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PROMOTING NATURAL HERITAGE
OF THE SOUTH BALTIC REGION
ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE BALTICMUSEUMS 2.0 PROJECT

Abstract

The paper discusses how the natural heritage stored in the oceanographic museums may be promoted using Internet on the example of the BalticMuseums 2.0 project (2009–2012). It describes the aims of the project, key architectural traits of the multilingual online information platform, its key components attracting visitors: Kids' zone and Virtual panoramas, as well as accompanying promotional activities including the BalticMuseums 2.0 conference and an advertising campaign in the Internet. The results of the campaign are analyzed in terms of the change in the number of on-line visitors.

Keywords: promoting natural heritage, oceanographic museums, Internet-based promotion.

Introduction

The South Baltic area is abundant with various types of natural heritage, but its tourism attractiveness is still unmatched by the number of visitors. This is especially valid in times of the financial crisis, when the consumers tend to limit their unneces-

sary spending,[1] which can be observed in the decreasing numbers of tourists in many European countries.[2]

One of the most important sites that give the tourists access to the natural heritage of the South Baltic region are maritime museums. These institutions have also experienced a decrease in visitor numbers in the recent years (see Table 1 further on) and keep looking for counter-measures that would reverse this trend.

Table 1. Decrease in the number of visitors in selected South Baltic museums
in recent years

Museum	2009	2010	2011
Gdynia Aquarium	430,977	361,342	340,391
Lithuanian Sea Museum in Klaipeda	375,809	330,881	120,777
Ozeaneum in Stralsund	800,000	700,000	650,000
Sum	1,608,795	1,394,233	1,113,179

Source: own work based on data obtained from the respective museums.

The helping hand is given by the European Union in a form of several mechanisms aimed at promoting tourism[3] backed by an adequate financial support. One of such is South Baltic Cross-border Co-operation Programme 2007–2013, a multilateral cross-border cooperation programme, whose overall objective is to strengthen the sustainable development of the South Baltic area through joint actions increasing its competitiveness and enhancing integration among people and institutions.[4] It defines two priority axes (Economic Competitiveness and Attractiveness and Common Identity) consisting of seven types of indicative actions. Among them is action 2.3 – "Sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage for regional development", which includes "joint creation of sustainable tourism products respecting protection needs

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[1] D. Milewski, *Popyt Turystyczny*, in: *Ekonomika turystyki*, ed. A. Panasiuk, PWN, Warszawa 2008, pp. 78–96.

[2] *Number of tourists who stay at least 4 nights in a collective or private accommodation*, Eurostat, 2012, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/product_details/dataset?p_product_code=TIN 00045 (30.06.2012).

[3] *European policies for tourism,* European Comission, 2012, http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/ tourism/promoting-eu-tourism/tourism-related-policies/index_en.htm (30.06.2012).

[4] *South Baltic Cross-Border Co-operation Programme*, European Comission, December 2007, en.southbaltic.eu/files/?id_plik=176 (30.06.2012).

for natural and cultural heritage and joint actions promoting the South Baltic area as a tourist destination".

One of the projects realized within South Baltic Programme's action 2.3 is the "BalticMuseums 2.0 – Joint development of cross-border information products for South Baltic Oceanographic Museums". We shall present this project in more detail in the following section.

1. The BalticMuseums 2.0 project

The main objective of the BalticMuseums 2.0 project is the promotion and effective use of the natural heritage stored in the oceanographic museums by means of cross-border tourism information tools, in order to increase their attractiveness and competitiveness, especially for international tourists.[5] Detailed aims of the project include:
- – developing a multilingual online platform, which enables a common presentation of tourist information by the museums – participants of the project,
- – delivering an online ticketing system,
- – developing a prototype of a modern, multilingual visitor guidance system,
- – propagating the information about the museums taking part in the project and their joint ventures by using the cross-border tools of information dissemination,
- – creating favorable conditions for the cross-border collaboration of organizations from the countries of the south Baltic region.

The BalticMuseums 2.0 project is realized by an international consortium consisting of two scientific institutions – the University of Applied Sciences in Stralsund and the University of Szczecin, and four oceanographic museums – the German Oceanographic Museum in Stralsund, Gdynia Aquarium, Lithuanian Sea Museum in Klaipeda and the Museum of the World Ocean in Kaliningrad. The main task of the University of Szczecin is the development of the Online Information Platform (OIP).

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    5 Z. Drążek, J. Swacha, K. Muszyńska, Ł. Stasierowski, *Internetowa Platforma Informacyjna BalticMuseums 2.0 jako przykład nowych form rozpowszechniania informacji turystycznej*, „Ekonomiczne Problemy Usług" 2010, nr 53, pp. 371–381.

2. Online Information Platform

The OIP is a web portal (available at www.balticmuseums.net) that provides its visitors with the most important information about museums, allows them to purchase entrance tickets and follow the museums' activity on various social platforms.

