use the internet as their main distribution channel (Shaw & Williams, 2009). Hotels that adopt the effective use of internet in their marketing strategies accrue more profits from their services. The hospitality industry employs the internet to send important information about their products and services purposely to entice customers and also be accepted by various groups (Kotler, 2011). Factors such as branding, pricing, increase in competitors, payment method and the differences in law and culture as well as language which form the basis for communication tend to affect internet marketing and therefore, should be fully assessed before an organization can adapt to international online marketing (Porter, 2008).

Internet Usage in Africa

Globally about 3.2 billion people use the internet as at the year 2015 of which 2 billion are from developed countries. Internet usage rate in Africa was reported to be 5.6% in the year 2009. North and South Africa are more advanced in terms of internet usage than the West, East and Central Africa countries. (Gillwald, et al., 2010). In the year 2015, thirty-four percent of households in the developing countries had internet while in the developed

world more than eighty percent of households had internet access (Bhuasiri et.al. 2012). In Africa, one in every five people use the internet compared to two in five people in Asia and three in five in Europe. Businesses in the developing countries that do not use the internet in their operations are adversely affected (Bhuasiri et.al., 2012). The growth of internet marketing business in Africa has been quite new due to factors such as lack of access to technology (Chaffey et.al., 2009). There has been an increase in the number of youthful literates who use the internet because it is the most effective means of acquiring information (Chaffey et.al., 2009). That is, a number of African countries continue to lag behind internet access and internet usage rate is below 20 percent and more than half of those living in developing nations have at least occasional internet access on a computer (Pizzi, 2016). However, online marketing businesses have grown substantially in the last few years and their success is just superb (Mohamed, 2018).

Internet Usage in Ghana

Ghana was one of the few African countries to be linked to the internet few decades ago and the information communication and technology sub-sector in Ghana has grown gradually with a number of organizations and individuals increasingly using the internet for business and other activities (Dzidonu, 2010). The Northern Region has a total number of 32,128 persons that use the internet facility with Tamale Metropolis having 11,483 people using the facility. This represents 7.4% as against Accra Metropolis that has a population of 247,967 (19.4%) using internet facility and Kumasi metropolis that has a population of 204,004 (16.1%) using internet facility (Ghana Statistical Service-GSS, 2010). This clearly indicates that majority of the population do not have access to internet facility and most organizations and companies rarely employ the internet for their services. Information Technology has helped to strengthen the pace of change in industrial activities (Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research-ISSER Report, 2005). Internet users in Ghana were faced with the challenge of a block on credit card transactions which was led by the United States of America Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1995 as a result of deceptive behavior by some users of the internet (Tetty, 2008). Organizations which have websites are

doing excellent business and online shopping sites in Ghana are still on the rise (Hinson, Boateng & Madichie, 2010).

Problem Statement

The internet contributes immensely to the growth of the hospitality industry. The internet provides a medium for hoteliers to promote products and services to attract a large number of potential customers while retaining their customers to their facility as well as to generate revenue for their operations and Ghana's economy at large (Cook, 2010). The hospitality industry in Ghana can only succeed and exceed their competitors both locally and internationally, when efficient and effective measures are taken in their marketing plan and also when they have a responsible management team that will incorporate modern strategies in their operations (Lovelock, 2011). The hospitality industry in Northern Region specifically, Tamale, is of no exception to the nation's development. However, there are issues of skilled ICT experts, poor marketing skills of management and high rate of computer illiteracy among staff and the population. These limit the active use of the internet in the provision of their services. Though the hotels in Tamale gain from using traditional means of marketing their facility, there are higher prospects in internet usage as compared to the traditional means of building their customer relationship which do not pose great challenges to their businesses.

Taking a look at the rate of growth in the hotel industry in the Tamale Metropolis, there is an urgent need to conduct a study on how well hotels within the Metropolis market their products and services to their customers as well as attract potential customers to their facility. Therefore, this study aims to assess internet usage as part of the marketing strategy in hotels in the Metropolis. The study therefore sought to ascertain the importance of internet adoption in the hospitality industry in Tamale Metropolis as well as the benefits that are derived from the internet as used for marketing. The study also specifically seeks to identify ICT tools used by hotels in the Tamale Metropolis.

