RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF E-MAIL FOR TRAVEL AGENCIES OPERATING IN THE TURKISH DOMESTIC TOURISM MARKET

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Abstract:This article explores the role and potential of electronic mail in building and developing relationships with the potential customers in the Turkish domestic tourism market. The relevance and the significance of the concept of relationship marketing for service industries and especially for tourism is emphasised in the study. The research establishes that, although almost all of major travel agencies operating in the Turkish domestic tourism market have their own Websites and e-mail addresses, they do not use these facilities to their full potential in terms of building and developing relationships with their potential customers. It was noted that a significant number of customer inquiries have not been responded at all. On limited occasions where customer inquires were responded, the responses were made rather late. The research puts forward that there is a lack of marketing orientation among the travel agencies operating in the Turkish domestic tourism market.

Keywords: Relationship Marketing, Tourism, Domestic Tourism.

İLİŞKİSEL PAZARLAMA VE ELEKTRONİK POSTANIN İÇ TURİZM PAZARINDA FAALİYET GÖSTEREN SEYAHAT ACENTALARI AÇISINDAN ROLÜ VE POTANSİYELİ

Özet: Bu makalede bir ilişkisel pazarlama unsuru olan elektronik postanın Türkiye iç turizm pazarında müşteriler ile ilişkilerin oluşturulmasında ve geliştirilmesindeki rolü araştırılmaktadır. Makalede, hizmetlerin ve özellikle turizm hizmetlerinin özellikleri ile ilişkisel pazarlamanın paralelliği ve ilgisi irdelenmektedir.Araştırmada kullanılan elektronik posta araştırması neticesinde, Türkiye iç turizm pazarında faaliyet gösteren seyahat acentalarının önemli bir kısmının, elektronik postayı bir müşteri ilişkileri oluşturma ve geliştirme unsuru olarak kullanmadıkları ortaya çıkmıştır. Araştırmada, seyahat acentalarına gönderilen müşteri sorularının önemli bir kısmına cevap verilmediği tespit edilmiştir. Cevap verilen sınırlı durumlarda da, müşteri sorularına çok geç cevap verildiği ve gözlemlenmiştir. Araştırma, Türkiye iç turizm pazarında faaliyet gösteren seyahat acentaları arasında pazarlama oryantasyonluluğunun eksik olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu araştırmanın Türkiye'deki diğer hizmet endüstrilerinde faaliyet gösteren işletmelerin, ve başka ülkelerdeki hizmet işletmelerinin faaliyetlerine de ışık tutacağına inanılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İlişkisel Pazarlama, Elektronik Posta, İç Turizm

I. INTRODUCTION

In this study the extent of the use of e-mail as an interactive medium in building customer relationships in the Turkish domestic tourism market is investigated. As explained below in the background literature search to the study, relationship marketing is believed to be more significant and relevant for services, and especially, for the marketing of tourism.

Additionally, research studies indicate that tourism and travel have relatively higher levels of 'potential for relationship building' and relatively higher levels of 'fit with the interactive media'. Hence, the objective of this research is to explore and investigate the role and potential of e-mail as a relationship marketing tool among travel agencies operating in the Turkish domestic tourism market. In order to explore the research problem this paper is designed to contain five main sections: i) background literature search to the study ii) tourism and relationship marketing iii) relationship marketing and the Internet in tourism marketing iv) research method v) data analysis and interpretation.

First, a background on the development of relationship marketing is provided. In the second section, based on extensive literature search, the relevance of relationship marketing for tourism marketing is established. In the section 'Relationship Marketing and the Internet in Tourism Marketing', the role and potential of e-mail as an Internet application in relationship building is discussed. In the fourth section, the research method for the exploration of the research problem is explained. Lastly, in the fifth section, the findings of the

research are analysed and interpreted, to be followed by a conclusion where suggestions are made for marketing practitioners.

II. BACKGROUND LITERATURE SEARCH TO THE STUDY

Relationship marketing [1] has been hailed as a new paradigm to replace or exist alongside traditional transactional marketing [2,3]. In the traditional transactional view of marketing business firms regarded the sale transaction as the end, rather than the start of the relationship between the firm and its customers. As a result business firms concentrated their efforts in increasing the number of exchanges, or transactions, while neglecting developing continuous and mutually profitable communications and relationships [4]. These businesses have used various techniques such as price discounts, coupons to get as many customers as possible

to buy their products or services at least once. However, business firms have recently begun to realise that this short-term, transactional view of marketing is not only expensive, but also it builds little protection against competitors in dynamic markets.

Relationship marketing can be defined as the process whereby the seller and the buyer join in a strong personal, professional, and mutually profitable relationship over time so that the objectives of both parties are met [3]. This means that a paradigm shift is required in which the sale transaction should be seen as the start, rather than the end of the relationship between the business and its customers [5]. Bowen and Shoemaker's [6] comparison of the relationship marketing with transactional marketing is particularly useful in understanding this new paradigm better.

Table 1 A Comparison between Transactional Marketing and Relationship Marketing

Relationship Marketing	Transactional Marketing
Orientation to customer retention	Orientation to single sales
Continuous customer contact	Discontinuous customer contact
Focus on customer value	Focus on product features
Long-time scale	Short-time scale
High customer service emphasis	Little emphasis on customer service
High commitment to meeting customer expectations	Limited commitment to meeting customer expectations
Quality is concern of all staff	Quality is the concern of the production staff

Source: Bowen, J., and Shoemaker, S. (1997), "Relationship in the luxury hotel segment: A strategic perspective", research paper, Centre for Hospitality Research (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University).

