

Munteanu, Adina-Roxana; Rizea, Raluca-Daniela; Ilie, Anca Gabriela; Sârbu, Roxana

## Article

# Investigating Potential Strategies for Increasing Tourism Competiveness at the Black Sea Shore

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## **INVESTIGATING POTENTIAL STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING TOURISM COMPETITIVENESS AT THE BLACK SEA SHORE**

**Adina-Roxana Munteanu<sup>1\*</sup>, Raluca-Daniela Rizea<sup>2</sup>,  
Anca Gabriela Ilie<sup>3</sup> and Roxana Sarbu<sup>4</sup>**

*<sup>1),2),3),4)</sup> The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania*

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### **Abstract**

During 2009-2011 the tourism industry at the Black Sea shore experienced a significant downturn as a direct result of the global economic crisis and a shy growth in 2012-2013 period. In this context of difficult macroeconomic conditions and a hardly predictable number of tourists, the suppliers of tourism services need a constant revision of strategy in order to increase their competitiveness and adapt to external market conditions. The main objective of this study is to investigate the competitive strategies that hotels managers in Mamaia resort, Romania, could adopt considering customers' expectations and hospitality industry best practices. In order to achieve this, a best practice benchmarking analysis was performed considering several locations on the seaside in France, Italy, Spain and Turkey. Following this analysis, several strategies are drafted, such as: use of social media, creation of packaged deals, targeting the business segment and advertising by using the cultural and historical context of the location. Moreover, a short survey among social media users revealed some of the tourists' expectations regarding their holidays at the Romanian Black Sea shore, such as quality of accommodation facilities, personalized services and entertainment possibilities.

**Keywords:** sun-tourism, hotel, tourism services, best practice benchmarking, competitive strategy

**JEL Classification** L82, L83, L84, L86

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### **Introduction**

Increasing the competitiveness of the production of a good or service can either occur on a one-off basis, or it can be part of an on-going process within an organisation. Organisations must recognize they need to evolve to meet the demands of a changing environment and market, and the ever-increasing expectations of their customers. This is also the case of hotel managers in Mamaia resort, Romania that experienced a lower numbers of tourists during the 2009 – 2012 period compared to the level of 2008. Even though the 2012 season meant for most hotels a level of revenues comparable to the one in 2008, 2013 was not as good as 2012 from a revenues point of view. Therefore in the current context of quite

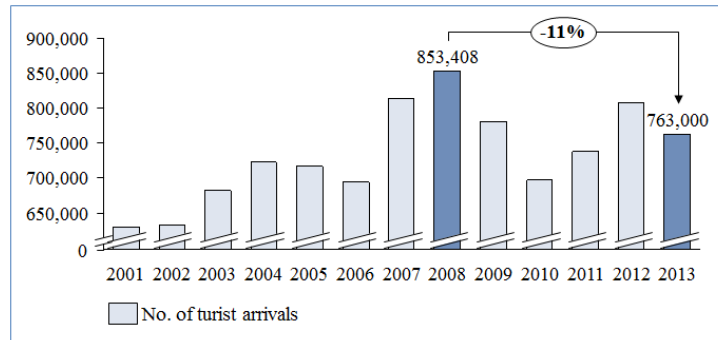
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\* Corresponding author, **Adina Roxana Munteanu** - munteanu.adina@gmail.com

difficult macroeconomic conditions, a constant revision of strategy in order to increase competitiveness and adapt to external market conditions is necessary.

In Romania, the tourism industry in terms of per cent in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is less developed compared to the neighbouring countries (Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria) which could be regarded as direct competitors according to analysis developed by Moraru (2012). Moreover, according to the estimate of the World Travel and Tourism Centre (WTTC) mentioned in their Report on Romania, in 2012 the direct contribution of the tourism in GDP is 1.9%, higher compared to the 1.5% registered in 2011. Moreover, the total contribution of the tourism industry in GDP reached 5.1% in 2012, compared to 4.5% in 2011 according to the WTTC (2012, 2013). Regarding these statistics, Moraru (2012) considers that two conclusions can be reached, first that the tourism industry is not significant in terms of GDP in Romania and the second that it tourism has a lot of growth potential keeping in mind the number, diversity and intrinsic quality of tourism attractions.

The tourism at the Romanian Black Sea Riviera is concentrated in Constanta County. Since the beginning of economic crisis, as the NIS data show, the number of tourist arrivals in hotels in Constanța County has dropped by 8% in 2009 compared to 2008 and continued to drop by 11% in the 2010 compared to 2009 (see figure no. 1). In 2011 the trend started to increase again since 2010 but started to drop again in 2013. However, as it can be noticed in the same figure, in 2013 the level of tourist arrivals was 11% less compared to 2008. Moreover, the number of overnights in hotels in Constanța County has been increasing since 2010.



