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SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION AS A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR  
INCREASED INTERNET VISIBILITY: A CASE STUDY

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Search Engine Optimization as a Strategic Tool for Increased Internet Visibility: A Case Study

Internet usage is increasing daily, and all industries need to adapt to the changes this brings for marketing methods. Traditional marketing methods are not enough anymore to gain a competitive advantage, and almost every company needs an online presence. This is the same for hotels. The hospitality industry is highly competitive in nature. Therefore, their marketing methods require modernization as well.

Hotel X is a hotel operated by Tourism and Hospitality students in Bursa, Turkey. This thesis was created for Hotel X as a qualitative single case study. Staff interviews were carried out, and personal interviews were done with a small number of hotel guests. Interviews were utilized to collect information about the hotel's current practices and customers' experiences. Secondary data was collected through a number of sources, such as books, journals and online publications. A study about the search engines and how they work was done; this was important in defining the requirements for search engine visibility for hotels. In line with the obtained results, suggestions were given for the utilization of search engine optimization techniques for the case hotel to increase its visibility in the search engines, contributing to the existing knowledge of Search Engine Optimization in online marketing.

Currently the hotel depends on word of mouth, and it was found out that the case hotel had little to no marketing budget. Despite the efforts of the management to modernize the marketing efforts, it was also found that the management somewhat lacked the understanding of modern online marketing and the suggestions given to optimize their online presence. It was concluded that it is essential for the hotel management to create a marketing budget, and potentially hire a consultant if it is not possible to hire a full time marketing professional.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Interview with the Assistant Hotel Manager

Appendix 2 Interview Questions for the Hotel Guests

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

SEO	Search Engine Optimization
SEM	Search Engine Marketing
PPC	Pay Per Click advertising
SERP	Search Engine Result Page
URL	Unified Resource Locator
ROI	Return Of Investment
CPC	Cost Per Click
CPA	Cost Per Action
HTML	HyperText Mark-up Language

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Hotel X is a practice hotel for tourism and hospitality students in Bursa, Turkey. A practice hotel is an officially recognized type of hotel in Turkey, operated by students in tourism and hospitality schools. This was founded in 1980, in an attempt to help boost the Turkish economy by increasing tourism and to educate people in order to have qualified employees in the tourism sector. Hotel X is a well-known choice in Bursa, but it is struggling to keep up with the new digitalizing world and the new hotels in Bursa.

The primary goal of this thesis is to define the search engine visibility requirements for Hotel X, create a new search engine optimization strategy for it and suggestions for implementing these requirements to their website. A study of different online marketing tools was also conducted to provide Hotel X with suggestions on improving their online presence.

The main concern of Hotel X was to be found on the search engines when their potential guests searched for them; therefore the focus of the study was made on the search engine visibility requirements that would suit Hotel X the most, and implementing them to Hotel X's website.

## 1.1 Background

According to the Tourism Industry Report by Investment Support and Promotion Agency in Turkey, Turkey is currently the 6th most popular tourist destination in the world, attracting more than 30 million tourists annually and continuing to show positive growth year-to-year. According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Turkey (2016), the number of foreign travelers arriving in Turkey in 2015 was 39.4 million, while the total turnover of the tourism industry that same year was \$31.4 billion.

By the end of 2015, there were 13,615 registered accommodation facilities, and 9,188 of these facilities were licensed by their respective municipalities, while the remaining 4,427 held tourism operation licenses. The combined total bed capacity of these facilities exceeds 1,250,000 (Investment Support and Promotion Agency in Turkey 2016).

Home to three universities, Bursa is one of the most populous cities in Turkey, with a population of 2,340,000 inhabitants (citypopulation.de 2017). It is located in the North West, next to Marmara Sea, in close proximity to the largest city in Turkey, Istanbul. Bursa is one of the most industrialized metropolitan centers in the country, including production facilities for various industries, such as; Fiat, Renault, Bosch, Coca-Cola and Pepsi Cola, and a couple of textile and food production facilities.

The highest mountain in the Marmara Region of Turkey is Mount Uludag - which is 2.543 m high – and it is located in Bursa; making the city the center of winter tourism in Turkey and a popular destination all year round due to the thermal complexes and health tourism (Bursa Chamber of Commerce 2015).

The tourism sector in Bursa is very active and provides a big market. According to the tourism report of BursaInvest (2015), there are 55 Tourism Operation Licensed hotels in Bursa. Twelve of these are 4 star hotels, and 10 of them are 5 star hotels.

## **1.2 Problem Discussion and Research Questions**

Hotel X is a medium sized hotel, which has been struggling to approach modern marketing channels and trends. The hotel does not have a website or a way to be reached on the internet. This causes them to lose customers, and the declining customer base is not enough to keep the hotel going in the future.

According to the hotel manager, they are ready to organize some changes and they initially want to start with making an online presence. The hotel manager contacted the author of this thesis and asked for help with the process. Therefore, this thesis

will include a theoretical framework regarding marketing and online marketing, as well as search engine optimization in order to have the basics regarding creating an online presence for the hospitality business.

Although there are several research questions, the main research question for this thesis paper is “How should a company use SEO to increase findability on the internet?”

The sub questions are:

- What is online marketing?
- What are the steps for SEO?
- What are on-off site optimizations?

### **1.3 Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to analyze the current situation in the case company Hotel X regarding its online presence. How can their online presence be improved, and what kind of suggestions can be made to increase their findability on the internet.

To answer the aforementioned research questions, sub questions regarding online marketing and SEO will also be answered, as well as making an analysis of the competitors. The final objective of this thesis work is to create appropriate suggestions for the case company.

## 2 METHOD OF STUDY

One of the most important things when starting a thesis work is to determine what research method is best suited for the topic. There are two general methods of research, and these are qualitative and quantitative methods.

Table 1. Distinctions between quantitative and qualitative data (Saunders et al. 2016, 569)

Quantitative Data	Qualitative Data
Based on meanings derived from numbers	Based on meanings expressed through words (spoken or textual) and images
Collection results in numerical and standardized data	Collection results in non-standardized data requiring classification into categories
Analysis conducted through the use of diagrams and statistics	Analysis conducted through the use of conceptualization

Wyse (2011) maintains that,

**Qualitative Research is primarily exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into the problem or helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research. Qualitative Research is also used to uncover trends in thought and opinions, and dive deeper into the problem. Qualitative data collection methods vary using unstructured or semi-structured techniques. Some common methods include focus groups (group discussions), individual interviews, and participation/observations. The sample size is typically small, and respondents are selected to fulfill a given quota.**

Qualitative data is information based on judgements which may be expressed in numerical or non-numerical ways, and data that may not be based on judgements that are not meaningfully expressed numerically. The data sources are often textual



and observational and expressed in words, thereby also providing context to a topic or issue discussed (GAO 1990, 147 cited in Baskarada 2013).

Merriam-Webster defines a case study as an intensive analysis of an individual unit, for example an individual or an organization. GAO (1990, 15) defines a case study as, “A method for learning about complex instance, based on comprehensive understanding of that instance, obtained by extensive description and analysis of that instance”.

Considering the aforementioned information, it can be concluded that this thesis work is a qualitative single case study, since the qualitative method enables the author to have a holistic view of the research problem while understanding and explaining the situation.

The reason for choosing the qualitative research method was because it allows the researcher to answer the research questions as efficient and as in-depth as possible. The qualitative approach provided a deeper understanding about the operations of the case company, and about the experiences of case company’s customers therefore leading to finding the best methods to enhance the company’s online visibility and findability for potential customers.

## **2.1 Data Acquisition**

The necessary data for this research was collected from two kinds of resources, secondary and primary resources. This thesis study is carried out as a qualitative single case study, and the primary sources of information used are collected through observation, interviews and benchmarking. Interviews can be found in the appendices.

Interviews are guided conversations that are usually one of the most important sources of case study evidence (Yin 2009). In order to better establish the hotel’s situation in both offline and online marketing and brand awareness perspectives,

several interviews were conducted with the hotel manager and the guests. Geographical limitations did not allow the author to personally conduct the individual interviews with the guests; therefore, the interviews with the guests were done by the reception staff during the check-out processes. The interviews were conducted in October 2016. Forms of questions were provided to the staff, and the staff took notes while the guests replied. These were then handed back to the researcher for further analysis. The questions were kept open ended in order to encourage deeper discussions from the guests. The results and analysis of these interviews can be found in the empirical studies section. The interview text can be found in the appendices (Appendix 2).

Secondary sources of information were the existing literature and research done in marketing, and search engine optimization areas; these will be covered in the research theoretical background section.

