

SPECIFIC PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOLS USED IN ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS BY TOURISM COMPANIES

Associate Professor Ph.D. Nicoleta-Rossela DUMITRU
Romanian American University, Bucharest, Romania
nicoletad01@yahoo.com

Associate Professor Ph.D. Costel-Iliuță NEGRICEA
Romanian American University, Bucharest, Romania
negricea@yahoo.com

Assistant Professor Ph.D. Manuela-Rodica GOGONEA
Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania
manuela.gogonea@gmail.com

Abstract:

The creation and development of the Internet have determined global changes in all social fields, including communications and public relations. Thus, the traditional Public Relations tools and strategies have been adapted in view of new benefits regarding maintenance of contact with the tourism companies' public.

This workpaper is intended to determine the extent of PR tools and methods utilisation, based on a research developed within several Romanian hotel units.

In this context, the application of the structural method has generated results that create encouraging online communications perspectives, taking into account the use of specific public relations tools.

Keywords: tourism, online public relations, Internet, website, e-mail.

JEL Classification: M30, M31, M37, M39

1. INTRODUCTION

As an integral part of everyday life, communication has become a major factor for society and individual; thus, the success depends to a great extent on the *ability to communicate*. For a modern organisation, communication represents an essential component of marketing activities, due to the ever more dynamic environment where it functions (increased exigency of customers, competitors' strong moves, etc.). This fact determines the organisations in any field, including tourism, to pay higher attention to marketing communication, as a set of signals sent by the company to its (internal or external) public, to the purpose of influencing its attitude and behaviour.

Thus, (Tran V., 2002, pg. 7) communication is defined as a "*process by which an emittent transmits information to a receiver by means of a channel, aiming at producing specific effects on the receiver*". In other words, each communication process has a specific structure, based on a specific relation developed by the trinomial emittent-message-receiver. A transfer takes place between the emittent and the receiver; the message transmission is performed based on a specific code.

While the **message** is characterised by coherence, fluency, clarity, and is determined by space, time and emittent's state of mind, the **code is fixed**, invariable, abstract, reduced to a small number of signs.

Within the complex environment where the companies function, one can speak about a communication marketing, which is exclusively informational, apparently, taking into consideration the importance and value of information nowadays. Actually, this market is a combination of two components: information and interest. In this interest context and from the marketing point of view, communication has to lead to action taking and decision making, regarding the procurement or non-procurement of a (tourism) product.

After a review of Internet communication effects on all activity fields (including tourism), this work emphasises the PR role in the organisation's communication activity. In the end, before the start-up of the research, the authors remind the main PR methods and tools at the disposal of the tourism companies.

The research referred to in the work used the enquiry as a research method, and the questionnaire as a tool. The sample consisted of 87 Romanian hotel units, located in the main tourist areas of the country. The conclusions, based on the information collected, referred to the initial assumptions, confirming or invalidating them.

2. INTERNET COMMUNICATION TENDENCIES

Under the influence of border opening and, partially, border elimination (Nistoreanu P.,), initiated in the last years, one can notice a process of market internationalisation, followed by an increased competitiveness and a stronger need to offer and receive information.

At the same time, a process of market internationalisation and globalisation of company activity is under development, which implicitly changes communication's coordinates. This new position is supported by *Internet communication*; the research carried out within the big companies shows an increase of activity dimensions within the network: *more news „is consumed”, more electronic mail messages are transmitted, more articles and reports are elaborated, more financial transactions are concluded, more sites are visited and more sales take place.*

Thus, the Internet shows the tendency to take over part of communication load, but at a different dimensions and by different means. Within these new Internet communication tendencies, the barriers of distance or language disappear, and so do the obstacles determined by the interference of intermediate agents, influenced by sets of rules and subjective thinking; therefore, the communication becomes direct and leads to a *personalised relation* (exchanges of texts, images, messages, etc . take place rapidly).

A remarkable advantage of Internet communication is visual communication, which allows transmission of a wide range of messages; the images are meant to *strengthen and stabilise the message, facilitate understanding, decoding and reception of the message by a wide range of means.* To this effect, one can notice several advantages of visual presentations: *catch the attention, look good,, improve perception, eliminate the monotony of texts, strengthen the verbal message, allow the pointing out of differences , etc.*

Referring particularly to *the tourism field in Romania*, we found out that the increase of Internet utilisation, which was 33% in 2007, reaches 32%, in 2009, and the number of the people that check the Internet before leaving on holidays has grown considerably. In June 2005, the first three Romanian tourism portals showed jointly little over 463.000 unique visitors, according to statistics displayed by Trafic.ro (site that analyses the Internet sites from visitors point of view). In the same period of 2009, the number of visits almost doubled, reaching 866.000 for the three tourism sites: www.infoturism.ro, www.romaniantourism.ro, www.infotravelromania.ro.