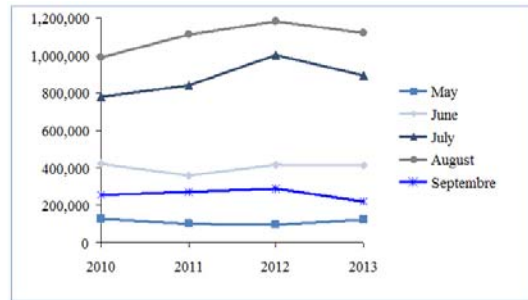
**Figure no. 1: The dynamics of the no. of tourists staying in hotels in Constanta County**

Source: NIS, 200-

As the touristic structures in the seaside region of Romania have around four months of activity (since mid-May until mid-September), the hotel managers have to make the best of this time. Moreover, the tourist categories that visit the seaside during this period are quite different in the peak months of July and August compare to the June and September, when more senior or lower income tourists come as a result of a decrease in accommodation prices.

Figure no. 2 presents the number of tourist arrivals during the 2010 - 2013 period for the months of the touristic season. According to the statistical data provided by National

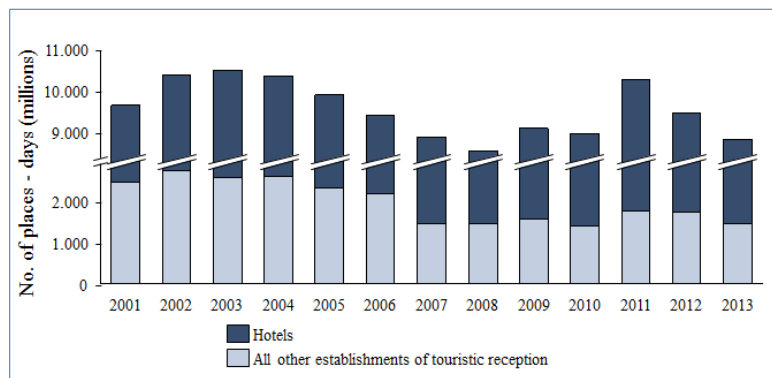
Institute of Statistics Romania (NIS), the season in 2013 attracted fewer tourists during the peak months of July and August compared to 2012.



**Figure no. 2: No of overnight stays in the hotels in the Constanta County during the season between 2010 and 2013**

Source: NIS,200-

Looking at the touristic accommodation capacity in operation at the seaside resorts excluding the city of Constanta (figure no. 3), it can be concluded that hotels are the most significant type of accommodation in the area. Moreover, between 2008 and 2013 the variations in the touristic accommodation capacity of hotels shows an increasing trend until 2010 and a decreasing one afterwards. These variations in accommodation capacity of hotels also highlight the importance strategies to increase to competitiveness of hotels.



**Figure no. 3: The dynamics of the touristic accommodation capacity in function by type of establishment, for all comfort categories in the seaside excluding the city of Constanta**

Source: NIS,200-

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section one briefly presents previous studies focused on various strategies of increasing the performance of hotels. Section two presents the employed methodology for this study while section three presents the results of the benchmarking analysis and discusses the proposed strategies. The last section presents the conclusions of the article.

## 1. Literature review

The first step in identify strategies for improving the performance of hotels in the seaside of the Black Sea in Romania was to review the scientific literature and identify the strategies proposed in previous studies from Romania and also world-wide.

According to a study of Maniu and Marin-Pantelescu (2012) that undertook a quantitative marketing research about tourist satisfaction regarding the hotel services in Romanian, approximately 60% of the respondents were satisfied with the service quality of Romania's hotels. Moreover, according to the same study, 54% are dissatisfied with the tariffs charged by hotels while 46% were dissatisfied with the staff behaviour. Such numbers should definitely catch the attention of hotel managers that need to take measure to improve the guest satisfaction.

Enhancing tourist satisfaction is crucial for any hotel manager in a competitive market as the primary challenge is proving quality services and achieving business performance (Kuo, 2009) therefore, the improving of the service quality is the one of the main recommendations. In this respect, in a study aiming to assess the human resources employed in tourism, both from a qualitative and a quantitative perspective, Rațiu and Oroian (2012) highlight that the access to continuous vocational training is restricted by employers who seem to ignored the importance of continuous training of their employees. The main strategy for increasing the competitiveness of touristic services suggested by Rațiu and Oroian (2012) is continuous training of human resources through vocational trainings.