## **2.2 Reliability and Validity**

As Golafshani (2003, 601) brought to attention, Stenbacka (2001) has discussed that reliability in qualitative research as an irrelevant concept because according to Stenbacka (2001, 552); “The concept of reliability is misleading in qualitative research. If a qualitative study is discussed with reliability as a criterion, the consequence is rather that the study is no good.”

Although, according to Patton (2001), validity and reliability are two factors which any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analyzing the results and judging the quality of the study.

Reliability depends on if the research study can come to the same conclusion, using the same data collection and analysis techniques. Therefore, it can be concluded that reliability refers to consistent findings (Saunders et al. 2009, 156).

There are several threats to reliability; these can be listed as (Robson 2002):

- Subject or participant error.
- Subject or participant bias.
- Observer error.
- Observer bias.

Reliability of this qualitative case study is achieved by providing numerous secondary literature sources in order to create an objective discussion. Although the researcher bias cannot be completely eliminated, the author has tried to lessen the effect. The personal interviews with the hotel guests were not conducted by the author herself, but they were conducted by the case company staff. Prior to the interviews, the staff were instructed on how to transcribe the replies accurately and truthfully, and how to ask open ended questions and encourage replies. The data from the personal interviews were collected in written form, staying true to the participants exact words to keep minimal bias.

The personal interview with the case company representative was done by the author herself over the phone, and the author was in touch with the managers continuously throughout the process to gain information and insights. The transcription of the interview conducted with the case company representative is provided in the appendices, thus enabling the interpretation to determine if the conclusions made by the author were justifiable.

Validity is concerned with the causal relationship between the variables (Saunders et al. 2009, 157). Although, Golafshani (2003) suggests that in the qualitative study context, validity is a vague term, and in order to evaluate the validity of a research study, one needs to evaluate data quality and trustworthiness.

Generalizability, also referred to as external validity, is whether the findings of a research are applicable to other research settings. Money et al. (1998) argue that in order for a research to reach external validity, the findings should be generalizable. However, Saunders argues that the aim of a case study does not have to be a theory generalizable to all populations, but it can simply be the explanation of what is going on in the particular research setting (Saunders et al. 2009, 158).

In this case study, the information was collected in a systematic approach, and the analysis was done according to the information. However, as explained earlier, this research cannot be generalized, as its only aim is to explain the particular research setting.

### **3 THEORY**

In this chapter, the relevant theories to the case study are presented in the form of secondary data. The theoretical part mainly includes competitors' analysis, marketing, online marketing, online marketing tools, search engines and how they work, and search engine optimization.

Firstly, tools for competitors' analysis is briefly mentioned, and later the analysis is carried out by using Porter's Five Forces Analysis method.

Secondly, the concept of marketing and online marketing is established. Afterwards, search engines and optimization techniques are analyzed in order to determine the plausible strategies for the case study.

#### **3.1 Competitors' Analysis**

There are tools to analyze and examine the external environment of a business organization. The most widely used tools to gain a thorough understanding of a business operation are called PEST analysis and Porter's Five Forces Analysis.

The PEST analysis has different variations, according to Cadle, Paul and Turner in their book, *Business Analysis Techniques* (2010, 3). These variations are listed as:

**PESTEL** (political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, environmental, and legal)

**PESTLIED** (political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, environmental, legal, international, environmental, and demographic)

**STEEPLE** (socio-cultural, technological, environmental, economic, political, legal, and ethical).

The second tool is called Porter's Five Forces Analysis, which can be seen in Figure 1. It is similar to the PEST analysis because of the fact that it helps analyze the external environment of a business, but it provides a different focus. In order to help analyze the competitor factors for Hotel X, Porter's Five Forces analysis will be used.



Figure 1. Porter's Five Forces Analysis (Source: mindtools.com 2017).

### **3.1.1 Porter's Five Forces Analysis**

The first step when starting the Five Forces Analysis is to determine what industry the business is involved in. In the case of Hotel X, it can be stated that Hotel X operates within the hospitality industry.

#### **Competitive Rivalry**

After establishing the industry, the next step is to examine the companies operating within this industry and finding the level of competition involved. In order to do this, the author interviewed the hotel manager and used secondary resources.

The hotel manager mentioned that the hotel management believe their biggest direct competitors are the other hospitality practice hotels in Bursa. They are around the same price range, and their facilities are newer. They just do not have the loyal customer base Hotel X does as they have recently started their operations.

There are also a couple of privately owned hotels near the location of Hotel X. Hotel X already has quite low prices for its standards, which is close to the 2-3 star hotels. These private hotels usually have larger resources at their disposal, their decision making is also faster, and their facilities are usually newer as well.

In circumstances where it is relatively easy for a customer to switch between products and services, competitive rivalry is generally very high. This is the same for the hospitality industry. A customer can change the hotel any time he wants in case he is not satisfied, and this causes high rivalry between hotels.

## **Bargaining Power of Suppliers**

The staff of Hotel X are the students of the Tourism and Hospitality School, and they are obligated to complete their traineeship period at the hotel. Since these people are preparing to be professionals in the industry, they generally have the professional attitude required by the hotel management. If there are any problems with the attitude of staff members, the management helps them improve. As the manager assured the author, this is rarely the case, as the students are well mannered and customer service skills are essential for success.

In the case of Hotel X, the main supplier is the hotel staff as they are crucial to the operations of their services, which is in great demand in the hotel industry all over the world. Although, it is also mentioned that hotels are not significantly subject to the bargaining power of their suppliers, and since Hotel X has a steady supply of trained staff, it does not suffer a high level of pressure (Cheng 2013).

## **Bargaining Power of Customers**

The bargaining power of customers is generally higher when there are more options and more competitors available. It was mentioned earlier in this paper that there are 55 Tourism Operation Licensed hotels in Bursa. 12 of these are 4 star hotels, and 10 of them are 5 star hotels. Hotel X does not have a star, but according to the hotel manager, it has the standards of a 3 star hotel. It can be deduced that Hotel X's customers can also choose accommodation from the remaining 33 hotels. This gives a high bargaining power to the customers.

Hotel X also has deals with tour operators and agencies. This brings them steady income during the slow months of winter, and since these operators usually buy rooms in bulks, they are given discounts. The hotel manager mentions this does not bring a lot of money to the hotel, as Hotel X has to keep the profit margin relatively

low in order to get these deals. Tour operators know this; therefore, they continuously push for better prices.

### **Threats of Substitute Products**

Substitute products, often due to technological advancement, are the products that can perform the same function as the original product, or sometimes reduce costs, or prove to be more valuable in terms of product or service quality (Porter 1980) So far Hotel X has been targeting the cost-conscious customer segment. Market for the cheaper hotels is quite sensitive, and it is often possible to replace the hotels with even cheaper options, such as hostels, motels, or even staying with a relative. It is possible to consider cheaper hotels segment as “cost-conscious” (Cheng 2013).

The hotel business requires a large budget because of the high maintenance costs. In recent years, Airbnb has also become increasingly popular in Turkey. Operating in Airbnb does not require a large investment, and maintenance costs are generally lower than running a hotel. Traditional hotel guests are not entirely trusting to Airbnb and still prefer going to a hotel that they heard about from a friend or a relative; but young people are more open to trying new things and therefore more inclined to try Airbnb.

There are also several guest houses for governmental employees in Bursa. If these guest houses are full, their customers are directed to the Hotel X. Because of the available substitute services, it can be stated that threats of substitute products are high.

### **Threat of New Entrants – Barrier of Entry**

High capital costs and a high proportion of fixed costs to total costs are the characteristics of the hotel industry. Due to the extremely high costs, from the beginning, it



is required that the hotel project must be managed to achieve the most cost effective use of resources (Cheng 2013).

Requirements for large capital costs limits the entry of newer players to the hospitality industry in Bursa. However, in the recent years the international hotel chains such as Hilton, Holiday Inn, Sheraton have also been constructing new hotels and starting their operations. However, these hotels are not exactly a threat to Hotel X, because they target different segments. Therefore, it can be mentioned that the barrier of entry is high, and threat of new entrants is low.

### **3.2 Marketing**

Marketing is not only about advertising and selling, but it is about satisfying customer wants and needs. According to Kotler, (2008, 7) Broadly defined, marketing is a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others. In the business context, marketing is about building profitable, value-laden exchange relationship with customers.

The hospitality industry is one of the world's major industries. Marketing has assumed an increasingly important role in the hospitality industry as well. The marketing expertise of large corporations entering the hospitality industry has created a competitive environment (Kotler, Bowen & Makens 2010, 10).

The importance of the internet has been increasing day by day in our daily lives. The marketing activities have been delivered by different methods to the audiences, such as newspapers, television, radio, and eventually inevitably, the internet has also been added to these platforms. According to the report "The State of Digital Marketing" (Chaffey 2016), by the end of 2016, over 3 billion people would have been using the internet.