Other tourism sites that are worth mentioning: www.hartionline.ro, www.rotravel.ro, etc. There are plenty of tourism units (agencies, hotels, restaurants, etc) that have their own site (Eximtur, Marshal agency, etc) or are linked to a portal specialised in accommodation offers (www.cazare.ro, www.pensiunituristice.ro) or provision of tourism information (www.iTurism.ro).

There is also the Ministry's official site (www.mdrt.ro) which focuses less on offers, reservations, and more on the news section, that is useful to the people directly involved in the Romanian tourism activity (press releases, amendments of regulations, various notices, etc.).

More than that, an on-line poll carried out by SMART-financial (electronic financial newspaper) on a sample of 412 persons, revealed that, in their preference ranking, TV advertising is overcome by Internet advertising, (table 1).

Table 1. – Results of SMART-financial on-line poll

Promotion means	Percentage	Promotion means	Percentage
Internet	36%	Indoor advertising	6%
TV advertising	28%	Outdoor advertising	4%
Direct Marketing	12%	on-line advertising	5%
Advertising publications	6%	Radio	3%

Source: www.bizwords.ro, 2008

One can notice the high percentage, over 50%, scored by the Internet, on-line advertising and direct marketing, in general.

3. PR STRATEGIC ROLE IN TOURISM

Generator of considerable public incomes, *tourism* is one of the most important economy sectors; it has had the most rapid development within the national economy, provisions for 2020 indicating approx. 1.760 mil.Tourists (Piovesan L, 2005).

Globalisation, the creation of new destinations and the new technologies have modified the competitive environment of the countries; at present, the most powerful tourism promotion tool is represented by the image (of the country, region or tourism product). If we refer to the international level, the strategies for image building or tourism promotion are the following: creation of a new tourism image, re-positioning of a traditional tourism destination, creation of awareness in a competitive framework, brand creation, etc.

In this context, the investment in public relations by elaboration of communication strategies emphasises the **PR (public relations)** contribution to tourism development. The PR activities are long term processes and have in view *the assembly of direct contacts maintained by the tourism company with the customers, the managers of other companies, the opinion leaders, the representatives of public power, mass media, etc. , that creates confidence in the company and a favourable opinion for it and its products.* The most common PR techniques are the following: (table 2)

Table 2– Presentation of public relations techniques

PR techniques	Activities
News dissemination	The tourism organisation regularly informs the consumers and the public on the launch of a new product, opening of a new destination, development of marketing events, etc.
Speeches	Communication within internal or external events, focused on performances of the tourism company.
Special events	Drawing the public attention on the tourism organisation's offer.
Identification materials	Written, audio- visual or electronic documents, that provide „technical”, financial or commercial information, and also contribute to creation of a specific image of the company.
Social activities	The tourism company gets involved into social or charitable activities.
Sponsorship	The tourism company supports (financially also) social and humanitarian causes (cultural, sports, religious activities, etc.).

Source: *Marketing turistic*, page. 376, by V. Balaure, I. Cătoi, C. Vegheș,

In case of well-known destinations, the tourism promotion is planned and financed by collaboration and public-private partnership. This guarantees and brings more promotion resources, that may be allocated by a long term strategy and a marketing and communication process where the objectives and targets are well defined.

With respect to Romania's promotion as a tourism destination on the external markets, here is the **budget** allocated, according to the strategy, for the main promotion activities, on the three groups of tourism markets (see the table below). Thus, in Europe, the PR activity ranks on the IIIrd place (after exhibitions and advertising), while on the other two continents it ranks the first.

Table 3 - Budget allocated for Romania's promotion
- bill. lei -

Promotion activities	Europe	North America	South-East Asia
Public relations	15	5	3
Special events	10	4	2
Tourism exhibitions	40	1	3
E-Marketing/Internet	5	5	2
Direct marketing	15	5	2
Advertising	20	4	3
Sales promotion	2	1	1
Other promotion activities	3	2	2
<i>Total by market groups</i>	<i>110</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>18</i>
Overall Total	155		

Source : *Strategia pentru relansarea turismului românesc*, ANT, 2006, pg. 93

The public-private partnership in tourism promotion is a crucial aspect; as most of the tourism companies are small and tend to establish short term objectives and take individual decisions, while the goal should be an overall approach of tourism. This is an important issue regarding involvement into promotion activities of promotion and strengthening of collaboration between various actors, so as to insure participation of all parties to the process.

