

E-Service Model of Outdoor Sports Club: Information Flow Guides People Flow

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Abstract:

Based on a case study of LeYou outdoor sports club's website, this paper explored the e-service model of outdoor sports club websites and found that information flow formed through online communication directly and indirectly guides people flow formed by various real outdoor sport activities. This guiding function is built on four platforms of website communication media: information, gathering, communication and organization. This paper also identifies main influence factors for the guiding process: plan, capital, member and supporter. Finally, discussions about how to develop human geography in current information-intensive society are given.

Keywords: Tourism websites, E-service model, China, Sports club, Information flow

1. Introduction

Outdoor sports have been infiltrated into all estates of our contemporary society, and have been effecting different aspects of our society, including commercial activities, personalizing design, dressing style, hero concept and value incarnation. The development of outdoor sports has been described as a partial representation of nation prosperity [1]. Since 1980s, outdoor sports clubs have been established in most large-medium cities of China. At the same time, most outdoor sports clubs took the advantages of online web services and their mutual properties to participate with this development.

The research interests in sport-related websites mainly concentrate on the field of information technology, sports and physical education, and e-commerce in the last ten years. However, the mechanism of people or material flow in the "self-relying" outdoor sports websites remains to be explained from the angle of human geography. It therefore is needed to explore the relationships between invisible information flow and visible people (material) flow. Recently, some researchers have focused on the roles of new telecommunication means and media power in various people or material flows. Graham and Marvin [2] discussed the cooperation, replacement, derivation and reinforcement effects of IT in urban agglomeration. Yao et al. [3] made

concrete example analysis to these effects. Zhen [4] developed a correlative theory on information flow and transportation. Lu et al. [5] analyzed the positive impact of traffic guiding system to urban transportation organization and spatial pattern. In particular, Adams and Ghose [6] put forward the functional relationships of websites to the immigration from India to American from the angle of information geography. Following these results, this paper aims to explore the roles and guiding function of communications on sports websites for related people activities of outdoor sports.

From a classification for 500 Chinese outdoor sports clubs' websites selected from the statistic table "complete collection of national outdoor sports websites"//www.gouhot.com/class/outdoor.htm, there are 7% of large outdoor sports websites (the number of club members is more than 4000), 30% of medium websites (1000-3000 members), and 63% of small websites (less than 1000 members). Obviously, the small-medium outdoor sports clubs are the majority in China. This paper therefore takes small-medium outdoor sports clubs websites as its research target.

We reviewed the development process of LeYou outdoor sports club's website (pre-registration name: <http://leyouclub.51.net>) and how it has been gradually developed into a very active, comprehensive, famous and professional website since founded in March, 2001 [7]. This website has an outstanding design in its structure and database system, and is effectively undertaking the role of extending traditional means of sports club services. Therefore, this club with its website (www.leyou.net) is as a case in this paper. This research results presented in this paper are mainly obtained through two research approaches. One is website observation and the other is website manager interview.

2. Information Flow's Guiding Function for People Flow through Online E-Service Platforms

The online communication model of LeYou club members has some features: depending on the communication media of websites, announcing information, forming a gathering field, simultaneously, communicating in members, participating in plan with

common interests, using the feedback information to policy-make, forming an organizational virtual community; and furthermore, realizing the activities in geographical space by outdoor tourism routes, supportiveness from sports outfits trade and organizing members' excursion. In this circulative process, websites ultimately realize the guiding function of information flow to people flow by four-platform functions: information, gathering, communication and organization (as shown in Fig.1).