With the importance of the internet on the rise, the importance of digital marketing has also increased. Online marketing is becoming more and more crucial for companies that want to reach out to their customer bases.

### **3.2.1 Online Marketing**

Recent technological advances have created a digital age and therefore helped online marketing to become the fastest growing form of direct marketing. Widespread use of the internet and other powerful new technologies are having a dramatic impact on both buyers and the marketers who serve them (Kotler et al. 2008, 839).

A number of recent trends are beginning to shape the future impact of the internet on hotel marketing. These include paid search marketing, eCRM (online customer relationship marketing), web analytics and ROI tracking among others.

In common with other sectors of the visitor economy, most accommodation businesses are shifting to direct marketing online. Not only has the internet become the preferred channel to plan and book accommodation in many markets, it has also become the cheapest form of distribution. With the ability to track and analyze the online marketing campaigns, web analysis is now a necessary part of marketing evaluation (Middleton, Fyall, Morgan & Ranchhod, 373-374).

According to Kotler (2012), there are four ways a company can conduct online marketing. These are: creating a website, placing ads or promotions online, creating web communities, using e-mail. For most companies, creating a website is the first step.

Digital marketing tools – also referred to as online marketing tools - are the tools that mostly developed from the traditional marketing communication tools, to be used in the digital era. For example, TV advertisements become pay per click advertising on Google, and trade show marketing becomes affiliate marketing. These tools are basically the digital equivalent of traditional marketing tools and are used in the digital communication mix (Pelsmacker et al. 2013, 487-507).

Digital marketing strategy, much like a traditional marketing strategy, is a plan that supports marketing and business objectives. Although, unlike traditional marketing, digital marketing strategy uses digital technology platforms and channels (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 190). In order to generate brand awareness, create a brand image and to attract new customers and create loyalty, various digital marketing tactics can be used in a digital marketing strategy (Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van Den Bergh 2013, 487).

### 3.2.2 Online Marketing Mix

A marketing mix is a tool used by marketers in order to determine what a brand or a product has to offer. When marketing and marketing mix are mentioned, people are usually familiar with the concept the “4Ps of Marketing”. The 4Ps is a concept that was proposed by Jerome McCarthy in 1960, and it is widely used and accepted by the marketers since then. These 4Ps are: Product, Price, Promotion, and Place.

Even though these 4, or 7Ps (Product, Promotion, Price, Place, People, Process, Physical Environment) are still relevant to today’s marketer’s; the changing environment of online businesses and online marketing cannot be discredited. (smartin-sights 2017.)

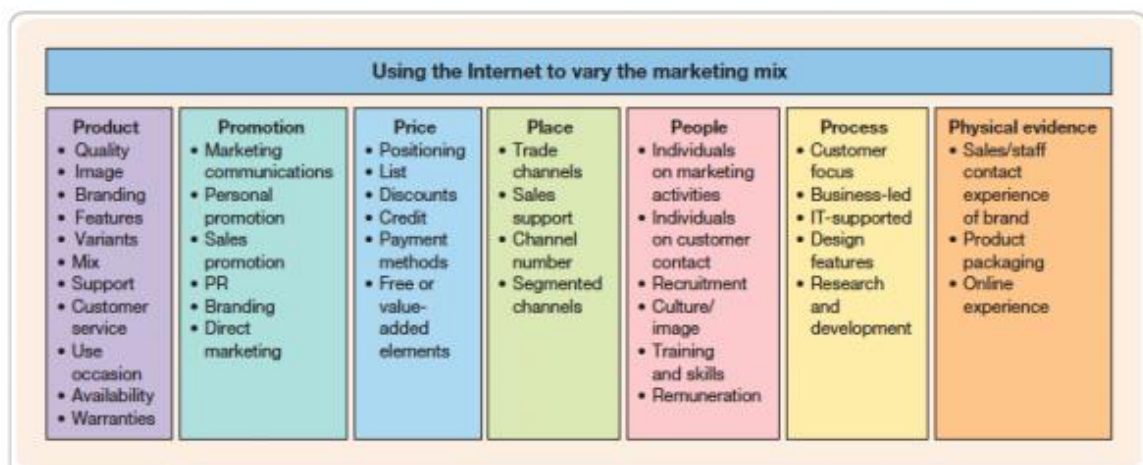


Figure 2. Using the Internet to Vary the Marketing Mix (source: smartinsights 2017).

Sami Salmenkivi, an online marketer, developed the CREF model, which is a modification of the 4P model to translate to the online world.

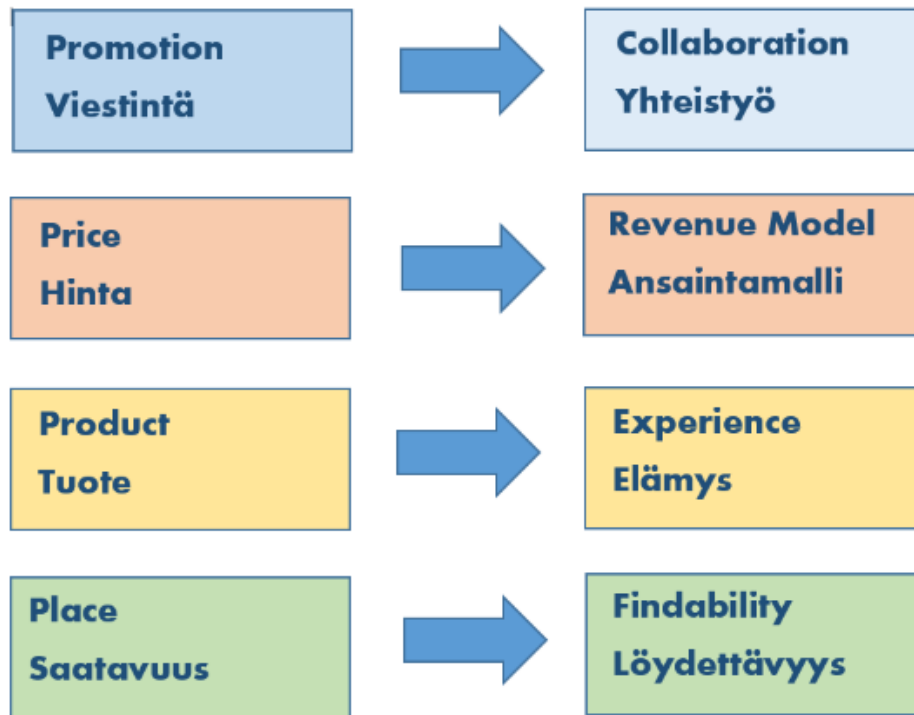


Figure 3. Sami Salmenkivi's CREF Model (Source: Salmenkivi & Nyman 2007, 220).

According to Salmenkivi (2007), collaboration is the digital environment translation for promotion. This means that the marketer needs to get the customers involved, and communication needs to be interactive. On some occasions, the customers might even know more about the product than the company does; for example, the competition environment and the features of other products. Nowadays, the customers want to be involved in the marketing process. This can also mean the content marketing can be done with user generated content.

Salmenkivi states that in the digital world price cannot be easily determined. The internet has enabled an easy comparison of prices, especially in the tourism and hospitality business. Instead of focusing on prices, the companies may need to find other sources of revenue in their business plans.

The product equivalent in the digital world is experience, Salmenkivi remarks. Especially in the digital environment, the experience a product gives is becoming more important than ever. Users are seeking memorable experiences.

Salmenkivi lastly maintains that instead of the physical place, in a digital environment, findability is one of the key issues. Customers can find the company online on purpose – or by accident. In both of these cases, it is important for the businesses to utilize these visits.

### **3.3 Principles of Search Engines**

In order to understand the basics of search engine optimization, it is necessary to understand how search engines work. The basics of search engines and their working principles will be introduced in this section.

Search engines are one of the first things people use when they go on the internet. Search engines create traffic to the websites, and this is vitally important for a website to gain visibility. This is especially crucial for online businesses, since a visitor to a website is a potential customer, which could mean a sale, ad revenue, branding (Jensen & Ortiz-Cordova 2012).

As Hackett and Parmanto (2009) state, it is crucial to understand and analyze the searched keywords and searched phrases that bringing people to the websites. These keywords and phrases help understand what is driving the visitors to the website, what topics they are most interested in, and what can be done to improve it.

According to previous researches, Google holds the largest market share; therefore, the strategies and principles studied in this thesis will be mainly about Google's logic as a search engine.