The OIP was designed with the following assumptions in mind:
- exactly the same set of information should be provided for each oceanographic museum taking part in the project,
- all information should be available in six languages – the four partners' languages (Polish, German, Lithuanian and Russian), English, and Chinese (simplified),
- Web 2.0 solutions should be embedded to develop a community gathered around museums,
- the list of museums present on the Online Information Platform should be open for enlargement,
- the website should have aesthetic and interesting looks and easy navigation.

The information is presented to the OIP visitor using three filters:
- language – set automatically on website entry based on user's system settings, may be later modified manually by clicking an appropriate flag icon (see the top sections of Figures 1 and 2),
- museum – chosen by the user on the entry page (see Figure 1) by clicking museum's name or associated image,
- category – chosen by the user on the main page (see tabs in the central part of Figure 2).

The Online Information Platform can be seen as a collection of three types of components:[6]
- information, i.e., focused mainly on delivering information about museums,
- community, i.e., facilitating the construction of communities around museums,
- entertainment, i.e., aiming to give a positive impression to its visitors.

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[6] J. Swacha, K. Muszyńska, T. Komorowski, Z. Drążek, *Development and maintenance of a multilingual e-Tourism website on the example of BalticMuseums 2.0 Online Information Platform*, "Prace i Materiały Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego" 2011, nr 3, pp. 237–246.

Figure 1. Entry page of the Online Information Platform

Figure 2. Main page of the Online Information Platform

It is the entertainment components that are supposed to attract visitors that otherwise would not visit the OIP or would leave quickly. The key components of this kind are Kids' zone and Virtual panoramas.

3. Kids' zone

From the very beginning of the OIP development it has been decided that the platform should offer some content specially designed for child visitors. Originally planned to be published in the same layout as the remaining OIP content, it eventually evolved into a separate website (the Kids' zone) with its own layout and graphics (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Main page of the Online Information Platform Kids' zone

Source: kids.balticmuseums.net.

The Kids' zone offers content for children in various age groups, which includes trivia about seas and sea life, quizzes, four interactive games (testing intelligence, reflex, agility, and memory skills), coloring books, image gallery, as well as

downloadable gifts (such as wallpapers or screensavers). All this is presented with colorful graphics and accompanied by thematic soundtrack.

Although Kids's zone is a highly attractive component of the OIP, it is interesting mostly for young visitors. For the adult ones, Virtual panoramas were chosen to play analogous role, after considering its powerful promotional effect confirmed by literature.[7]

4. Virtual panoramas

Panoramic gallery is a set of connected panoramic views, each of which allows the viewer to change horizontal viewing angle (cylindrical panoramas) or both horizontal and vertical viewing angles (cubic and spherical panoramas).[8] The viewer is also allowed to switch between different views using the so called navigation points.

Figure 4. An exemplary panorama published at the Online Information Platform

Source: www.balticmuseums.net/panorama.

Two specific requirements were stated for the OIP panoramic gallery:
– interactivity, that is an ability to place interactive objects inside panoramas that could augment their effect on the viewer,

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[7] *Marketing Locations with Panoramic Earth Virtual Tours*, Panoramic Earth, May 2011, www.panoramicearth.com/images/documents/VirtualTour-LocationPromotion2012.pdf (30.06.2012).

[8] C. Jacobs, *Interactive Panoramas: Techniques for Digital Panoramic Photography*, Springer, Berlin–Heidelberg 2004.

    – easy configurability, so that even staff which is not fluent in virtual tour construction could manage to modify them.

A concept of a web-based panorama management system compliant with these requirements has been conceived and then developed,[9] based on which a set of panoramic galleries was constructed for each of the museums participating in the Baltic-Museums 2.0 project. An exemplary panoramic view is shown on Figure 4.

5. Promoting the website

Although the OIP is a tool for promoting the museums, it also requires promotion of its own, so that it could be noticed by the Internet users. The promotional-informational campaign promoting the OIP and the www.balticmuseums.net address started right after its official opening in February 2011. Since then it has been promoted on several tourism conferences, there were at least 12 press releases mentioning it, and leaflets were distributed in more than 50 places.[10]

The most important single event with the promotional impact was the Baltic-Museums 2.0 conference held in Szczecin in December 2011, with over 100 participants from Poland and abroad. The conference was preceded by a press meeting with journalists from the radio and newspapers, thanks to which the OIP was mentioned in local media.

The bulk of the OIP promotion was aimed at the Internet. First, a Search-Engine Optimization (SEO) audit has been done that verified the website preparation for search engines in respect to various forms of metadata, keywords, usability, security and used technologies. The report from the audit has been used as a base for a set of adjustments that helped to improve the OIP's ranking in the search engines. Then a paid advertisement campaign was launched, including banners, mailing and sponsoring search engine keywords.