The research in the field (Piovesan L, 2005)., emphasises the importance of investment in PR communication strategies that may contribute to tourism development. Thus, in order to increase efficiency of PR activity in promoting a company image, a set of issues should be taken into consideration:

- a PR project should take into account all the **parties** (stakeholders) **involved** into the tourism field (accommodation units, tourism associations, vocational associations, trade-unions, municipalities, local tourism agencies that work for public institutions, Ministry and/or National Tourism Commission, National Tourism Offices, European Union, etc.).
- **market research** is an essential tool that provides specific information and offers a clear picture of the existing situation; at the same time, it allows quantity and quality researches in the tourism sector, and investigation of tourism trends in general.
- **strategic plan**: selected PR methods (for communication with mass media, public personalities and customers, product positioning, special events, company identification, etc.).
- creation of a **monitoring and evaluation system**, in order to check fulfilment of performances and objectives

3.1. E-PR – CONCEPT AND ADVANTAGES FOR THE TOURISM COMPANIES

With regard to communication and informing, the Internet allows the possibility to reverse the communication roles (emittent – receiver); this fact supports communication and contributes to a better informing and regular updating of the information.

The online (e-RP) public relations represent the totality of communication actions oriented to promotion or protection of the tourism organisation or its components (brand, products, website), to the aim of generating a positive interaction/ understanding (perception) of/from the public, by means of the on-line tools. e-RP represents the most recent tool used by the tourism organisation in view of reaching the communication policy objectives..

Here are some of the e-PR advantages (Negricea, 2010):

- *The tourism organisation may address the target-public directly and interactively* – in the online environment, the consumer may be addressed personalised messages, and feedback may be obtained in this process.

- *The public has at its disposal a wide range of informing tools* – at any moment, the information launched by the organisation may be evaluated and selected from a multitude of independent sources, by the tourist or other interest groups.

- *The online environment offers the opportunity to easily develop various PR processes* - One can easily organise events for a numerous public located in various regions (online conferences, discussion groups, workshops, online workshops, newsletters, etc..)

- *The public takes a proactive part to the online PR processes* – In the online environment, the public of the tourism organisation may share with the interested people its experience or perception concerning the organisation's activity or products.

- *Effective management of critical situations*– The tourism organisation may use various online tools to release the tension of relations with the target public; these tools allow fast reactions, so that the effect of potential conflicts can be reduced in very short time, with maximum efficiency.

- *Lower costs than the traditional PR environment.*

3.2. ONLINE PR TOOLS

Among the services that can be used as communication and informing tools (Negricea, 2010), we would like to mention:

- **The website:** it is a collection of web pages, network services, mainly html documents that form a consistent pack offered usually by one server. For an efficient communication and informing, both the design and the software must comply to the requirements of the public (the effective or potential tourist). A website must load rapidly, offer easy access to (regularly updated) information, contain attractive elements for each type of public (occasional visitors, permanent visitors, customers, etc.). A corporate website allows promotion of tourism company values, products and services provided, immediate publication of news, maintenance of a permanent relation with the targeted public;

- **Electronic mail** – this is the most often used and most popular Internet application ; it can be used for sending out press releases (accompanied by the tourism company's logo or even photos), invitations to events, congratulation messages, etc.; this is a fast, efficient and cheap communication tool.

- **Forum** – it is the place where one can discuss various topics; the discussion groups may address both the tourism company members and the large public;

- **Banners** – posting information about the company on another site (non-competitive), particularly news, information, e-commerce etc.;

- **Newsletter** – may publish a specific topic, may be stored (archived and accessed when needed), the public may subscribe or unsubscribe to this service.

3.3. ONLINE PR TECHNIQUES IN THE TOURISM FIELD

Among the most often used techniques of online public relations we mention:

- Organisation of online events – supposes the organisation of online workshops, presentations, exhibitions, show and sale, competitions, question and answer sessions with personalities or specialists, supporting of events;

- Monitoring of brand related statements – is focused on managing the reputation of the tourism organisation, and all brand related statements. The purpose of this activity is identification and perpetuance of positive elements posted on various websites or identification and management of various negative elements related to the organisation's brand. (There are online applications that allow the implementation of this PR technique, for instance www.googlealert.com.; by means of this automate tool, the organisation may be daily informed, by email, on the mentions referring to the organisation and also its competitors.);

- Management of unfavorable situations – the online environment is a free environment that facilitate transmission of unfavorable information; in view of reducing its impact on the tourist

organisation, the OPR expert has to consider developing actions such as: prompt reactions on the organisation's website, press releases, transmission of personalised e-mails to opinion-makers, editors of various online and offline publications, main customers and partners.