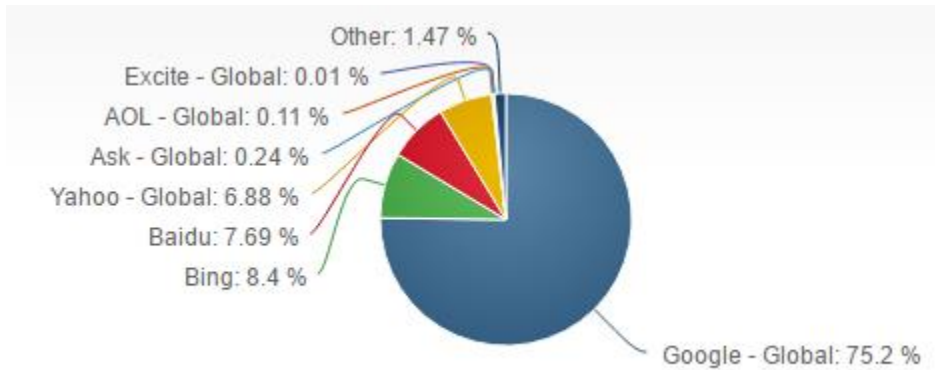


Figure 4. Global market share of desktop search engines (Source: netmarket-share.com 2016).

In order to fully understand the basics of search engines, some key concepts and words must be understood. In a brief list, these are:

**Search Engine Results Page (SERP):** SERP is important for SEO. If one's website does not rank high on the results of a search, it is not likely for a user to find it. At the top of a result page, there are paid advertisements and these ads usually make up the 30% of the page, the rest being organic search results.

**Google AdWords:** This is a program by Google that takes click through rate into consideration and determines the price of key words. The ads on search results are made by using AdWords.

**Keyword:** A word or a phrase that a search engine user might use to find relevant webpages.

**Meta Description:** A tag hidden in the HTML that describes the page's content. The meta description provides an opportunity to influence how the webpage is described in the search engines. According to the book by Enge & Spencer & Stricchiola & Fishkin (2012, 675), meta description does not affect the search rankings, neither do meta keywords. Although, it is still widely recommended to use meta description, because the algorithm Google uses for website rankings change often.

**Long-tail Keywords:** These are three or four-word long keyword phrases with low-volume search queries that rank highly because using long-tail keywords indicate that a searcher is usually closer to the point of purchase. These bring much more qualified traffic to the websites (Dodson 2016, 31).

**Spider or a Crawler:** A specialized bot that helps search engines find websites and add them to their indexes (Dodson 2016, 387).

**Organic Search Results:** Organic search results are the results that appear because the search engine thinks they match the searched term. These are free placements, unlike the advertisement pages that appear on top of the search results.

The factors for Google's search rankings, as mentioned before, change constantly. According to a survey which was done by the website moz.com (2015), the leading 150 search engine optimizers mentioned the factors they think are the most important ones.

These top nine results were:

- Page Level Link Metrics.
- Domain Level Link Authority Features.
- Page Level Keyword Usage.
- Domain Level Keyword Usage.
- Page Level Social Metrics.
- Domain Level Brand Metrics.
- Page Level Keyword Agnostic Features.
- Page Level Traffic / Query Data.
- Domain Level Keyword Agnostic Features.

In the book, "the Art of SEO", Enge et al. (2012) give brief explanations for these terms:

*Page Level Link Metrics* refers to the links as related to the specific page, such as the number of links, the relevance of the links, and the trust and authority of the links received by the page.

*Domain Level Link Authority Features* is based on a cumulative link analysis of all the links to the domain. The factors considered include the number of different domains linking to the site, the rate at which new inbound links are added, the relevance etc.

*Page Level Keyword Usage* refers to the keywords and phrases used in the HTML code on the page.

*Domain Level Keyword Usage* refers to how the keywords are used in the root or subdomain name, and how impactful that might be on search engine rankings.

*Page Level Social Metrics* refers to the links, shares, likes and other social media based metrics.

*Domain Level Brand Metrics* are the factors that include search volume on the website's brand name, and mentions, whether it has a presence in social media and so on.

*Page Level Keyword Agnostic Features* are the factors that include on page elements, such as the number of links on the page, number of internal links, etc.

*Page Level Traffic/Query Data* include the click-through rate (CTR) to the page in the search results, the bounce rate of visitors to the page, and other similar measurements.

*Domain Level Keyword Agnostic Features* include for example the number of hyphens in the domain name, numeric characters, and domain name length.



## **3.4 Search Engine Optimization**

### **3.4.1 Introduction and Definition**

When a person goes to Google.com and searches for the term, for example, “Bursa Hotel”, Google lists the pages it finds somewhat relevant to the term that was searched. Google also ranks these pages, but how does that work?

According to David Viney (2008), the vast majority of searchers never make it past page two of Google or click on sponsored listings. Therefore, appearing higher on the Google search results should be a priority for businesses who are looking to get higher conversion rates and findability.

Search engines consider many factors when they are ranking the websites. For example, the search engine’s robots crawl through the website to determine what words are being used, how the website is formatted, and the links on the website etc. These bots also consider the invisible parts of the website, such as the HTML source code.

There are many elements on a website, and some of these elements are visible to the crawlers and some are not. For example, search engine crawlers can see that there are pictures on a website, but they cannot see what the pictures are and what these pictures contain. In order to help crawlers list these pictures, an image tag can be used. An image tag is an element that is used to tell a web page to display an image (Enge et al. 2012, 66).

In Merriam-Webster dictionary, the act of optimization is described as; “an act, process, or methodology of making something (as a design, system, or decision) as fully perfect, functional, or effective as possible”. In the search engine context, optimization refers to the following Google ranking factors and strategies in order to achieve high traffic and visibility on the website.

Search engine optimization is the process of refining one's website using both on-page and off-page optimization techniques so that it will be indexed and ranked successfully by search engines (Dodson 2016, 21). Traupel (2014) suggests that creating and sharing great content are the key components of SEO ranking.

Even though this seems like a simple procedure, Google constantly changes its algorithm in order to prevent exploitation. For example, if repeating one keyword would help a website rank higher, there would be some people who would fill their websites with the same word repeatedly, without involving any actual content.

There are internal factors that affect the ranking of a website, and these can be changed by the person who is managing the website, such as the content of the website, the website structure and accessibility by Google's crawlers; but according to Ledford (2007, 18) there are also external factors that affect a website's ranking.

According to Dodson (2016), there are four key stages of the SEO process, and these stages are briefly explained in the following figure.



Figure 5. Four Stages of SEO (Source: Dodson 2016, 22).

**Goals:** The first key stage of SEO is being aware of the benefits it provides. Goals serve as key drivers to help one navigate their SEO strategies.

**On-page optimization:** This deals with the technical optimization of the various elements on the website. This step focuses on ensuring that the website can be read by the search engines and be indexed and navigated correctly.

**Off-page optimization:** This refers to the steps to influence the website position in organic search results that cannot be managed by on-page optimization. This step is mainly about what kind of an impact a website does on the internet. For example, by earning online credibility as a source of information and creating a digital footprint.

**Analyze:** This stage involves analyzing the data coming back, and deciding upon the adjustments.

### 3.4.2 Steps for Building an SEO Friendly Website

Potential customers and website visitors will use certain key words and phrases to search for a website or information on the internet. Structuring these keywords and phrases in a certain order to enhance the analysis by Google's web crawlers increases the visibility and rankings of the websites.

According to the author Peter Kent (2012, 62), several steps need to be taken when planning an SEO friendly website. These steps include:

- Do a keyword analysis.
- Create readable pages.
- Create key worded pages.
- Consider local.
- Get listed in the search engines.
- Get other sites link to one's own sites.

## Keyword Research and Analysis

Keyword research is one of the most important, valuable, and high-return activities in the search engine marketing field. Through the detective work of dissecting a market's keyword demand, it is possible to learn which terms and keywords should be targeted with SEO (Enge et al. 2012, 137).

When a phrase or a word is searched for on Google, the search engine looks through its index of websites and lists the entries related to the phrase.

Peter Kent (2012) states in his book that the search engine looks for:

- Pages that contain the exact search phrase.
- Pages that do not have the exact phrase do have the words in close proximity.
- Pages that have the words searched but not necessarily close together.
- Pages with word stems, for example, pages with the words located somewhere in the page.
- Pages with synonyms of the search terms.
- Pages that have links pointing to them, in which the link text containing the words.

There are several keyword research tools available on the internet. Some of these are paid services developed by third parties. Google has tools that can help with the keyword analysis. One of these tools is called "AdWords Keyword Tool". Google AdWords is mainly used by paying customers to create advertisements, but it is possible to get information about the keywords as well.