In a study targeting the hospitality industry in Mureș County, Romania, Conțiu, Gabor and Oltean (2012) analysed the respondents' views on the employee-related factors that drive the performance in the hospitality companies. Using the hypothesis that the employee motivation can be an asset to sustainable tourism business, the study reveals that performance is determined by motivational factors, criteria of payment, incentives (both negative and positive).

Several studies focus on the criteria that a tourist uses to choose a hotel (Barsky and Labagh, 1992; LeBlanc and Nguyen 1996; Chu and Choi, 2000; Hseigh et al 2008, Kuo, 2009; Sohrabi et al, 2012) and the first conclusion is that the attributes for which a tourist selects a hotel have changed over time therefore, the constant contact with the guests in order to understand their expectation is essential.

Increasing competitiveness forces hotel managers to work harder to remain competitive by getting more hotel guests, therefore some studies focus on the development of frameworks for improving the overall management in the hotel industry (Karhunen, 2008; Tari et al 2010).

Sustainability aspects are also relevant in the hotel industry but were not part of the benchmarking analysis as criteria due to data unavailability. The concept of sustainability and environmental management as it is implemented in practice is a business practice that positively affects the performance of a company (Melnyk, Sroufe & Calantone, 2003; Montabon, Sroufe and Narasimhan, 2007; Heras-Saizarbitoria, Molina-Azorin and Dick, 2011). Moreover, according to Pereira-Moliner et al (2012) the environmental management practices impact positively the hotel efficiency and quality service which lead improvements in customer satisfaction and sales.

Moreover, in a study of Bastič and Gojčič (2012) investigating the environmental expectations of tourists staying in wellness hotels and spas concluded that particularly for this type of hotel the eco-component is likely to create competitive advantage for hotels in on tourist markets and that hotel service quality tends to be perceived as very high if the hotel staff is ecologically conscious. Therefore sustainability aspects should be part in the overall strategy of a hotel.

## **2. Methodology**

As this article aims to identify strategies for improving the performance of hotels at the seaside of the Black Sea in Romania, benchmarking is an effective way of achieving this goal, keeping in mind the limitations regarding access to data, the budget and allocated time for this research. Although a best practice benchmarking analysis is not the only way to achieve the stated aim of the article of identifying strategies for improving the performance of hotels, this methodology is employed in this study mainly because it is easily replicable by hotel managers, with the higher purpose of making benchmarking a permanent tool to serve the improvement of performance.

Benchmarking received many different definitions from various organisations and authors even though there seems to be a consensus regarding its goal. The most widely accepted definition is the one that Xerox gave at the end of 80s which is „the continuous process of measuring our products, services and practices against the toughest competitors or those companies recognized as industry leaders” (Cano et al., 2001).

The American Productivity and Quality Center also contributes to the definition of benchmarking by saying that „benchmarking is the process of continuously comparing and measuring an organisation against business leaders anywhere in the world to gain information which will help the organisation take action to improve its performance” (Kozak, 2002). In addition, Spendolini (1992) states that “benchmarking is a continuous systematic process for evaluating the products, services and work of organizations that are recognized as representing best practices for the purpose of organizational improvement.”

The first stage of benchmarking is the comparison while the following stages are taking action and reviewing outcomes in order to improve performance. As this article aims to come up with general suggestions and recommendations for hotel managers at the seaside of Romania, especially Mamaia resort, three hotels in Mamaia as the baseline for this benchmarking exercise were chosen. The other hotels abroad were chosen to serve as best practices examples. In the selection of these specific hotels, the decision was made based on the availability on the hotel’s website of all necessary information for the analysis along with good reviews of the hotels on specialized sites.

For this benchmarking exercise 15 hotels were selected, three from each of the following countries: Romania, France, Spain, Italy and Turkey. For each country the focus was on the seaside region recognized worldwide as sun-tourism destination. All hotels from abroad are similar in general terms with the Romanian hotels.

In the current benchmarking analysis the selected hotels differ in the sense that the duration of the season in which they are open is longer in Antalya, the French Riviera, Italy and Spain than in Romania. The hotels in the sample are located in Romania -Mamaia resort,

Turkey - Antalya, Italy – Rimini, Capri and Taormina, Spain – Benalmadena, Alicante and San Sebastian, France – Cannes and Nice.

The hotels have approximately the same star classification, but it should be observed that the classification system is not identical in all the mentioned countries. Five of the hotels have five stars while the other ten have four stars.

The Romanian hotels that are part of this sample are all situated in Mamaia Resort, all have four stars and they are Iaki, De Mal and Richmond. Only the last one is part of a hotel chain. Iaki is the largest with 122 rooms and apartments, Del Mar follows with 67 double rooms and 23 different suites, and Richmond is the smallest with 40 double rooms, four VIP rooms and three apartments.