Materials and Methods

Study Area

The study was conducted in recognized hotels in the Tamale metropolis which included 2-star hotels, 1-star and budget hotels.

Location

Tamale Metropolis is one of the 26 districts and the capital town of the Northern Region. Tamale is acclaimed to be the fastest growing city in West Africa (GSS, 2010) and it is located in the central part of the Region and shares boundaries with the Sagnarigu District to the west and north, Mion District to the east, East Gonja to the south and Central Gonja to the south-west (GSS, 2010). Geographically, the Metropolis lies between latitude 9°16 and 9° 34 North and longitudes 0° 36 and 0° 57 West. The population of Tamale, according to the Ghana Statistical Survey (2010) is 233,252

representing 9.4 percent of the region's population. Males constitute 49.7 percent and females represent 50.3 percent (GSS, 2010). The Metropolis has a market potential for local goods from the other districts in the Region. Aside the central location of the Metropolis within the Region, the area stands to gain from markets within the West African region from countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and also en-route through the area to the southern part of Ghana. There are 115 communities within the Metropolis and most of the rural communities have large expanse of land for agricultural activities (GSS, 2010). However, these communities lack basic social and economic infrastructure such as hospitals, good road networks, markets and school blocks. These hinder socio-economic growth, poverty reduction and reducing rural-urban migration (GSS, 2010).

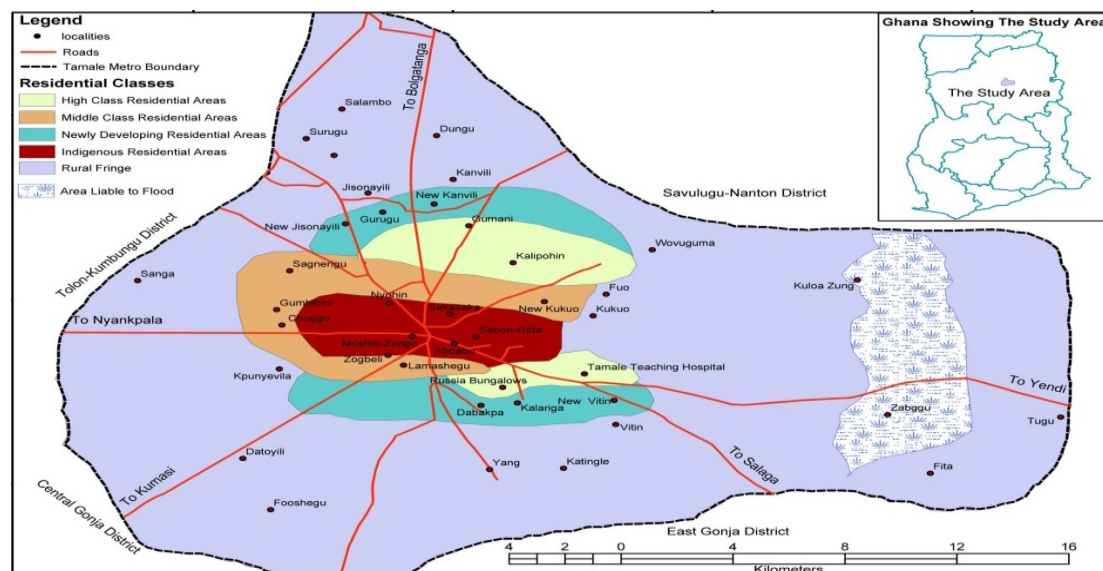


Figure 1: Map of the study area (Tamale Metropolis)

Source: Based on TaMA Medium Term Development Plan 2003-2005

Source of Data

Collection of data that was pertinent to this project was obtained from the management and guests from registered hotels in the Tamale Metropolis. These hotels include star rated and budget hotels. Currently, there are about seventy-four (74) hotels in the Tamale Metropolis (Ghana Tourism Authority-GTA, Tamale Office, 2017). Methods employed for the research include;

- Primary data (questionnaire administration).
- Secondary data acquisition.