A strategy for analyzing the possible keywords is mentioned by Jason McDonald in his book *SEO Fitness Workbook* (2016, 48). He suggests a brainstorming session, assuming a completely new customer. This would help to list possible keywords the customers use in order to find the website. Another thing would be to "reverse engineer competitors", meaning, analyzing the competitors' websites and listing the words they use to describe their businesses, and using the ones that are applicable

to one's own business. After the analysis of potential keywords, the next step is to create readable pages.

### **Search Engine Accessible Websites**

Google and other search engines use crawler bots to analyze and index websites. The first step in the SEO design process is to ensure that a site can be found and crawled by the search engines (Enge et al. 2012, 181).

The process of creating a “readable website” is included in the on-page optimization step. The on-page optimization step is very important because when it is done properly it makes it easier for off-page optimization as well. This part mainly consists of the website structure. Web crawlers analyze the metadata in a website to understand and categorize what the website is about.

When the web crawlers at Google get to a page, the first thing they do is to look at the meta title tags, meta descriptions and the page headings. This is done in order to determine the content and subject the website covers. The site meta data tells the users and the web crawlers what the page is about. Therefore, if the meta data is consistent with the website content and topic, the chances of ranking higher is better (utechservs 2016, 30).

After optimizing the meta data and the tags, the next step is to make sure the content in the website is readable by the crawlers. Web crawlers are able to see certain elements in the website, but there are also elements they are not able to see. For example, while the search engines do crawl images and flash files, these content types are difficult for search engines to analyze; therefore, they do not help them determine the topical relevance of these pages (Enge et al. 2012, 182). The same situation also occurs with JPEG and GIF files, where the search engine crawlers can only read the “image tag”, which is a relatively small field.

HTML text content is the easiest to read for the web crawlers. Therefore, to make sure the web crawlers can list the content and help to rank higher, materials should be available to visitors in HTML based files.

Another important element for the search engine crawlers – as well as the users – is the website architecture. There are two types of website architecture, called “Deep site architecture” and “Flat site architecture”. One very strict rule for search friendliness is the creation of a flat site architecture. Flat sites require a minimal number of clicks to access any given page, whereas deep sites create long paths of links required to access detailed content. For nearly every site with fewer than 10,000 pages, all content should be accessible through a maximum of three clicks from the home page and/or sitemap page (Enge et al. 2012, 195).

### **Creating Pages Including Keywords**

When someone searches for a certain key word, the search engine finds the websites that use the term. If there are two websites with the same key word, the one having the greatest number of pages containing the word is placed higher than the other one which has fewer keywords. However, Google also understands when this is overdone. For example, if the page has the keyword repeatedly, in an order that causes disruption in an overall sentence flow, Google might think this is just done to grab the web crawler’s attention and does not list the website higher.

Many professionals regard creating key worded pages as “content SEO”. This essentially means creating content around the theme of keywords. Content SEO is about creating web pages that match Google search queries with compelling, relevant content, be that on a specific page, a press release, or a blog post (McDonald 2016, 118).

Although it is possible to have great content on one’s website, this does not really mean anything if the website is not able to reach the intended audience. SEO is a crucial step to take to ensure the website is noticed, and can be utilized for the digital

marketing activities. Though, it is also important to keep in mind that SEO-led content can still do poorly, simply because it is not interesting enough. That is a reason why the companies need to put equal amount of pressure on both creativity and performance (Capala 2015, 67).

## **Localization**

A business has many local customers, and it is important to understand the factors of local searches. All the major search engines have local search features, incorporated into their map systems but still accessible from a regular search (Kent 2012, 205). When a search is being made on Google, the search engine can see where the computer actually is, and therefore it localizes the results. For example, if somebody searches “Bursa, hotel” the search engine shows the results in the city of Bursa in Turkey.

This has positive and negative effects on the businesses. The positive effects are that it gives a chance at ranking higher. If a website is not doing well in organic rankings, it can still do well in local searches. The negative side for this feature is these rankings are indexed differently, so things to do are different in order to rank higher (Kent 2012, 210).

According to author Peter Kent (2012), there are some steps to take for ranking high locally:

- The full address of the business should be included in the web pages.
- All the locations of interest should be included in the pages.
- A “contact us” page for every location a business has should be listed.
- Important keywords should be added to “contact us” pages.
- City and the location the business is interested in should be mentioned in the body of the text.
- The city name should be included in the “Title” and “Description” meta tags.

## **Getting Listed in the Search Engines**

Google and Bing have tools for webmasters to register web pages. In Google, it is possible to do this via the link <https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/submit-url>. This lets Google know that a website exists, therefore making it possible for Google to index and crawl it. In order to do this, one has to establish a password protected Google account.

## **Getting Other Sites Link to One's Own Site**

Providing the visitors with relevant content and keeping fresh content on the website helps other websites to create links, and this helps one's website rank higher in search engine results. The way to do this is to provide the visitors with fresh content, press releases, blog posts, etc. and establishing the website as something worth talking about. Another way to make sure this happens is to create a social media account and link it with the website.

# **4 EMPIRICAL STUDIES**

## **4.1 Introduction to the Case: Hotel X**

Hotel X has a special status among the hotels in Bursa because it is not privately owned and operated by professionals. The staff, mostly made up of the Tourism and Hospitality School students, is responsible for day to day operations. Only the senior staff and management are non-students, but they are teachers by profession.



Hotel X is in the center of Bursa, and currently is operating with 36 rooms and 85 beds. There are 2 meeting rooms; and a spacious, 300 guests capacity garden for special organizations. A 100-guest capacity restaurant is available for the hotel guests and for special occasions, although a la carte service is not provided. They also provide catering and event services.

The hotel manager states that Hotel X mainly accommodates guests who are in Bursa for business related trips. In the first six months of 2016, Hotel X had 6,618 guests, who stayed for 1.6 nights on average.

According to Euromonitor International's report in 2014, online hotel sales are growing fast in Western Europe, and this accounted for \$36 billion in 2013, 26% of total hotel sales. It is expected to grow to \$60 billion by 2017, equaling 40% of total hotel sales. Online hotel sales growth is especially strong in Eastern Europe due to low penetration and amounted to \$2.2 billion in 2013, 17% of total hotel sales. It is forecasted to more than double to \$4.8 billion by 2017, 24% of total hotel sales. Clearly, all companies need to consider moving online (Kotler et al 2008, 849).

Hotel X, because of its special circumstances, has always been behind in the current technological advancements in the accommodation sector. After the recent administration change, it was decided that the systems and the facilities need to be renovated in order to modernize the hotel and make it cost efficient. The renovation of the hotel is still on going, but in the meantime, management is looking to renovate the online appearance of the hotel as well.

In order to achieve this, the author was contacted by the hotel management and asked to help them improve the hotel's online presence and help them be found on the search engines.

In the process of writing this thesis work, the author has searched existing theses in order to better understand what is missing, and what can be done to contribute to the literature. In this research, the author found out that there are many theses written about marketing, online marketing, and the hospitality industry; but not many theses or researches have been written about the combination of the hospitality industry and search engine optimization in the online marketing perspective.

## **4.2 Interview with the Assistant Hotel Manager**

Emir Seymen has been the assistant hotel manager of Hotel X for four years. He is a tourism and hospitality teacher who works at the Tourism and Hospitality School in Bursa, which is next to the hotel. His duties within the hotel management include making sure the daily operations run smoothly, keeping financial situations under control and making sure maintenance and improvements are done correctly, looking after the staff as well as the customer satisfaction. The interview questions and the provided answers can be seen in Appendix 1.

He also considers the feedback they receive from the guests in order to analyze the hotel's situation and decide what to do next. Another part of his duties are to make necessary meetings and deals with the tourism agencies and to try to increase the hotel's market share.

### **4.2.1 Current marketing strategies**

According to the information provided by the assistant manager, the current marketing strategy of the hotel is close to non-existent. The management does not have a concrete marketing strategy, although there are some efforts in order to attract more attention, such as dealing with tourism agencies and printing leaflets, etc. Other than these efforts, the hotel mainly relies on word of mouth from the satisfied guests. Therefore, they usually make special efforts to make the customers happy and feel satisfied.

The hotel right now does not have an official website. There is information available about the hotel on the internet, but these sources are not controlled by the hotel staff. There is a Facebook page which is controlled by the hotel staff but it is not updated regularly and it is not being utilized.

#### 4.2.2 Hotel's guest profile

According to the statistics provided by the assistant manager, 90% of the hotel guests are Turkish citizens, and the rest are other European nationalities with the majority being German citizens. The assistant manager mentioned this is because of their collaborations with the other tourism and hospitality schools in Germany and visiting lecturers.

The assistant manager provided the author with the figures in Table 3 to show the situation in 2016 (until 31.10.2016 when the data was collected).

Table 3. Hotel's yearly guest situation (Source: Case Company 2016).