- *Other OPR techniques* - maintenance of close relationships with the editors of online publications or mass media in general, good relationships with the bloggers, the event sites, sites for opinions and product category ranking, web folders, provision of „white paper” and case studies, maintaining contact with the target public by RSS (Reader Software Services), viral marketing campaigns, newsletters, lobbying, relationships with the Governmental environment and various local communities.

The online public relations require permanent attention for observance of each marketing environment component, maintenance of stable relationship with each interest group with which the tourism organisation interacts. A crucial aspect of OPR activity is deontology and professional ethics (*etiquette*).

4. RESEARCH ON ONLINE COMMUNICATION BASED ON PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOLS USED BY THE TOURISM SERVICE PROVIDERS IN ROMANIA

4.1. PRELIMINARY RESEARCH PHASES

The main objective of this study is *to determine the extent of e-PR techniques utilisation by the tourism service providers in Romania*; we mention that the research took into account only the accommodation units / the hotels that could be contacted by electronic means (Web page, e-mail).

The research assumptions were the following:

H1: The major part of hotels in Romania develop PR activities.

H2: Over 1/3 of hotels' PR activity develops online.

H3: The main tool used by accommodation providers is electronic mail

H4: Most hotel owners consider that the online PR activity is efficient.

H5: The target public of online PR activity is represented by the tourism agencies.

The *general collective* of the research, which is the people to whom the information shall be extended / generalised, is represented by the accommodation providers in Romania, and the *poll unit* is, depending on the case, the person assigned to deal with promotion of the company image in every hotel (the person may belong to marketing department, PR, sales department, etc.)

The *data collection method* was the enquiry; the tool was the *questionnaire*; it was sent by email to the respective company, in attention of the person assigned to deal with the company image.

The research was carried out in the period 17 Aug. – 13. Sept. 2009 (we selected the common season for both the mountain units, less affected by seasonality, and the seaside units).

The *sample size* was 87 hotels (of all categories), located in Bucharest, Constanța, Valea Prahovei (Sinaia, Predeal, Bușteni...) and Bucovina. The sample was intended to be larger, the questionnaire was sent out to more hotels, but they didn't respond, therefore they were not included in the sample. However, we considered that the research is feasible, because, as one can notice, the most important tourism regions are represented in the sample (this was an issue targeted in the beginning of the study).

4.2. RESEARCH RESULTS

The first part of the questionnaire was focused mainly on *determination of the extent of utilisation of traditional PR techniques in the communication activity of Romania's hotels*. We have to mention that the questions included examples of such techniques (in case the contact person did not have a specific PR background). According to the responses, we reached the conclusion that 89,66% (78 hotel units) use one or several PR techniques (as shown in the table).

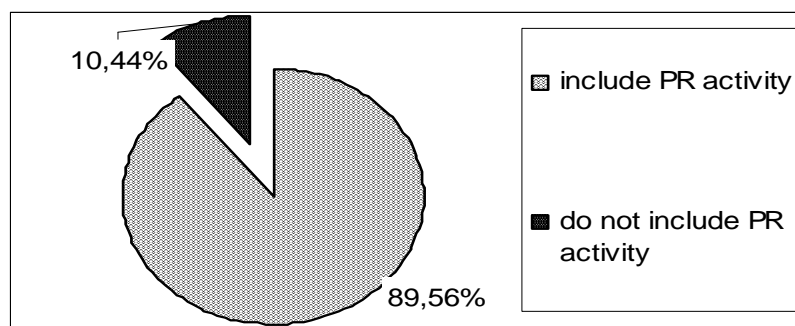


Chart 1. Structure of hotel units by extent of utilisation of PR techniques in the communication activity

The chart shows that 89,66% (78 hotel units) of the total hotel units (87 hotel units) apply one or several PR techniques.

Important for the research is verifying the hypothesis which says that hotel dimension and category has an impact for PR techniques breakthrough degree in units communication activities.