The foreign hotels in the sample have different sizes, from 26 places to almost 1000. Eight of these hotels are part of hotel chains, either national or international. Four of the 15 hotels in the sample are very close to the seaside (less than 50m), while seven are rather close (less than 1 km), and the rest are quite far from the seaside (more than 1 km).

The criteria used for this benchmarking exercise are divided in three categories: **available facilities** (boutique, conference centre, restaurants & bars, wireless internet, spa & wellness centre, accessibility and safety box), **services provided** by the hotel (airport transfer, cleaning services, other services) and **the online interface of the hotel** (presentation of the rooms and restaurants on the hotel's website, Facebook page, online reservation and cancelling, loyalty program, special offers, reviews). The criteria above were chosen keeping in mind previous studies and the availability of information.

The price criterion was not included in the analysis because the hotels' locations are quite different and difficult to compare, and also the main objective of the benchmarking analysis was to highlight the types of facilities and services offered by the hotels with the purpose of suggesting improvements to the hotel managers in Mamaia resort.

Other criteria such as the perceived level of hospitality, the level of training of employers and sustainability aspects could not be used in the benchmarking analysis as the corresponding data was not available.

To explore some hypothesis and gain additional insight, a short survey was deployed among users of social media. As the survey is not representative at national level, it should be regarded as a qualitative list of opinions and additional market insights. The survey was designed and deployed in Romanian, after being tested on five people. The survey was distributed via social media (Facebook, Twitter) to approximately 450 persons, with a response rate of 9.33%.

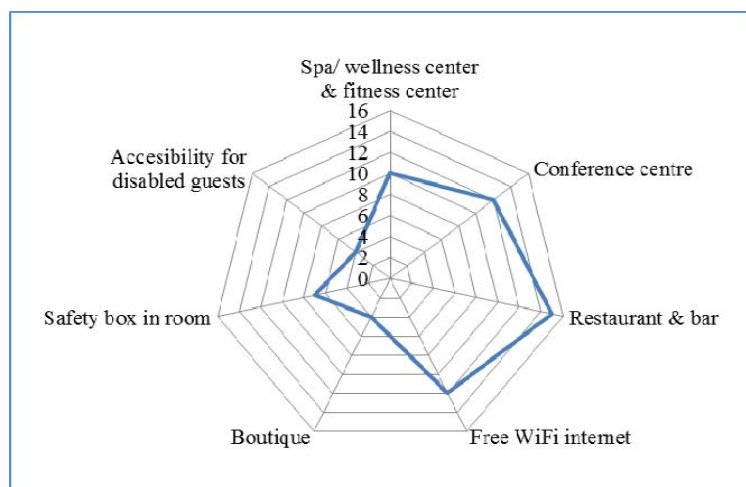
In total, 47 questionnaires were obtained, five of which incomplete, leaving a total of 42 usable ones. The respondents were between 25-45 years old, from urban areas of Romania and that visited the Mamaia resort at least once in the last four years. The geographic distribution of the respondents is as follows: Bucharest -20 respondents, Iasi -7 respondents, Brasov - 5 respondents, Cluj Napoca - 6 respondents and Timisoara - 4 respondents. The analysis of the data set was based on exploratory analysis and descriptive statistics.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The following paragraphs present the results of the benchmarking analysis for each bundle of the criteria- available facilities, provided services and the online interface of the – and the recommended strategies based on the finding of the benchmarking analysis.

#### 3.1 Available Facilities

The available facilities that were considered for this benchmarking analysis were conference centre, restaurant and bar, Wi-Fi, boutique, safety box in room, accessibility for disabled guest and spa/ wellness centre. The overall profile regarding the available facilities at the hotels in the sample is presented in figure no. 4 and as it can be observed, most hotels have restaurants and bars, conference centres and provide free Wi Fi internet. Moreover, boutiques and facilities related to accessibility of disabled guest are most rare facilities in the sample. Each criterion will be detailed in the following paragraphs.



**Figure no. 4: The hotel sample profile according to the available facilities criteria**

*Source: own representation*

Conference centres as facilities are designed to address a different type of customers, meaning the business sector. 12 of out the 15 hotels in the sample have conference rooms, ranging from 80 to 2780 places. All these hotels target the corporate tourism not only as a different source of revenues, but also as an indirect promoting of their other packages. Five of these hotels sell also touristic packages to companies, as a strategy to increase occupancy rate all year round. In addition, all three hotels in Mamaia have a conference centre, the largest one, with a 430 places capacity is at Iaki. Del Mar has half this capacity and Richmond has a smaller conference room with 80 places.