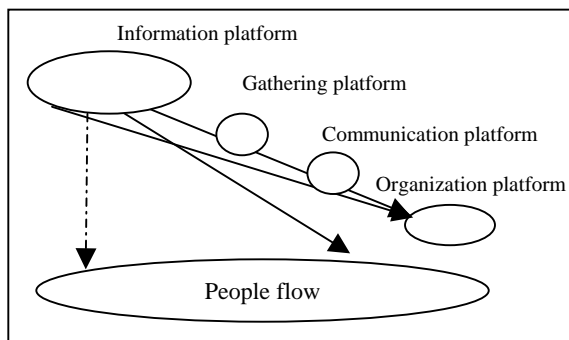


Fig.1: Relationships between information flow and people flow

2.1. Information platform

As a kind of communication media, the outdoor sports clubs websites derive information flow by information production, diffusion, sharing and exchange. Their members log into these clubs' websites with individual virtual identities, and then search, obtain, absorb, and store information for specific purposes, which become the first step to realize a realistic flow with real identity in geographical space. After two times of re-design of LeYou website, the functionalities of the website have become more normalized and especially more practical. It has added more useful functions such as picture-base of outdoor activities, friendship links, diary manager and message notebook and formed an information platform for all of its club members. In general, the functionality of the information platform consists of three parts: club information, commodity information and outdoor sports information. The club information includes club introduction, current regulations, problem solving and recent activities; commodity information includes in online purchase trade established below website provides the commodity information of outdoor sports outfits to members in the form of "online supermarket"; club organizers or members mainly upload outdoor sports information that includes four parts: information of outdoor activities, pictures of outdoor activities, diary of tourism friends, and download of outdoor resources, and information of outdoor sports is the mainstream of website information and also the key factors of attracting members' gathering. Meanwhile, effective interaction will make the derivative information feed back to website in the virtual community, more information

flow are derived after the reorganization and re-announcement of the feedback information, which makes the information platform more effective [8].

2.2. Gathering platform

The website attracts club members by encouraging them use virtual identity to gather on the network for online services, which, in turn, can make them gather in a geographical space with real identity. LeYou club has become an important gathering place for outdoor sports lovers in the wide range of Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei, which results from the carefulness and specialization of the website. Through the development of online information announcement, online forum, information base, outdoor outfits trading and survey results in its website, LeYou has gathered more consumer groups with different interests from consume layers [7, 9]. The gathering platform is diversifying day by day. Reflection in the gathering result is that affiliated members and registered members increase 1.5 and 5.5 times in 2002 to 2004, there have been 1400 registered members in LeYou website. Moreover, according to statistic data about website online members, it suggests that a large number of lovers have not registered. The members' gathering and outdoor activity's gathering & commodity gathering promote each other, and the gathering of information flow further intensifies that of people flow.

2.3. Communication platform

Communication platform means a virtual arena provided by websites for club members to exchange ideas, feelings and experiences interactively. Such online relations eliminate many barriers occurred in face-to-face communications [9, 10]. Website communication platform makes the information conduct model become poly-faceted. As soon as the online notices of LeYou club are announced, the instant response of one-to-many or many-to-one of information can be effectively realized; soon members can conduct discussions between online and off-line or between data and video. LeYou outdoor sports forum is the best arena for information communication; the communication between operators and members often is conducted in the form of operators announcing recent outdoor activities on the net and members consulting online or replying by sending messages with some questions. LeYou forum is also divided into several parts in detail: LeYou club, LeYou member' excursion, LeYou outdoor experiences and LeYou family. The club members mainly exchange their ideas online by the form of online message, sending message, online help seeking, E-mail and OICQ. The effectiveness and interaction are stronger. For instance, since LeYou forum introduced "ice-climbing" online in February 2004, hundreds of members made comments actively in the form of replying messages, watching messages

and following messages. Members are encouraged to give suggestions about the running characteristics and development trends of website in the part of LeYou big family on the forum, which realizes sense of identity of members and being back home of Website. Communication provided by the website has the characteristics of the shortest interval, the minimum indirect loss, and the fastest spread speed, which accords with the flexible, active, light, free means and democratic, relaxed environment that modern consumer group pursue. This kind of online communication combines with the real communication of bodybuilding activity once a week of LeYou club and the club's pub gathering twice a week, which increases the realization of organizing outdoor sports.

2.4. Organization platform

Organization platform is a platform launched by the club website, and aimed to organize, coordinate, and supervise effectively various outdoor activities through online functions. It directly embodies the parallel functions with other website platforms. The organization platform links up the demand side of tourism products and its supply side practically. For example, "the monthly activity plan" is put on the LeYou forum in which it formulates the activity time, activity grade, activity type, activity name, etc., and introduces the characteristics of activity's destinations. Members form a series of excursion schemes by consulting on exchange platform. After two months, members have been organized in two forms: website team leader in charge and members' individual spontaneity. The form that members individual organizing activities (self-aid outdoor tourism) has become the mainstream and shows the following features: extending of activity projects, the amplification of regional range, the increase of activity's routes, the prolonging of activity season, the improvement of choice space, the enlargement of activity frequency, miniaturization of team excursion and the individual character. It was launched by the members with same hobby and common routes choice, and information of "seeking partners", travel plans, outfits and fees, etc. are also announced on line. The club provides relevant outfits (two forms: sale or rent), technology support of route nearby and gathering arena to participants. The organization platform of website emphasizes the interaction and cooperation of members' collective participability and the common interests and the mutual attractiveness of activity's participants, which makes people flow developing greatly.