Total Room Capacity	Total Booked Rooms	Yearly percentage of booked rooms	Total Bed Capacity	Total amount of guests	Total percentage of booked beds
13236	5292	40%	33672	10555	31.4%

The amount of guests is usually higher during the spring and summer months. In the first 6 months of 2016, Hotel X had 6618 guests, who stayed for 1.6 nights on average. When on 31.10.2016 this data was checked again, the total guest number was 10555 and the average night spent at the hotel was 1.3.

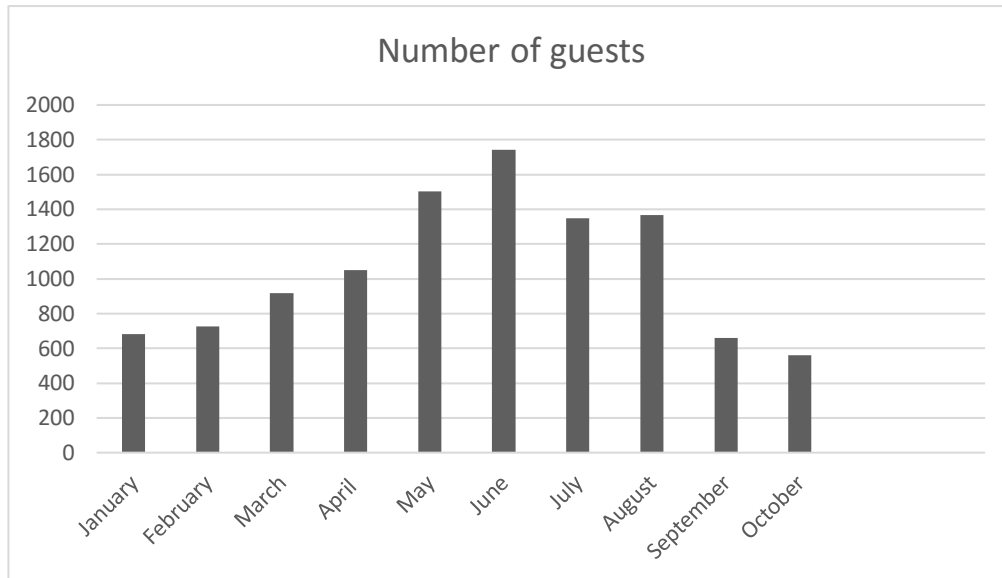


Figure 6. Number of guests per month (Source: Case Company 2016).

Most of the hotel guests stay for business purposes. Unfortunately, the author does not have the statistics available for this as the records are not kept by the hotel, but the assistant manager provided the information confirming the fact.

#### 4.2.3 What are the problems with the hotel?

Currently, the main problems with the hotel are the outdated facilities, not being able to fully compete with rivals and having no way to reach out to new customers (Interview with the assistant manager 2016). There is no concentrated marketing effort to increase the findability of the hotel and raise the market share.

The management is aware that the internet has an increasing influence on the decision making process of the potential guests. The management is not qualified or knowledgeable enough to implement these necessities themselves. Therefore, they need help exploring the possibilities to make the hotel findable on the internet.

### 4.3 Interview with the hotel guests

The author could not personally be present during the interviews. Therefore, she contacted the hotel manager, and together they concluded that the interview questions would be prepared by the author but the interviews would be conducted by the reception staff during the guests' check-in and check-out processes. The interview questions can be seen in Appendix 2.

These interviews were conducted in an open way: the reception staff had a chat with the guests and asked the questions in between. The questions were designed to be open ended, to encourage conversation with the guests as well as elaboration and contribution by the guests.

The reception staff interviewed 15 guests, with open ended questions to encourage conversation and feedback. The majority of the guests who were interviewed stated that they decided to come because they heard good things about the hotel from either a relative or a friend. Some of them also mentioned they had no previous knowledge of the hotel, but they were looking for affordable accommodation in the area, and since these practice hotels have a reputation of being affordable and good quality, they decided to give it a try.

Nine out of fifteen guests stated that they are staying at Hotel X for business purposes. The remaining six stated that they are staying for leisure purposes.

More than half of the guests stated that they did a Google search to find the contact information of the hotel, and also search for the previous customer reviews. They used third party websites in order to do so, because despite looking for an official website, they could not find one. It was also mentioned that the customers were looking for the photos of the rooms and the facilities on the internet before they decided to contact the hotel.

The guests were also asked about the words they used when they were doing the search in Google in order to find the most commonly used key words. The commonly used words (in Turkish) can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Suggested key phrases by the guests.

Phrases in Turkish	Phrases in English
Bursa uygulama oteli	Bursa practice hotel
Muradiye uygulama oteli	Muradiye practice hotel
Muradiye Teknik lisesi oteli	Muradiye highschool hotel
Kamu otelleri	Public hotels
Egitim bakanligi otelleri	Education hotels
Muradiye uygulama oteli yorumlar	Muradiye practice hotel comments
Muradiye uygulama oteli resimleri	Muradiye practice hotel photos
Bursa merkez oteller	Bursa center hotels
Bursa uludag oteller	Bursa Uludag Hotels

These phrases show that the guests already had the knowledge of the hotel, and therefore they tried to limit their searches to the phrases that would describe the hotel. There were no general searches like, “bursa, hotel, cheap”. These kinds of phrases are called long tail key phrases, as it shows the searching potential customers are close to the point of purchase (Enge et al. 2012, 139).

When asked if they would consider coming back to the hotel and suggest it to their friends and family, all the interviewed guests said they would. The author believes it is possible that these answers were not entirely truthful, because in Turkish culture it is considered rude to answer this question negatively, especially while being interviewed face to face.

The last question in the interview was an open ended one asking if the guests had any suggestions for improving the hotel services. Ten out of fifteen people said they had no suggestions and they thought everything was satisfactory. The remaining five had a couple of different suggestions. One of them mentioned that the rooms needed improvements, including better air conditioning. Another suggestion by the same guest was that the hotel needs a better online presence, as they searched for the hotel on the internet before they decided to come and they hesitated when they could not see any official photographs or websites.

Two respondents stated that they were very satisfied with the breakfast and suggested that the hotel should keep offering the breakfast service. It was also mentioned by two guests that they were disappointed about the a la carte dinner service which was removed earlier this year. The manager said they removed the service because it was not cost effective, so unless the number of guests significantly increases, this service will not be brought back.

One of the last suggestions was that the façade of the hotel needs maintenance. The hotel staff is currently working on this task, they have already made improvements by planting flowers and making extra efforts to keeping the garden and the entrance tidy.

These results were analyzed with the assistant hotel manager. The assistant hotel manager confirmed that most of their guests come to the hotel with prior knowledge about the hotel; since these practice hotels already do have a reputation in the community, and they rarely have walk-in customers with no prior knowledge.

According to these results, the assistant manager and the manager decided that the online presence of the hotel should be about giving information to potential guests, having a gallery of photos of the facilities and the rooms, and potentially having a review section where posts can be controlled by the hotel staff prior to publishing.

After the key words were established by analyzing the interviews that were conducted with the guests and the hotel manager, a key word list was made in order to help focus on improving the Google search results.

## **5 ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION**

The originally formulated main research question for this thesis was “How can companies use SEO to increase findability on the internet?” Through the analysis of secondary sources about SEO subject, various theories were found.

In this section, the answer to the main research question will be found by carefully analyzing the findings and combining empirical findings with the theoretical background to create appropriate suggestions for the case company.

### **5.1 Implementation of an Online Marketing Strategy**

Businesses are moving online at a rapid pace, and hospitality businesses are not far behind. Bursa is a growing city, with a population of two million inhabitants already. It is a popular tourist destination for both domestic and international tourists.

There are currently 55 hotel establishments with a tourism operation license in Bursa, and the amount of tourist accommodations in Bursa was 652,986 in 2015 (BursaInvest Tourism Report 2015). This proves that there is a bigger market for Hotel X than it is able to reach now, and there is room and need for improvements.

The author believes that one of the biggest problems in the management of Hotel X is that the management does not have a clear marketing plan and strategy. The hotel so far has relied on word of mouth. This has kept the business going for the time being, but with the new competition arriving in the city, the author believes this will not be enough and there needs to be a change in direction to achieve success.

The hotel usually is not fully booked, but mostly has higher booking rate during the summer months as can be seen in Table 3. The number of guests is significantly reduced during the winter months, as can be seen from the statistics provided by the



management in Figure 3. Even though the summer activities are enough to keep the hotel running all year round, the hotel management could show effort to increase the booking rate in the winter months as well. One way to do this could be to advertise. The hotel is very close to one of the biggest ski resorts in Turkey, and in the winter months there are customers coming from all over Turkey to visit these ski resorts in Bursa.