Restaurants & bars are one of the most common facilities. All the hotels in the sample have at least one restaurant and one bar, while six of them have two restaurants or more. The smaller hotels tend to orient towards regional or national specific cuisines for their



restaurants, while the larger ones offer much more diverse cuisines. Moreover, eight of the hotels that organize various events (banquets, weddings, corporate parties and private parties) provide also catering-like services.

Bars are very common among the hotels in the sample. When it comes to this facility, there is also quite a variety, besides the classic lobby bar, there are pool bars, piano bars, grill bars, vitamin bars in the Spa centre and snack bars, which are open 24/7 to serve tourist during the time the restaurant is closed. Another example of a remarkable bar is one situated at the top level of the hotel designed to offer the tourists the best view of the region. Moreover, the bar facility of the hotel is very important as, if satisfactory, it keeps the tourist in the hotel and therefore increase the revenues per tourist of the hotel.

Iaki has three restaurants with a 510 capacity and two smaller bars, one next to the pool and one 50 places Piano Bar. Similarly, the Del Mar hotel has two restaurants, with a total capacity of 340 places, one at the top floor, designed to offer a panoramic view and one at ground floor, designed for events, including weddings. On the other hand, Richmond has a smaller 80 places restaurant. Therefore, the ratio restaurant capacity to accommodation capacity is more than two for Iaki (2.09) and Del Mar (2.26) while Richmond has a less than one ration (0.85), similar to other four smaller hotels in the sample.

Arguably, nowadays the internet connection is very important, whether tourists are on holiday or a business trip. Therefore, as expected, 13 out of the 15 hotels mention on their websites that they provide internet, mostly Wi-Fi but also cable, and in 12 cases this service is free. In addition, all three Romanian hotels offer free internet for their guest at least in the lobby area.

Spa & Wellness Centre are present in almost half of the hotels in the sample. For most of the hotels, the spa facilities and fitness centre are included in the price of the room, but some additional services such as massages are charged. This criterion is very important mainly for the segment of the customers that come for recreation and body treatments, but it also proves a plus for the business segment which has probably little time to visit the surroundings. All three Romanian hotels offer spa services for their guests, while Iaki also offers the spa services year round also for non-guests for a daily or subscription fee.

Accessibility for disabled guests are present in four hotels in the sample, as the rooms are equipped for disabled people, or there is wheel chair access around the hotel and the public areas and ramp access to different buildings of the hotel complex. Iaki is the only Romanian hotel in the sample that has facilities for disabled guests.

Safety box in rooms are provided in half of the hotels in this sample, while all the other offer this service at the reception. Arguably, the existence of the safety box in the room creates a sense of security and privacy, therefore making the overall stay at the hotel more enjoyable. Iaki and Richmond offer their guests safety boxes in rooms while Del Mar offers safe keeping of tourist's objects in the hotel's safe, the service being available at the reception desk.

All hotels in the sample offer a diversity of other facilities, out of which the most common are swimming pools (60%), followed by parking at no charge (20%), Turkish baths (20%), and quite rarely private beach with all things included (6%), casino (6%), and tennis courts (6%).

### **3.2 Provided Services**

Among the provided services, in this benchmarking analysis were chosen airport transfer and cleaning services as they are quite common, but as other types of services were identified, they are also mentioned in the following paragraphs.

Airport transfer is offered in only a third of the analysed hotels and in all cases it comes at a surcharge. This kind of services it is related also to the distance from the airport. Most of the analysed hotels were located in resorts with no close-by airport. As the airport is placed quite far away from the hotel, the transfer costs are significant. Both Iaki and Richmond offer airport shuttle services, at a different surcharge depending on the airport (Mihail Kogalniceanu Airport or Henri Coanda International Airport).

Cleaning services are available in more than half of the hotels in the sample, including Iaki and Richmond, mention on their websites that they offer laundry services at a surcharge.

All hotels in the sample offer a diversity of other services, out of which the most common are baby-sitting and children's playgrounds (33%), followed by outdoor excursions including hiking (20%), newspaper delivery for guests (20%) and very rarely scuba diving (6%), delivery of luggage to hotel (6%) and solarium (6%).

### **3.3 The online interface of the hotel**

In this benchmarking exercise, the "online interface of the hotel" refers to the possibility to reserve a room online via multiple sites, transparency regarding the cancelling conditions of a reservation, the Facebook page, availability of pictures of rooms and restaurants and special offers on the website of the hotel, and loyalty programs available.