Primary Data

A questionnaire was structured and presented to the management and guests in the hotels to obtain the primary data concerning internet usage in the facility. This gave the chance to gather information from a large number of respondents at a reasonable cost.

Secondary data

Information concerning the total number of registered hotels and their ratings was obtained from the Ghana Tourism Authority, Tamale. Other relevant information was obtained from related journals, the internet and UDS Library.

Sample Size, Sampling Technique and Data Collection

A total of twenty (20) hotels were randomly selected for the study out of the seventy-four (74) registered hotels within the Metropolis. This was done to give every hotel (2 & 1-star and budget) the chance of being selected for the study in order to prevent bias, to limit the tedious manner of getting managers to work with and coupled with limited time frame.

The twenty (20) hotels consisted of 2-star, 1-star and budget hotels. In total, eighty (80) respondents were used for the study. Sixty (60) questionnaires were administered to the guests of the facility, comprising three (3) guests from each hotel.

Guests were purposely chosen because they had enough knowledge on hotel promotions and mostly use such facilities based on its publicity. Twenty (20) questionnaires were administered to the management of the hotels. These categories of people were chosen because they are involved in marketing the hotel and its operation.

Table 1: Number of Hotels Used and their Ratings of the Hotels Used for the Study

Hotel ratings	Total number Hotels	Number of hotels sampled
Budget	59	11
1-star	6	4
2-star	9	5
Total	74	20

Source: GTA, Tamale Office, 2017.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Microsoft excel and Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20. Simple frequencies and percentages were used to analyze each objective. The analyzed data was presented using bar charts, pie charts and tables.

Results and Discussions

Demographic of Respondents

The study (Table.2) revealed that male guests (73.3%) make more use of hotel facilities than female guests (26.7%). This could be attributed to gender discrimination in this part of the country where the males are more educated than their female counterparts. Thus, males tend to have official jobs, earn higher wages that enable them to buy electronic devices such as smartphones to access the internet as well as use hotel facilities for their vacation or business purposes. However, this finding contradicts Toh, et al. (2011), who stated that many American business travelers are females and that females mostly use hospitality facilities than males.

The study (Table.3) again revealed that 61.7% of guests had attained tertiary education. These category of guests are in their youthful stage

and are government workers. These categories of guests have enough knowledge on hotel promotion, use the internet to search for information and mostly use such facilities for meetings, conventions, incentives and exhibitions. This is similar to the finding of Minazzi, & Lagrosen (2013), who recorded that there has been an increase in the number of youthful literates who use the internet because it is the most effective means of acquiring information. Again, the finding agrees with the study of Seybert (2011) on internet use in households by Europeans who stated that Europeans that have attained higher education used the internet most.

Nevertheless, the results show that managers of the hotel facility are mostly male (80%) with few females (20%). This is basically because the males have attained higher education than the females and are more qualified to take up managerial functions than the females. This finding is similar to the GSS (2010) employment status in the Tamale Metropolis which revealed that the proportion of male employees is 28.2% whereas only 11.3% are female employees. However, this is contrary to the study of Toh, et al. (2011), who found that the female labor force in Malaysia accounts for

45.8% of the country's total labor force. And this is because there are equal education opportunities for both male and female. The study revealed that most managers (80%) do not have a certificate in computing. This implies that though managers have not attained any formal education or training in computers, they do have some basic skills or informal training that enables them to maneuver through computer usage.

The study (Table.4) also revealed that most managers have spent 4-6 years in the industry. This generally makes the managers quite experienced in their operations such as how to manage available resources, motivate and coordinate staff to work together to achieve organizational goals and promote the image of their facility.