Even though the hotels' biggest competitors are the other practice hotels in Bursa, those are not the only competitors. Within its price range, there are other options available. The management is aware of this issue and they do believe it is necessary for them to reach more potential customers. Even though the management is aware of the potential and existing competition, so far the company has not showed any effort into implementing a concrete online marketing plan. The management does not have a background in marketing, and this limits the management's understanding and capability. With the new competition arriving with the newly opened practice hotels and the existing strong local competition, it is very important for Hotel X to start working harder in order to attract and retain customers.

Hotel X so far has not put any effort into gaining new customers or making the potential customers aware of Hotel X's existence. By relying on Hotel X's existing customer base, the management was content with mediocre booking rates as long as it helped the hotel break even.

There currently is no budget for marketing activities at the hotel, and the management is not knowledgeable in the area. The author suggests that there needs to be a budget reserved for marketing activities, and potentially hire a consultant if it is not possible to hire a full time marketing manager. This, of course, causes great costs in the short term for the hotel, and therefore the management is reluctant. In order to implement a concrete online marketing strategy, it is important to analyze the current situation and the prospects for the hotel. The author believes this cannot be accomplished by the current management because of lack of marketing knowledge.

There are many different online marketing channels that can be used for Hotel X's purposes, such as SEO, Advertising, Online PR, Affiliate marketing, social media, e-

mail marketing, etc. For example, online PR can be a valid, low cost option for creating brand awareness and bringing traffic to a website, although it requires a dedicated marketing employee or a consultant for the hotel (smartinsights 2017).

## **5.2 Implementing the SEO Requirements and Building Website**

In the theory section, it was mentioned that there are four stages of SEO. These are; goals, on-page optimization, off-page optimization, and analysis. In the case of Hotel X, the first step is crucial for the managers, because it was noted that the managers lacked the understanding of online marketing tools. If the managers become knowledgeable on the subject of SEO, they could understand the key drivers of a successful SEO strategy and the importance of implementing it in a digital marketing plan.

After benchmarking the similar hotels (2-3 stars) and hotels that are more luxurious than Hotel X (4-5 stars), their websites show what the norm on Turkish websites for hotels is. These seem to be: elegant design, a photo gallery from the facilities of the hotel and the rooms in great detail, with professional quality photos, and good introductory texts inviting the interested parties to contact the management, providing the contact information for the hotel. Hotel X needs to build a website. It is lacking the potential reach to the customers as also shown by the interview results. Guests do want to see photos and descriptions. The potential guests want to see reviews before booking a hotel room.

The website needs to have a domain name which is related to the keywords that were suggested by the guests in the interviews. The author's suggestion would be [www.muradiyeuygulamaoteli.com](http://www.muradiyeuygulamaoteli.com), as it clearly conveys the message that it belongs to the hotel and it is one of the key phrases that are searched for by the potential guests. These were mainly long tail keywords, and in the previous interviews with the hotel manager, it was mentioned that by building a website they mainly want to provide people with information and increase findability on the internet. This means

that the website of the hotel needs to have content with these key phrases in it and needs to implement these key words into the website structure as well.

On page optimization refers to the technical optimization of a website. These technical steps ensure that the website is correctly indexed and therefore easy to read for the Google bots. One of the key points of on page optimization is to implement the correct title tags and meta descriptions on the website structure.

The title tag is the text that is displayed on the browser's title bar and tabs. Title tags are important because search engines figure that the title tags may indicate the page title, and therefore its subject (Kent 2012, 43). The suggested title tag for Hotel X would be "Muradiye Otelcilik ve Turizm Meslek Lisesi Uygulama Oteli", which is the full name of the case hotel. This title tag includes the most used search terms for the hotel; therefore, it would help the rankings and the increased visibility on the internet.

```
<title>Muradiye Mesleki ve Teknik Anadolu Lisesi Uygulama Oteli</title>
```

Figure 7. Example Title Tag.

The next step is to implement these keywords to the meta tags and description tag as well. According to Kent (2012), search engines have a bias for content, and they prefer the content they can read. Search engines cannot read flash files or picture contents; they need HTML text. The more text with the right keywords in a well-constructed manner – the better.

```
<meta name="description" content="Muradiye Uygulama Otelimiz kaliteli hizmet anlayisiyla sizleri Yesil Bursa'da agirlamaktan memnuniyet duyar."/>
```

Figure 8. Description Tag.

Keyworded pages are essential for high visibility. In the interviews made with the guests, there were several keywords and long tail phrases mentioned. Another suggestion to the hotel management would be to try to utilize Content Marketing techniques with using these keywords. As mentioned by McDonald, (2016, 118) content SEO is about creating web pages that match Google search queries with compelling, relevant content, be that on a specific page, a press release, or a blog post. One of

the best ways for the hotel to reach to a wider potential customer base is to provide an informative website.

```
▼ <h2 class="font_2">
    "Yeşil Bursa'nın Muradiye semtinde, Uludağ'ın
    yanibaşında yer alan 36 oda ve 86 yatak
    kapasiteli&nbsp;uygulama otelimizde dağ ve ova
    manzaralı odalarımız bulunmaktadır."
</h2> == $0
```

Figure 9. Example of a keyworded HTML code.

The next step is called off-page optimization, and off-page optimization cannot be achieved by optimizing the technical part of the website. Since off-page optimization is mainly about online credibility and a digital footprint, the best course of action is to increase an online reputation by getting business reviews and creating PPC advertisement campaigns with the appropriate keywords (moz.com 2008).

The author is aware that the assistant manager of the hotel mentioned that the management does not necessarily want to reach out to customers who do not already have prior knowledge of the hotel, but in the long term, being able to reach new demographics could help the hotel to bring more profits. The hospitality sector is highly competitive. With the increasing competition, two new practice hotels opening in Bursa, a loyal customer base may not be enough. In order to utilize content marketing, the hotel could create posts that are related to the tourism industry, and share these posts on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter.

This brings the author to another suggestion for future improvements. A social media channel should be maintained by the hotel staff. A Facebook page for the hotel linked to the website would benefit the hotel, as this would enable the staff to reach out to potential customers better. Facebook is an immensely popular social networking site in Turkey, and people use the "Review" function of Facebook business pages actively. This suggestion caused concern for the management, as it is believed that it might hurt the business if it is not possible to remove the negative comments. Facebook does not allow businesses to remove negative comments unless the comment is insulting and does not follow the Facebook Community Standards. That is why it

is also suggested to have a review section on the official website which can be fully controlled by the hotel staff. In the interview, the guests mentioned they do search for reviews online before they commit themselves to a booking, so the review function is a valuable addition. The reviews would also have keywords in them, which then would appear in the search results, therefore increasing the visibility.

The analysis step is the last step in the four stages of SEO. It is important to analyze the data after implementation, but due to time limitations, it was not possible for the author to implement these suggestions and analyze the outcome. If the hotel management decides to implement these suggestions, it is very important to analyze this phase and report on the findings to see if these changes actually help the hotel to gain more guests in the end and calculate the ROI, and make possible adjustments to the strategy.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Own Comments**

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the criteria for search engine optimization, and how to implement these criteria in the hospitality industry on a limited budget. While there is abundant information on the search engine optimization subject, it proved to be difficult to find reliable sources and academically acceptable resources. The nature of search engine optimization is also rather difficult to build concrete information about, as it is highly dependent on Google and other search engines algorithms and policies. In the end, it can be concluded that there is no strict policy to follow, but there are practices that prove to be useful and these practices were suggested for implementation.

The hotel staff were more than helpful during the thesis work, and for that the author is grateful. There were however many occasions where it was difficult to determine the methods of management, and the level of professionalism was not high. There does not seem to be a clear objective or goals determined by the management in order to solve the issues they shared, and even though there is some effort to implement better and more modern solutions, the decision making process is really slow.

One of the main priorities for the management of Hotel X should be to improve the hotel's online presence in order to attract more customers. Customer retention is of course a valuable effort, which currently seems to be successful for the management, as their customers are mainly repeatedly staying for business purposes, but with newly arriving competition, acquiring new customers will be important.

When the author presented the hotel management with a prototype website, which was built according to the research results after benchmarking the famous hotel websites, with the appropriate content, key wording and structure. The management did not seem pleased with the design of the website, and it was suggested that a "more traditional" approach to the website design would be better. This is a problem because even after explaining that the website structure needs to have text content and photos in order to attract traffic, the management still had different ideas. This proves that the hotel management is not completely open to new ideas and does not seem to be keen on changing.