Several studies investigated the success factors of hotels' websites (Chatfield-Taylor, 2002; Jeong and Gregoire, 2003; Vrana, Zafiroopoulos and Paschaloudis, 2004) focusing on the website attributes. The study of Law and Cheung (2006) that studied the perceived importance of the overall quality of a hotel website concluded that for the upper-classes hotels the quality of the website features when making an online reservation is important and also that the importance of the website quality varies depending on the different hotel classes.

The online profile of hotels in the sample regarding their online promotion is presented in figure no. 5. Most hotels have pictures of rooms and restaurants available on their webpage; have Facebook pages and present special offers on their websites. In addition, only six hotels have loyalty programs, and only two have cancelling conditions clearly mentioned online.

Online reservation on the hotel website is possible for 13 out of 15 hotels, through website an application that allows for instant checking of the room availability and booking. For all hotels reservations can be made online at least on six more booking sites. For six hotels there are at least 10 other sites where reservations can be made. All the specialized sites allow the availability checking and have no or small booking fees. Although booking a room is quite easy, the cancellation process is much less transparent. On none of the websites of the hotels in the sample were found details regarding the cancellation procedure

and only on two sites the cancellation procedure was available only if a reservation was already booked.

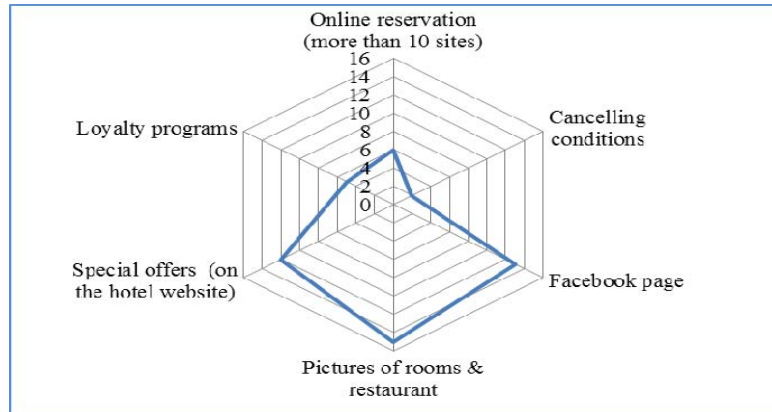


Figure no. 5: The hotel sample profile according to the promoting of the hotel via internet criteria

Source: own representation

Loyalty programs tend to be available in hotels that are part of a chain of hotels, as is the case for five out of the 15. However, Iaki, which is not part of a chain, offers a gold card program which gives its members certain discounts for the spa and wellness club which is open year round.

The hotels in the sample offer various special offers. Most hotels (12 out of 15) advertise special packages on their websites. A quite common strategy is the design of packages for special occasions (honeymoon, discounts on birthdays) or clearly defined customer segments (family trips, week-ends, business trips, or discounts for longer stays (“stay 5 pay 4 nights”). In the case of the Romanian hotels, they offer discounts for Summer Weekdays Offer (Iaki), -40% off for Sunday night (Iaki), discounts for longer stays such as a complimentary night after a certain number of paid nights (Richmond and Del Mar). Moreover, they all offer special packages for newlyweds.

Pictures of the rooms and restaurants are present on all the hotels’ websites. All of the hotels in the sample present more or less extensive photo galleries of their type of rooms and restaurants. Moreover, for the hotels that have different kinds of rooms (suites, VIP rooms etc.) the presentation of the rooms is accompanied by pictures from different angles. Two of the hotels abroad present a virtual tour, meaning a 360 degree view of the rooms and the restaurants that allow for a very detailed impression of the atmosphere of the hotel. One hotel has even live cameras that offer pictures from a few angles. Regarding the Romanian hotels, on the websites of Iaki and Del Mare, there are photos of organized events along with photos of the rooms and restaurants, while in the case of Richmond and Iaki, those interested can take a virtual tour of the hotel lobby and restaurant.

The majority of hotels in the sample (13 out of 15) have a Facebook page. Moreover, a third of them had additional social media publicity, such as Twitter, Google + or more

specialized application such as Trip Advisor. This approach is quite effective and cost efficient way to share new special offers or special menus of the restaurants. Another advantage of the social media is that the management of the hotel can receive feedback from their guests and can improve the services.

All of the hotels in the sample received good review on several specialised sites such as [www.booking.com](http://www.booking.com), [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com), and [www.ebookers.com](http://www.ebookers.com). Considering only the reviews on [booking.com](http://www.booking.com), all the hotels in the sample received the qualification “good” (6/15) and above, i.e. “very good” (3/15), “fabulous” (4/15) and “superb” (2/15).