3. Influence factors for information flow guiding people flow

The relationship between outdoor online sports information flow and offline people flow is affected

by four factors: plan, capital, member, and supporter.

3.1. Plan

Through interview with LeYou club managers we found that the website operators formulating proper short-term or medium-term excursion plans are the base of club achieving its development goal and the main parts of website success. The sureness of long-term plans is in relation to the choice of club directions, which can assure that its goal is not only daily operation and vested profits but also long-term behavior. The most important basis for formulating plan correctly is the general reflection conditions of club members. The plans supported by most members come from the realization of website communication media's function, the communications between operators and members or among members are all essential to improve plan.

3.2. Member

The members' excursion volume is the main criterion to assess the development and success of a club, and the scale of members is the base of excursion volume and variety. The statistic data shows that, it suggests that the total times of annual excursion of LeYou website online members increase four times and the total number of people who participated in excursion increase one and half times from July 2002 to July 2004. The interview result also suggests that LeYou website has great potential to attract members, and newly increasing members mainly depend on online contact model. In view of the specialization of outdoor sports club websites, spatial distribution issues pertaining to the members are also significant. Website information platform transmits information to members who were separated by distance, which weakens members' isolation in geographical location. The users of LeYou club website can be found everywhere in the wide range of Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei. The website enables these members to communicate online and also indirectly influences the members' decisions in related outdoor sport activities. The importance of plans embodies it can reflect the members' wishes and make organizations remain successful.

3.3. Capital

The capitals adequacy is one of the important problems in the small-medium tourism websites. The financial incomes of outdoor sports websites include membership fees and the incomes of outdoor sports outfits, apparatuses & excursion services. The combination of website online purchase trade and club outfits trade not only makes club members more convenient but also enhances the flexibility of the purchase options, which is the steady incomes source of the club. Nowadays, the reduction in excursion fees of members is the symbol of strong-power competition, which includes the reduction of

necessary outfit costs in the organizational stage and communication costs used in communication, training and contest before members' excursion.

3.4. Supporter

The club managers indicate that an important way for the club to increase income is through supporters and media by advertisement distribution and increasing services for members. Websites must make full use of the advantages that Internet can spread supporters' information to online consumer of outdoor sports and link directly supporters' websites to the club pages. At the same time, the supporters of outdoor sports can use the links to examine the demands of outdoor sports. These online information activities will influence and guide the people flow in selecting outdoor sport activities and related outdoor sport tools as well, and the aim is to achieve win-win result with supporters.

4. Conclusions and discussions

Outdoor sports clubs provide various related services to club members through websites and thus create an information exchange arena. As a result it enables members to gather together into many interest groups. This result leads members to conduct realistic outdoor sport activities in a geographical space. The online communication model through club websites plays a key role in the process of web-based information flow guiding people flow. In this process, information available from real world is also sent to the websites as a feedback and is re-announced after reorganization; mutual coordination, and reinforcement. Derivation functions were taken place between the information flow and the people flow.

In the circulative process of information flow guiding people flow on such kind of "self-relying" websites, information flow in network space cannot displace human communications in geographical space. At present stage, the main target of running business in plenty of small-medium outdoor sports websites all lays emphasis on local consumers group, so the space concept of geographical distance meaning is still very significant in their virtual communities. With future development of outdoor sports websites, their break to regional restraint is also limited. In the field of human geography, our conclusion is to discover some signs of complement and enhancement between online contact and realistic one, namely, the increasing opportunities provided by network cannot displace excursion but are beneficial for communication. It can be considered that contact among people is also important when web-based applications make communication enhancing among members.

The web-based members' communication model

provides a special opportunity for successful development of websites, and the importance of plans embodies that it can reflect the members' wish and make organizations remain successful. The future websites must formulate more strategic plans to attract more members, make their development display in profits and achieve win-win results with supporters and media. The research that puts forward result of four aspects helps outdoor sports websites make decisions. It can be seen from these issues: in order to achieve the long-term development of virtual-real tourism, the research that further provides the optimum development model to websites is absolutely essential.

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