## **6.2 Suggested Improvements for Future Development**

It is a necessity for the case company to focus on improving marketing efforts and creating a concrete online marketing strategy. Currently, the management team of the hotel does not seem to be keen on trying new ideas and accepting suggestions. Main reason for this seems to be because of the concern regarding budget and the fact that the management does not have the marketing knowledge to implement the

suggested changes and make an analysis. The case company is highly dependent on one segment of their customers – business. While this currently proves to be a working strategy, with the upcoming competition, in the future, there is a possibility that the company will start losing customers.

One of the suggestions made in this research was for the case company to hire a marketing professional, and this suggestion was quickly shut down by the company because of financial reasons. This is understandable, because this indeed causes a great financial burden to the company in the short term, but in the long term, this would help acquire more customers and retain existing ones. Considering the lack of marketing knowledge and activities in the case company, it surely can be argued that this short term financial cost would prove to be a good investment because it would create a better structured - systematic approach to marketing in the long term.

According to the literature, one of the best ways to attract traffic to one's website is to provide informative content and blog posts. This could potentially be utilized in the case company. The company website could be used to give information about tourism in Bursa, potential tourist areas and activities as well as upcoming events. Therefore, people searching for information would stumble upon the hotel's website. This could attract attention to make a booking or at least be aware of the hotel's existence for the future.

The hotel provides catering services and also serves as an event venue, although this is not advertised actively. The customers who use these services mainly are aware of them because of word of mouth. The author believes that these services should be advertised more actively, because it would differentiate the hotel from its competitors and create a competitive advantage as well as provide income.

The main feature that differentiates Hotel X from competitors is the fact that the hotel provides affordable accommodation with reasonable quality, as the staff consists of students. When improving the online presence, the fact that the prices are lower than the competitors could be advertised more aggressively, possibly while providing information about practice hotels in Turkey. The hotel recently had renovations done,

providing more modern equipment and better sleeping arrangements; this should also be considered in the online marketing strategy.

When the aforementioned marketing methods have been implemented, a crucial step would be to analyze the effects and the outcome. Currently the hotel does not have a systematic feedback system, and the reporting system lacks the required professionalism. It is possible to measure the CTR and conversion rate in Google's services, and the hotel could add an option to the check in processes to ask how a customer has become aware of Hotel X's services. It is advisable to use Google Ads, as this would carry the website to the top of the SERP and amplify the CTR. Measuring and analyzing the effect of these activities would help determine if the online marketing efforts help to acquire more customers.

### **6.3 Proposals for Future Research**

In this thesis the author explored the case company's marketing situation and online marketing efforts and strategies. How the customers find information about the case company was examined, as was their thoughts regarding the case company's online presence, as well as overall thoughts about the service and facilities.

For the purposes of this study, the main focus was kept on the case company's online marketing methods and improvements that can be done with implementing SEO in the marketing strategy. For future research, other methods of online marketing, such as e-mail marketing, online PR and affiliate marketing should also be considered as a part of case company's online marketing strategy.

This study was done according to the framework of a qualitative research, and the data was gathered by conducting personal interviews. However, due to the limited time frame and geographical limitations, the author could not personally conduct the interviews. For future suggestions, it can be concluded that it would prove to be more insightful and informative if the author could supervise the interviews with the guests



and conduct them personally, and potentially use a recording device to capture the responses fully without having to pay attention to transcribing at the same time. If the interviews could be conducted by the researcher, open ended questions could have helped create a dialogue and provide deeper understanding of the expectations and experiences of hotel guests. The main source of information for this thesis was personal interviews with the guests and the staff. Secondary resources were obtained from the existing literature, and primary resources were provided by the management team of the case company.

While analyzing the SEO strategies, the author mainly used the customers' perspectives to suggest improvements. This caused divided views with the management, because of the existing financial plans and the lack of an appropriate budget for suggested marketing activities. Another issue was that the management team had no marketing background, and online marketing was a foreign term to them. For future research, the approach could be kept in balance between the realistic objectives of the case company and the limitations for implementations, as well as explaining the online marketing concept better.

Another limitation was that the researcher did not have the time to fully implement the results of this research and analyze the outcome; therefore, it could not be observed if the suggestions provided were helpful to the company. Since SEO is a subject which is highly debated on whether the methods actually work or not, this would have been a crucial step to analyze the methods and suggest further improvements and calculate the ROI. Unfortunately, measuring the outcome of SEO implementation takes a long time because the data for analysis is gathered from Google's databases and it takes time until meaningful changes can be recorded; therefore, the researcher would need at least a couple of months to analyze each different outcome.

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**Interview with the Assistant Hotel Manager Emir Seymen, 05.10.2016 (Interview originally conducted in Turkish, translated by the author.)**

**1. What position do you have within the company? What are your responsibilities?**

I am the assistant hotel manager. At the same time, I am teaching in the Tourism and Hospitality School. My responsibilities in the hotel include making sure the daily operations run smoothly, also keep financial situation under control, making sure maintenance and improvements are done correctly. I also consider the feedback we receive from our guests in order to take the hotel to the right direction. I am also responsible for making necessary deals and meetings with the interested tourism agents, in order to increase our market share.

**2. For how long have you had this position?**

I have been in this hotel for 4 years, but I have been teaching the tourism and hospitality students for the past 15 years.

**3. Could you please inform me about the history of the hotel?**

The hotel started operations in 1981. The hotel has a special status because it is owned by the ministry of education but the rights to manage it is given to the president of the Tourism and Hospitality school. It both serves as a regular hotel, driven by profits, but also as a practice hotel for the students in the Tourism and Hospitality school. We receive funding from the ministry of education, but this funding alone is not enough to continue our hotel operations. We must increase our revenue.

Since 1981 we have had some restoration and maintenance work done in order to improve our quality of service. Unfortunately, our main building is in need of restoration as well, but due to the funding problems we cannot attend to that issue yet. If the hotel had higher revenue, we would definitely invest more money into developing our facilities.

**4. How is the present situation regarding competition? What hotel is your biggest competition?**

In the past 5 years, there have been 2 more hotels in the same status (practice hotel for the students) opened in the city. These hotels have better and more modern facilities, therefore this leaves us in a disadvantage as the new customers who have never visited us before usually prefers more modern facilities by the competitors. Although, the guests we have accommodated before, mentioned that our customer service is definitely better and they would like to keep coming back.

**5. What do you think differentiates Hotel X from its competitors?**

Our hotel is the oldest hotel in Bursa which has the practice hotel status. Over the years we have had many guests and therefore our hotel has become known and has a reputation. The hotel is in close proximity to Bursa's center and the business district. Another thing to consider is the hotel's proximity to Bursa's touristic sights and the proximity to Uludag (the tallest mountain in western Turkey, which is a popular touristic destination because of the ski resorts located there.)

**6. Have you divided your customers into segments? How many segments are you targeting?**

Our guests usually come for either leisure or business purposes, therefore we segment them according to the purpose of their visit. We would like to increase and retain both of these segments, but according to our previous researches business segment is more profitable as they tend to come back periodically and more often.

**7. What customer segments are most profitable?**

Business segment brings the most profit.

**8. In general, which segment (e.g. corporate, leisure guests) usually seems more positive and satisfied with their stay?**

In general, according to the feedback we receive, business guests seem to be the most satisfied and positive guests of them all.

**9. What do you think is the main reason for customers to choose Hotel X?**

Safety and quality mainly, and our past satisfied customers advocate us.

**10. Do you usually ask your guests how they have heard about the hotel?**

Of course, we always try to engage in conversation with our guests and ask for their feedback. If they are our first time guests we always ask how did they find out about us, and if they have stayed here before we warmly welcome them again.

**11. What is the most common reply (word of mouth, ads, and so on)?**

The most common reply is that they heard about the hotel from one of our previous guests, and they were recommended to come and stay here if they had business in Bursa. So usually, the most common reply is word of mouth. A couple of our guests have also mentioned they searched for an official website by us online in order to get more information, but they have not been able to find anything else than our address and the phone number.

**12. What are your future plans for the development of Hotel X?**

We would like to improve the facilities of the hotel and try to keep modernizing it. We also believe in order to increase our customer portfolio, we need to improve our online presence and use online marketing tools.

We do realize that businesses are moving online more and more every day, and the accommodation and tourism businesses are also in need of keeping up with the competition. We decided that the first step we need to take is to create a website where we control our content and therefore create a better presence and findability.

**Interview Questions for Hotel Guests, Interview date 05-07.10.2016 (Questions originally in Turkish, translated by the author.)**

1. Why did you choose to stay in Hotel X?
2. Are you staying for leisure or business?
3. Did you do any kind of research before you decided to stay at Hotel X? Did you use Google? What did you search for?
4. If you did an internet search, what kind of words did you use?
5. Would you consider coming back to the hotel? Would you consider suggesting the hotel to your friends?
6. Do you have any suggestions for improvement?