### **3.4 Recommended strategies**

Considering the benchmarking exercise, several strategies for increasing their competitiveness could be recommended to the Romanian managers: extensive use of social media, creation of packaged deals, targeting the business segment and implementation of a Customer relationship management (CRM) software and the advertising of the hotel by using the uniqueness of the cultural background of Constanta region.

It is not a novelty anymore that the online gains increasing importance in the way tourism business is made. Even though tourism agencies have a large share of the market, because they can offer complete and tailored packages for many customers still, more and more tourists decide to take matters into their own hands and research their vacation possibilities using the internet. In this respect, the online reputation of the hotel is essential.

One of the optimization measures that any hotels manager wants to have is increasing the occupancy level while reducing the advertising costs. One way of obtaining this is utilizing to the fullest the social media possibilities. By this we mean Facebook, Twitter, Google +, Pinterest, Trip Advisor application and so forth. The costs of this type of advertising are lower than that of traditional publicity. Moreover, the hotel, the restaurant and the business facilities could be advertised separately, as to better target the different customer segments.

In the survey among the users of the social media that travelled to Mamaia resort in the last four years, the participants were asked whether they use the specialized review sites. 76% of the respondents answered that they used such sites, not just for their vacation but out of curiosity to see the hotels their friends chose to stay at, or simply because at one point they had to check for reviews of a certain hotel. However, far less (28%) decided to write a review, and more than half of this respondents wrote a bad review rather than a good one. One respondent mentioned that wrote a good review only because the review site presented the hotel a little worse than it actually was.

A recommendation that can be formulated as a result of the benchmarking analysis is that hotels managers should create and maintain a good reputation of the hotel in the social media. Looking up the bad feedbacks and investigate the reasons for it, directly from the tourist and also from internal information. An unsatisfied customer might inform a great deal of other potential customers, so the stake is significant.

Even though reviews of the hotels are a less important criterion than price and provided services in the decision of choosing a specific hotel, it seems to be a criterion that is growing in popularity. In the sample of respondents, the most popular criterion in choosing a hotel is the price (95% of the respondents), the location (90%) and the facilities (88%).

However, 35 % mentioned that they keep in mind the reviews on the specialized site when making a decision.

With increasing prices, the expectation of tourists also increase regarding the facilities and services. From the comments of the survey respondents it seems that the most likely person that will write a bad review is the type of individual that feels he/she paid more than what the services and the facilities received are worth and that he/she encountered at least three things that bothered him/her. Moreover, an analysis a few hundred reviews of the hotels in the sample and others, revealed that at a first glance it seems that some guest enjoyed a certain aspect while others did not appreciated it. However, at a closer look, patters do emerge regarding certain amenities or type of services for specific hotel.

The quality of the facilities and services are most common type of complaint from customers. Moreover, 71% of the survey respondents mentioned that they pay great attention to the facilities the hotel offers before booking a room. Most of the respondents expect Wi-Fi, air conditioning, minibar, possibility to make coffee and/or tea in the room.

The overall conclusion is that the specialised review sites are a precious source of information for hotel managers that is, above all, free.

Packaged deals are the second recommended strategy. In Romania, at this point, the market seems to be expecting more of package deals. In the specific case of tourists in the sample that came to Mamaia in the last four years, 54% did mention that they find it to be quite expensive and that they would like to be able to choose also all-inclusive packages. Some mentioned travelling to Turkey and being impressed by the comprehensive deals they acquired there.

Moreover, when it comes to the family vacation packages, 60% of the respondents in the sample consider that in Mamaia there are very limited or no such offers while at the same time 30% are interested to know more about family packages. Besides, as observed in the sample of hotels, three hotels, one in Turkey, one in Italy and one in Spain, offer baby-sitting services for their guests in addition to specially designed playground for the little ones. Such package deals might be a very good way of attracting the segment of couples with small children.

In the specific case of returning customers, 28% of respondents returned to Mamaia resort twice in the last four years, it is quite important to offer new activities each year. The entertainment side of the vacation is significant, 64% of all respondents said that they want to enjoy active relaxation activities. In this respect, hotels could create partnerships with local entertainment providers to be able to provide for example aquatic sports, excursions to the historical places or experiencing the paraglide.

The third recommended strategy is the targeting of the business segment, most so if the hotel has conference facilities. Considering that Constanta is a large port, and the Mihail Kogalniceanu Airport is rather close (28 Km) to Mamaia resort, the business segment is significant and should be given the deserved attention. For all the business people that come to Constanta, special packages could be designed, either to include the family or an extra day for relaxation (e.g. spa activities) or outdoor activities and excursions (e.g. historical places, gastronomic experiences).