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[9] A. Miluniec, Z. Drążek, T. Komorowski, K. Muszyńska, J. Swacha, *Novel Approach to Panoramic Gallery Management on the Example of BalticMuseums 2.0 Website*, Presented at the „Strategie zarządzania e-biznesem w przedsiębiorstwach" conference in Szczecin on 27 February 2012. Forthcoming publication.

[10] *BalticMuseums News*, 2012, www.balticmuseums.org/news.html (30.06.2012).

6. Effects of the website promotion

The number of visitors coming to the OIP has been continuously monitored since its going live. As can be observed on Figure 5, the search-engine optimization in January and then the advertisement campaign starting in the end of February boosted the initially low number of visitors. After finishing the campaign in April, the visitors number has fallen, yet even in June it remained on a level about five times higher than in January. Therefore, the campaign can be considered as successful.
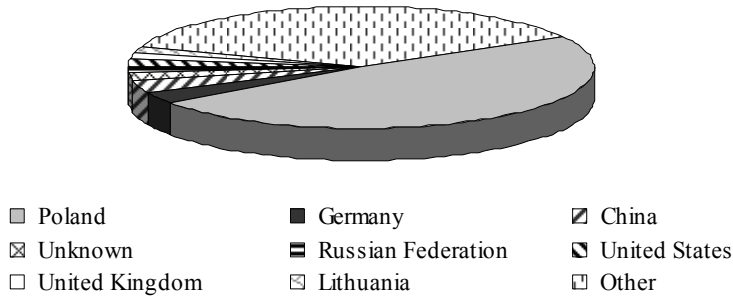
Figure 5. Number of OIP visitors during the first six months of 2012
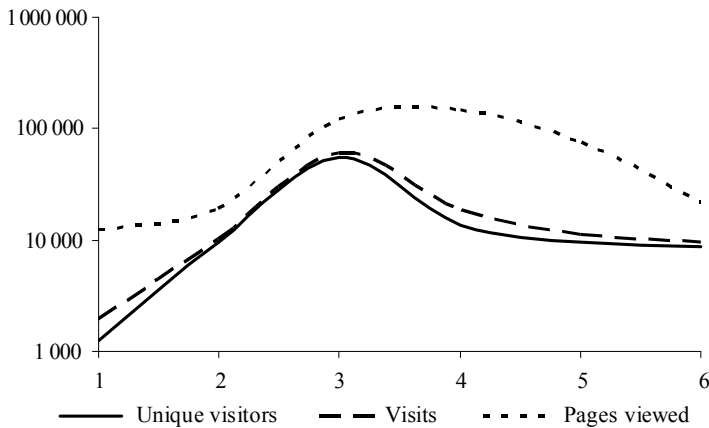
Source: balticmuseums.net server statistics.

Also the country of origin of each visitor has been monitored. As can be observed on Figure 6, most of the OIP visitors come from Poland, with smaller numbers from Germany and China (which seems to justify the decision of including Chinese as one of the languages of the OIP). Notice the traffic from countries other than those where the museums are located (almost 150 in total), which indicates there is interest in natural heritage of the South Baltic region among international tourists.

Figure 6. Country of OIP visitors during the first six months of 2012

☐ Poland   ◼ Germany   ▨ China
☒ Unknown   ▬ Russian Federation   ◨ United States
☐ United Kingdom   ⊠ Lithuania   ⬔ Other

Source: balticmuseums.net server statistics.

Conclusions

In this paper, we performed a case study of the "BalticMuseums 2.0 – Joint development of cross-border information products for South Baltic Oceanographic Museums" project to show how the Internet-based technologies can be used to promote the natural heritage stored in the oceanographic museums.

The approach presented in this paper, based on a multilingual online information platform with special section for children and enriched with virtual panoramas, can be effectively used in promotional activities in order to attract visitors to regions and locations less known worldwide. The measured increase in the number of the OIP visitors shows that search engine optimization and paid advertisement can be very efficient in attracting a large number of Internet users to a new website.

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PROMOCJA DZIEDZICTWA NATURALNEGO REGIONU POŁUDNIOWEGO BAŁTYKU NA PRZYKŁADZIE PROJEKTU BALTICMUSEUMS 2.0

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia możliwość wykorzystania Internetu do promocji dziedzictwa naturalnego prezentowanego w muzeach oceanograficznych na przykładzie projektu BalticMuseums 2.0 (2009–2012). Opisano w nim główne cele projektu, kluczowe cechy architektury wielojęzycznej internetowej platformy informacyjnej, najważniejsze jej komponenty mające na celu przyciąganie gości: Strefę dla dzieci oraz Wirtualne panoramy, jak również działania promocyjne dotyczące platformy, takie jak konferencja BalticMuseums 2.0 oraz internetowa kampania reklamowa. Rezultaty kampanii zweryfikowano w oparciu o dane na temat liczby osób odwiedzających witrynę.

Słowa kluczowe: promocja dziedzictwa naturalnego, muzea oceanograficzne, promocja w Internecie.