Table 4 –Hotel dimension and category test results for PR techniques breakthrough degree in communication activities

<i>Conjecture characteristics</i>	<i>Impact Factors</i>	<i>Link (relation)Intesity level</i> (Pearson link coefficient and threshold increasing factor compared with 5% signification factor)
PR techniques breakthrough degree	Hotel dimension	C = 0,399 with p = 0,004 < 0,05
	Hotel categories	C = 0,455 with p = 0,031 < 0,05

As conclusion we may see the both factors influence (especially for hotel dimension) for PR technique breakthrough degree.

Further on, the research focused on the 78 hotel units that use PR techniques.

The next question referred to *the rank of online public relations (OPR) within the global PR activity of each hotel*. Again, the question included examples of PR activities, in order to obtain realistic data.

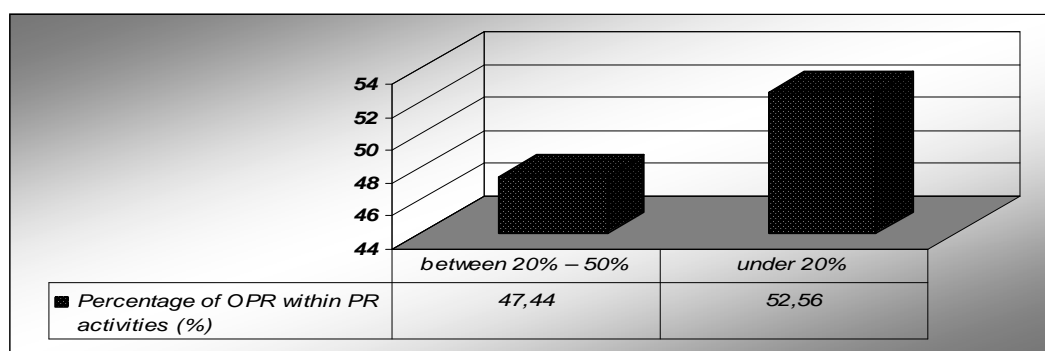


Chart 2 - The OPR percentage within PR activities

Thus, for 41 hotels, the OPR activity represents less than 20%, and the respective hotels represent 52,26% of the total.

The option „none” was not introduced, because since the questionnaire was sent by email, we considered that the hotel uses minimum one OPR technique: the electronic mail. Therefore, the responses to this question divided the sample of 78 units into two parts having quite similar values and structures, which is not fully satisfactory for the PR activity of each tourism unit.

Once we obtained the outline of the PR activity of hotel units in the country, we proceeded to investigate the concrete *tools* used in OPR. Below one can see the types of responses:

Table 5 – Distribution and structure of responses by the OPR tool preferred by the hotel services providers

The OPR tool preferred by the hotel services providers	Number units	Structure of units (%)
Website	37	47,43
electronic mail	13	16,66
Forum	11	14,10
Banner	9	11,53
Newsletter	8	10,25
Total	78	100

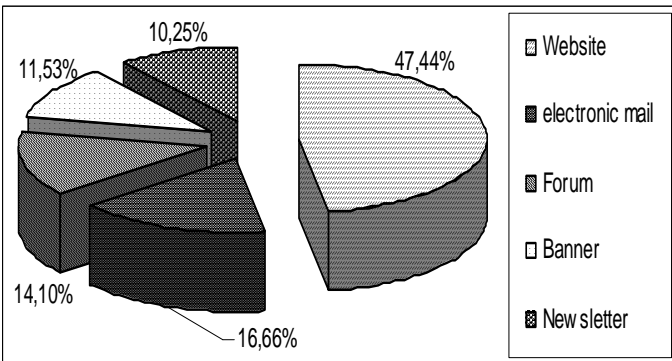


Chart 3

The communication research had also in view the *efficiency of online PR activity*.

Table 6 – Distribution and structure of responses concerning the efficiency of PR activity

The efficiency of PR activity	Number units	Structure of units (%)
It is efficient	53	67,94
It is not efficient	19	24,35
no response	6	7,69
Total	78	100