Table 2: Gender of Guests

Gender	Frequency (N=60)	Percent (%)
Male	44	73.3
Female	16	26.7

Table 3: Educational Status of Guests

Educational level	Frequency (N=60)	Percent (%)
Primary	6	10
Secondary	13	21
Tertiary	37	61.7
Non-formal	4	6.7

Table 4: Years Spent by Hotel Managers

Number of years	Frequency (N=20)	Percent (%)
1-3years	5	25
4-6years	8	40
7-9years	5	25
13-15years	2	10

Internet Usage (ICT Tools Used by Hotels)

The study (fig.2) revealed that hotels use ICT devices. It was shown that all the hotels have and use telephone (100%) and TV (100%). Most of the hotels have Wi-Fi (85%), computers (80%), intranet (70%), websites (65%) with only few hotels that have Personal Digital Assistants (PDA) (20%) and reservation system (5%). This shows that the hotels have and use some electronic devices to enhance the services provided as well as to promote their marketing strategies. This agrees with the study of Åström & Wittenmark,

(2013), who stated in their findings that hotels use ICTs to expand their operations, sell their products and to market their business.

The hotels that had no PDA (80%) and reservation system (95%) could be attributed to the high cost involved in purchasing the device (PDA) and installing a software system for database even though such devices facilitate customers' database management and also help to manage customers' information in order to identify the chief patrons of the facility, what they like most and want

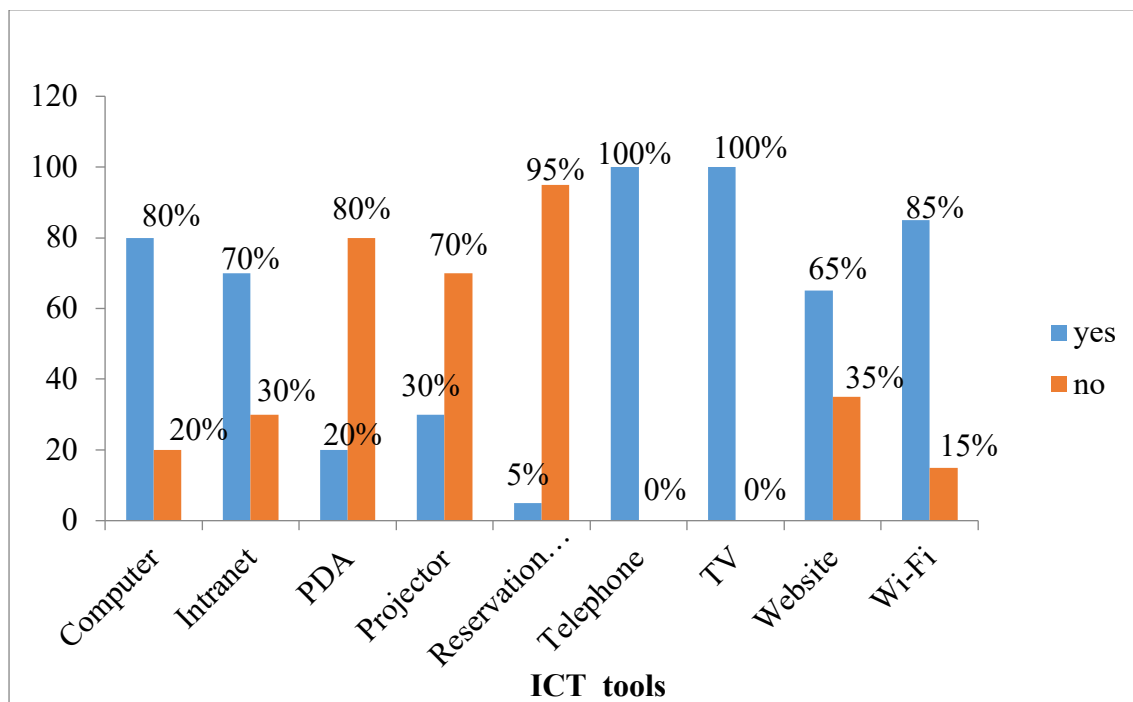


Figure 2:

ICT Tools Used by Hotels

Type of Hotels Advertisement

Social Networks Advertisement

On the type of social networks that hotels used in marketing their products and services, it was surprising to know that 45% of the hotels do not use any social media to advertise their services. Managers explained that though social media has become a faster and easier means of sharing information, they do not want to extremely advertise on this platform so that customers will not be satisfied with the type of services they render and their products when they finally visit the facility but rather prefer door to door marketing to their guests and mostly rely on word of mouth (WOM) advertisement. In the area of hotels publicity, the study revealed that 65% of the guests got to know the hotel through friends and relatives, through social media 18.3% with the least being the hotel website 3.3%. This shows that most guests rely on organic sources of information (friend and relatives, WOM) and this is because such sources of information are factual. Whereas, 18.3% of guests got to know the hotel via social media which indicates the low turnout of guests that rely on information on social media. This is in line with Shankar et.al. (2010) study on destination selection in Australia, which

revealed that most of Western Australians' travel decisions were based on WOM recommendations from friends.

This finding is contrary to Boateng, & Okoe (2015) who stated in their study about how marketers are using social media to grow their business, that Facebook is the most preferred media for marketers and about 54% of marketers chose Facebook as their essential media for marketing.

Quite a number of hotels used Facebook (25%) and twitter (15%) to market their services. This is mainly because of low penetration rate of internet usage among majority of the population as well as their level of education.

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2013) in their study on International Internet Connectivity in Sub-Saharan Africa, stated that the average rate of illiteracy is about 33% for adults and one in every three (3) potential internet customer is unable to use the service because he /she cannot read and write, thus delaying the growth of internet usage especially in Africa. Again, this reflects on the literacy rate in Tamale Metropolis which has 60.1% of the population being literate with 39.9% being non-literate (GSS, 2010).

Table 5: Social Network Advertisement by Hotels.

Social Network	Frequency	Percent
Facebook	5	25
Twitter	3	15
Do not use any	9	45
Others	3	15

Traditional advertisement

The result of the study (fig.3) revealed that 55% of hotels use other traditional means of advertisement such as billboards to market their services. This is mostly because hotels are of no risk in terms of fraud when they employ such means to market their products. Also, the cost involved to design billboards is not expensive and it is easy to manipulate as compared to electronic devices. A number of these hotels use brochures (50%) and magazines to market their services. Although such print media are cheap and affordable by all, its outreach is mostly limited to few people and that hinders the growth of the hotel with regards to how well the hotel facility is known to potential customers beyond the Metropolis and Ghana as well.

The study (fig.3) revealed that the hotels that advertise via media houses such as radio and TV recorded low percentages (35% and 15%) respectively. This is mostly because the cost involved in making such adverts is quite expensive, often associated with language barrier and also limited to a certain frequency. Thus, they are not mostly preferred by marketers to use as a medium for advertisement.