The hotels in Mamaia resort could further develop the business segment, especially with the purpose of increasing revenues in the other seasons except the summer. In the proximity of

the Black Sea shore, the climate is much gentler than the rest of the country, and business trips (including team buildings) and corporate events could be organised from April to November. For the business segment that travels to Constanta not only in the summer season, the cultural and historical background of the area should also be highlighted.

Moreover, whenever the business segment is involved (but not only in this case), the hotel managers could also design better service guarantees, as a service guaranty are a signal of quality for consumers (Wong et al, 2009; Hogleve and Gremler, 2009). Moreover, according to Wu et al (2012), the service guarantee can influence the tourist choice and when hotels provide unconditional guarantee, the quality perceived by the tourist is higher than in the case of a specific guaranty.

The fourth recommended strategy is the implementation of a customer relationship management (CRM) software. Accurate information about the client is crucial in order to make better business decisions. Hotel managers need to know as much as possible about their guests, their expectations and their overall experience with the hotel in order to improve their services. CRM tools and the data collected via surveys among guests (who should be rewarded for giving feedback in order to improve the response rate) provide valuable information.

The researchers are not aware whether the Romanian hotels in the sample have or not implemented CRM tools, they merely want to highlight the importance of this aspect. In a study on the strategic management tools in the hotel industry, Şenturük (2012) reveals from the 110 middle and senior managers of Antalya hotels surveyed, 91% of them use CRM as a tool and that the satisfaction of this tool is higher than benchmarking, strategic planning and even total quality management. This study reveals that focusing on the customers' expectation became necessary as the number of alternatives available to tourists has increased.

With CRM software, a better understanding of the customers' needs creates the possibility for hotel managers to provide more personalized services. 88% of the respondents of the survey said that they expect the staff to be friendly but polite, and fast in responding to their needs. 76% of respondents declared that they want personalised services, meaning receiving suggestions regarding the best use of the hotel facilities and services adequate for their needs, adjustments for the rooms if necessary, air conditioning and TV, and information regarding the entertainment possibilities.

The fifth recommended strategy is the advertising the hotel by using the uniqueness of the cultural background of Constanta region. One of the aspects that were obvious about the investigated hotels in the sample is that most of them sell the hotel facilities and services in the context of the location they are in. For example, the Monte Igueldo Hotel in San Sebastian Spain, sells the experience of being 170m from the sea level and the incredible view to the bay and the city that the hotel has. Moreover, they place themselves in the context of beautiful city of San Sebastian, in the north of Spain at only 20 minutes away from the border to France, and build on this aspect. Another example is the Meliá Alicante Hotel, in Alicante Spain that presents the main tourist attractions close by, the most important festivals over the year and the gastronomic enticements of the area.

Constanta region is a multicultural environment, with multiple types of cuisines and cultural and religious particularities. Therefore, hotels in partnerships with tourist agencies could organise thematic excursions in the area to offer the type of authentic experience of

the local culture that a foreign tourist is very likely to desire. For example, one type of excursions could be a tour of the most important architectural jewels of Constanta region, such as the Adamclisi Mausoleum, many churches and monasteries including the cave of St Andrew, the archaeological park in the city of Constanta, and the ruins of the Histria Fortress.

Another type of thematic excursion would be one at sea, on boat from Constanta to the Danube Delta, to enjoy the extraordinary landscapes but also the specific cuisine. Moreover, following the gastronomy line, hotels could include special evenings such as Greek; Turkish or Aroman evening with specific dances and dishes.

### **Conclusions**

This article brings a microeconomic perspective from which it investigates the strategies for increasing competitiveness, by analysing a sample of 15 hotels in five countries with the purpose of drafting strategy recommendations for hotel managers in Mamaia resort, Romania. Considering the employed methodology, a first remark is that the benchmarking analysis could be a tool easily used for the creation and update of competitive strategies by any hotel manager.

According to the result of the benchmarking analysis, the proposed strategies for the improvement of the competitiveness of hotels refer to: extensive use of social media, creation of package deals, targeting the business segment, implementation of a customer relationship management software and promotion of the hotel in the context of the uniqueness of the cultural background of the Constanta region.

Hotel managers must keep in mind and constantly improve the hotel's reputation in the online environment and use all possibilities offered by social media in order to promote the hotel and its offers.

The package deals for vacations – meaning the mix of additional services besides accommodation – should be based on the desires of tourists and in this respect the CRM tools are a good way of gathering and analysing tourist related information. Moreover, the uniqueness of the cultural background of the region could serve as basis for the introduction of new services such as outdoor excursions, excursions on the sea, etc.

The business segment has growth perspectives in Constanța area and should be attracted with additional services besides the ones strictly related to the business events.

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