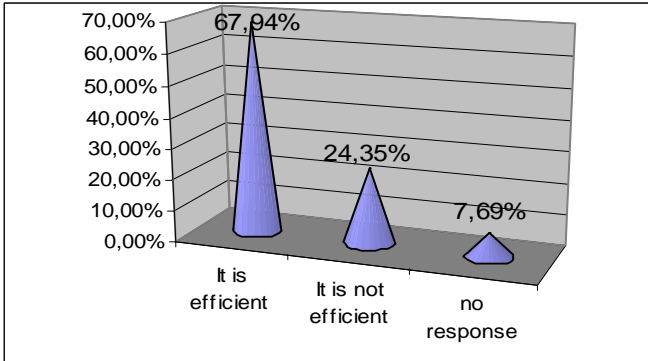


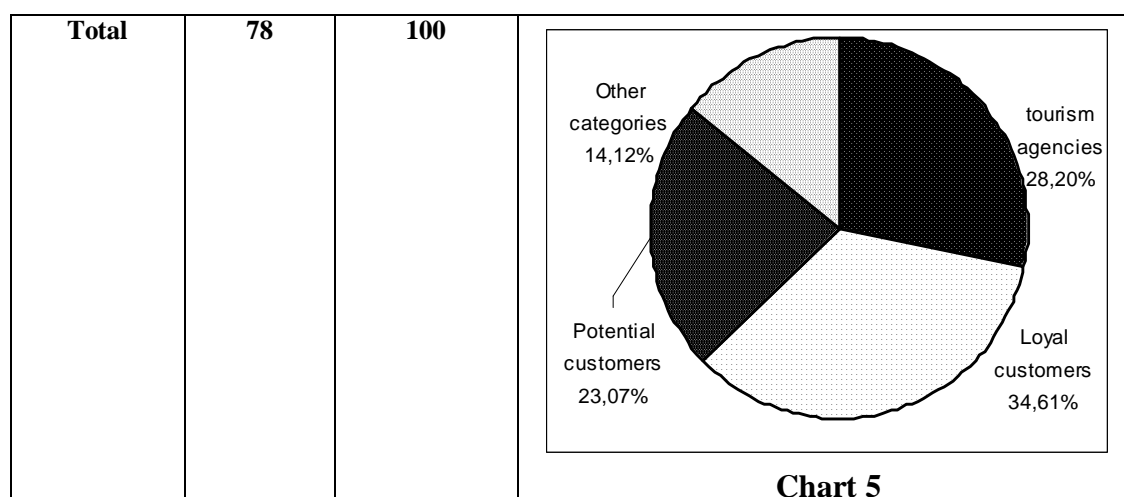
Chart 4

Based on the results obtained and chart 4, one can state that more than half of the hotel units (64,94%) consider them efficient, particularly in the context of extended communication and Internet utilisation in all fields.

The research attempted also to determine the *public targeted* by the hotel units within their OPR activities.

Table 7 - Distribution of responses by selection of targeted public

The public targeted by the hotel units within their OPR activities.	Number units	Structure of units (%)
<i>tourism agencies</i>	18	28,20
<i>Loyal customers</i>	27	34,61
<i>Potential customers</i>	22	23,07
<i>Other categories</i>	11	14,12



The major part of the tourism units (27 units), representing 34,61% , are oriented toward the loyal customers (both natural persons that visit the hotel and legal persons, institutions that send their employees to the respective units), while only 14,12% of the total target other categories.

The research conclusions revealed the following results:

H1: The major part of hotels in Romania develop PR activities –confirmed, 89,66% of the hotels have a promotion policy and develop PR activities.

H2: Over 1/3 of hotels' PR activity develops online. – not confirmed, the majority (52,56%) allocated only 20% to online PR.

H3: The main tool used by accommodation providers is electronic mail – not confirmed, the website being used by 47, 43% of the units.

H4: Most hotel owners consider that the online PR activity is efficient. – confirmed, approx. 70% consider it is worth investing in OPR activities.

H5: The target public of online PR activity is represented by the tourism agencies. – not confirmed, the public is represented by the hotel customers, with which, as the hotel management considers, a long term relationship of mutual advantages should be developed,

In the end, we have discovered an opening to this type of public communication – the application of PR techniques and tools in the online environment, an environment that incorporates the characteristics of traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines) and includes, in addition, a set of new features.

5. CONCLUSION

The main research results revealed some issues that partially contradicted the initial assumptions.

In this context, we can assert that the online environment allows the development of *personalised* PR campaigns and offers the opportunity to educate the target public and attract it by games and entertainment elements, involve it and change it into a key element of the relationship with the other public categories.

Also, one can notice that it decreases dependence on various traditional channels, as the web site becomes one of the main PR tools of the organisation. By means of this tool, the information about the organisation may be easily taken over by other sites.

The online environment represents one of the most efficient support media for the PR activities, with impact on consumers and other interest groups, as the elaboration of OPR campaigns requires knowledge about the online tools, the objectives that may be fulfilled by their means, and the features of targeted public and online activities that it carries out.

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