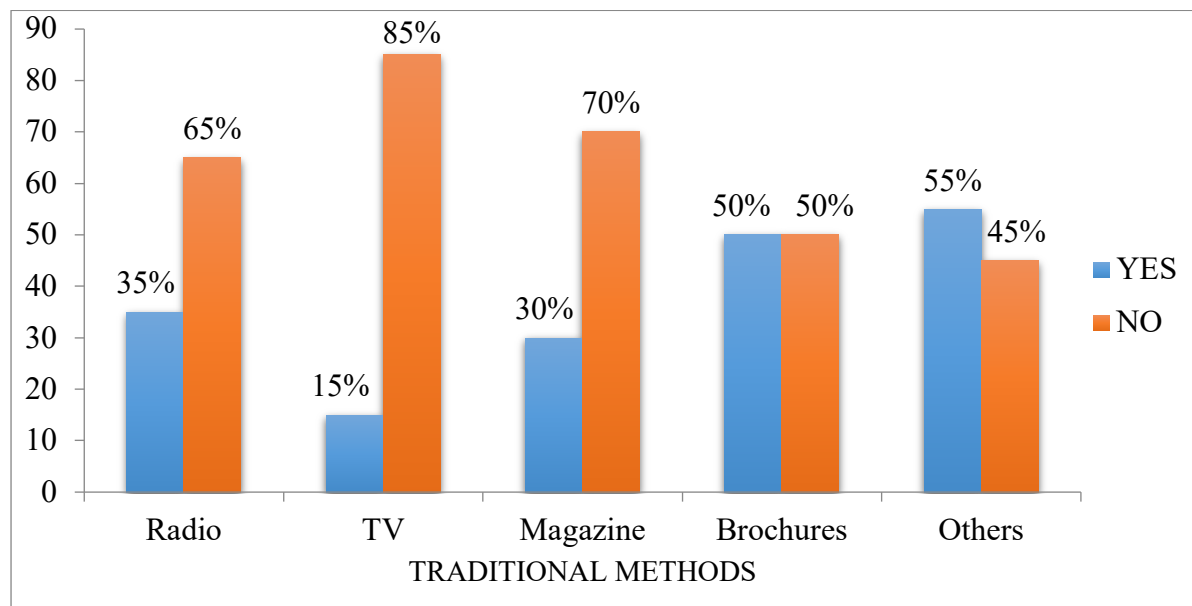


Figure 3: Traditional Media Advertisement

The Benefits of Internet Marketing

From the analysis (Fig.4), it can be shown that hotels gain a lot from internet usage. Most of the hotels agreed that the internet enables them to reach out to large customers (90%), improve customers' communication (90%) and ease their advertisement (90%). This is mostly because internet services are always available, that is twenty-four hours, seven days (24/7) and that makes it appropriate for both service providers and customers to use the internet. Again, most hotels agreed that the internet enables them to reach out on a global scale (85%) and satisfy their customers' requests (80%). Some hotels also agreed that the internet helps them to remove barriers from the marketing process (55%) and there are low costs involved in mass marketing (45%). This is because hoteliers are of the view

that third parties play an active role in our part of the world to assist guests in knowing a hotel as well as marketing goods and products and also advertising via the internet involves more cost. Therefore, it is clear that most hotels benefit from using the internet as part of their marketing strategy. This affirms the study of Keller, Parameswaran, & Jacob (2011), on the benefits of internet marketing which states that, using the internet to market products is associated with some benefits which include; time and cost savings and not limiting its reach to any set audience. The study also relates with the study of Issahaku (2012), who stated that, the commercial gain of e-business lies in five (5) areas which are; geographical outreach, efficient cost benefits, improved communication, barrier reduction and new product development.

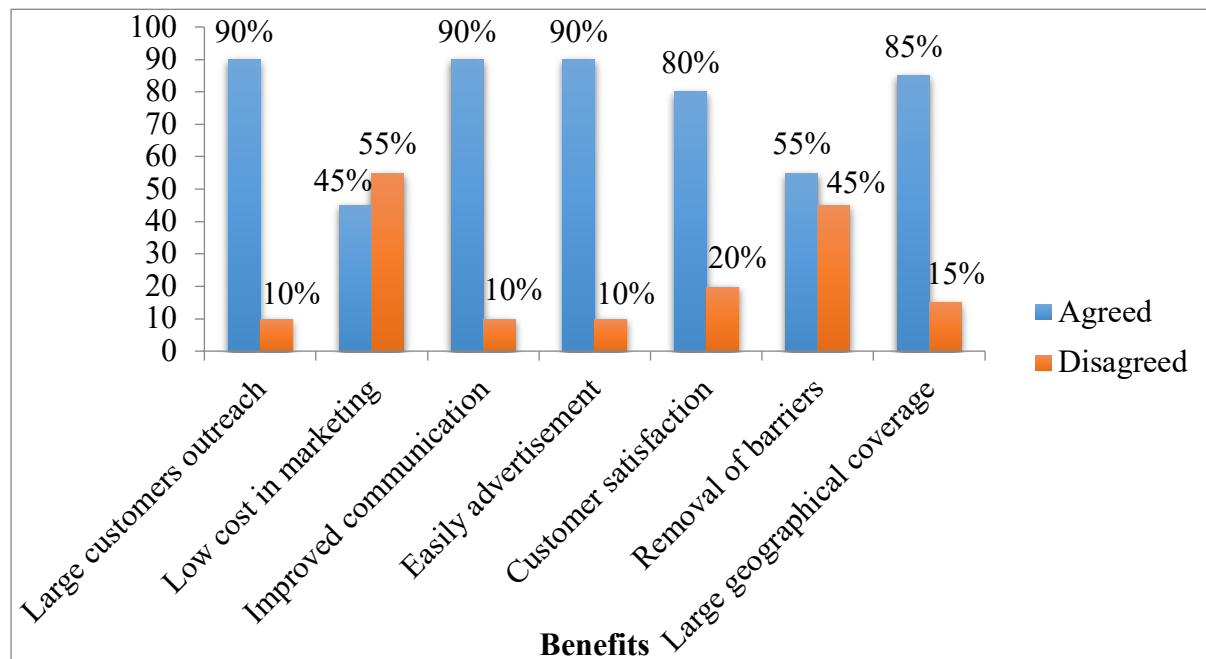


Figure 4: Benefits of Internet as a Marketing Tool

Challenges of Internet Marketing

On the challenges that hotels encounter in using the internet as part of the marketing tool, 85% of hotels agreed that the costs involved in purchasing ICT facilities are high and most of the hotels further agreed that hotels are exposed to scams and threats (68.3%), distrust between customers and service providers (66.7%), less control of information spread about the hotel (65%), low internet usage among majority of the population (63.3%), high technical incompetence (60%) and ability to manage too many customers (58.3%). The difficulties that hoteliers face with internet usage are mostly due to the fact that technological advancement is limited in the country and that has affected business entities in using such devices to improve their operations. Therefore, the hotels agreed that the internet poses challenges to them.

Again, on the issue of low internet usage among majority of the population and high technical incompetence, the finding is in line with that of ITU (2015), that Africa is the only

region where internet penetration remains below 20%. Furthermore, the study agreed with a previous study conducted by Al-Bakri & Cater-Steel (2010), who found that IT facilities and tools are expensive in most African countries of which Ghana is no exception, making its availability and usage in the hospitality industry very rare.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to determine internet usage in hotels in the Tamale Metropolis, the ICT tools that hotels use, the benefits and challenges of internet as a marketing tool in the hotels. The results from the study showed that hotels in the Tamale Metropolis make use of some ICT devices such as computers, Wi-Fi (internet services) and other traditional means of marketing their products. The results also reveal that hotels rely mostly on word of mouth advertisement from their guests to potential customers. Hoteliers explained that, the word of mouth advertisement is basically to build a positive

image about their facility and prevent excessive exaggeration on advertising via internet. Although in this technologically driven age, with internet connection, the world is made a global village with the click of a button. However, some hotels in the Tamale Metropolis are not moved with such obsession and are still glued to the oldest form of marketing. With regards to the benefits of internet usage as part of their marketing strategy, the study showed that hoteliers enjoyed some form of benefits such as being able to reach out to a large number of customers, improved customer and service providers' communication, promoting products easily, customer satisfaction and large geographical outreach, removal of barriers and low cost in marketing. The study further revealed that although the internet is advanced and attracts more benefits to its users, hotels are faced with difficulties with internet usage which include high cost in purchasing internet equipment, trust issues, limited penetration on internet usage among domestic customers, less control of information spread about the hotel, unskilled technical personnel, exposure of hotels to scams and not able to manage too many customers. Based on the findings from the study, the following recommendations have been made to improve the effective adoption of internet services as part of the marketing strategy among hotels in the Tamale Metropolis. The hotel management should liaise with GTA, to at least assist the hotels to advertise via media houses at a reduced rate if not through the internet. The public should be educated on the prospects that accrue from internet services especially when used by hotels in the Metropolis in order to promote and patronize the hotels and telecommunication networks should also make their services affordable and reliable for both hoteliers and the public to use.

Conflict of interest

The authors of this article have no competing interest and all the authors whose works were used have been duly cited and acknowledged.

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