The major benefits of relationship marketing explained above rest on the premise of establishing loyal customers. Loyal customers may offer the following potential advantages for a business [7]:

The cost of acquiring new customers can be substantial – a higher retention rate means that less marketing expenditure needs to be allocated to targeting potential customers. Research shows that it may cost as many as five times more to acquire a new customer than to keep an existing one [8]. Therefore efforts should be geared towards building one-to-one relationships with existing customers by opening two-way interactive dialogues with them and establishing a system to understand the customer's point of view. Understanding individual requirements means that more business can be created as products can be tailored to the needs identified as a result of personalized interaction.

Loyal customers tend to spend more. Riechheld and Sasser [9] found that a 5% increase in customer retention resulted in a 25 to 125% increase in profits in nine industry groups they studied.

Loyal customers tend to place frequent, consistent orders, therefore it usually costs less to serve them.

Satisfied customers are the best advertisement for any business as they are likely to introduce new customers to the company through the word-of-mouth recommendations.

Satisfied customers are often willing to pay premium prices to a supplier they know and trust.

Retaining customers makes gaining market entry or share gain difficult for competitors.

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF TOURISM AS A SERVICE

Witt and Moutinho [10] stress that, due to the lack of physical evidence and abstract qualities of services, customers place a greater emphasis on personal information sources. Gronroos [11] and Jackson [12] argued that service businesses were more likely to use relationship marketing than businesses marketing tangible products. This is very much related to the intangibility nature of services and the risk associated with this intangibility. Although the risk element on the part of the consumer is high for many services in general, it could be said that decisions related to tourism may cause higher levels of risk perception by the consumers. When Goodall [13] compared tourism with tangible products, he classified tourism as a high-risk purchase. There is a need to distinguish tourism from not only tangible products but from other services too in terms of risk perception due to the following factors identified by Witt and Moutinho [10] which are believed to increase consumers' perception of risk:

Tourism decisions involve committing large sums of money on something which cannot be seen or tested prior to purchase. Although tourism and travel activities of individuals may represent a relatively smaller proportion of time, they may involve large sums of expenditures. For instance, a week's holiday may represent less than 2% of time in terms of duration, in a fifty two-week year. However, the amount of money spent on a holiday may be as high as 10% or more of a tourist's annual income [14].

Tourism decisions involve large emotional investments. Whole families look forward to and backwards from holiday activities, so the fear of failure is high, and the opportunity cost irreversible. If a holiday goes wrong, that may be it for another year. Holidays often involve encounters with the unknown in terms of destinations, accommodation, transport etc. Perceived risk, based on the above characteristics of tourism services, motivates intensified information seeking and (if not properly reduced) erects a consumption barrier around the unacceptable alternatives [10], and hence makes the design of marketing communications messages and managing relationships, in the tourism market, a significant task. Doney and Cannon [15] note that trust is pivotal to marketing theory and practice. Trust is about confidence in partner and it reduces conflict and increases satisfaction between collaborative partners [15]. Trust between partners, e.g. between a business firm and its customers, can be created through communication and building relationships.

Marketing practitioners try to create involvement by differentiating their brands [16] and equating marketing communications appeals to consumer needs [17]. According to Petty and Cacioppo [18] the factors which influence the level of involvement and the extent of information search in a given purchase situation are; a) high level of perceived risk; b) low level of product knowledge; c) the pressure of limited time to make a decision; d) relatively high price of the product or service; e) the extent of differences of the characteristics of the products or services in the market.

Prior research [19,20,18] demonstrated that attitudes towards both risk and ambiguity together are important determinants of choice under uncertainty [21,22]. For instance, when a consumer feels uncertain about the merits of alternative holiday products and or destinations, it is assumed that the external information search activity will be proportional to the degree of *perceived risk* ie the level of perception of uncertainty and adverse consequences of buying a product or service, decreasing with the increasing level of product knowledge derived from experience [19]. As most of the travel experience relies on services that are intangible, consumed simultaneously when they are produced, and are typically hard to standardise, travellers' perceived risk is likely to be high [23,24].

After Bauer's [25] introduction of the concept of " perceived risk" to the marketing literature many contributions have been made by various scholars in the area of perception of risk and its relationship with brand purchase behaviour [26,27,28]. Van Raaj [29] and later Settle and Alreck [30] outlined the types of risk consumers may perceive as: *performance risk* - "will the hotel be as nice as it was depicted in the brochure?"; *financial risk-* "can I afford that much or should I go for a three star hotel?"; *physical risk-* "is it safe as the chalets are so far away from the nearest village?"; *social risk -* "will my friends laugh at me or will they be impressed with me for going on a Black Sea tour?"; *Ego risk -* "will I feel as good as I want to feel when I am having my holiday or when I am talking about it?". Stone and Grounhaug [31] proposed an additional risk factor which is to do with the opportunity cost of time spent using a product or service choice. This *psychological* risk factor may be particularly relevant for tourism, as consumers may need to wait another year for another holiday, if the one they have currently purchased does not produce satisfaction for them. Financial, psychological, satisfaction, and time risks were found to be most frequently associated with pleasure travel [32].

IV. RECENT TRENDS IN TOURISM

Tourism industry in general is going through a number of changes. One of the significant changes taking place in the tourism industry is that there is an overall world trend moving away from General Interest Tourism (GIT) to Special Interest Tourism (SIT) [33,34,35,36].

Culligan [33] suggested that the tourist's increasing desire for more novel, adventurous, and 'authentic' forms of tourism experience is a function of the decline in *utility* associated with a decision to simply replicate previous experience; an increasing ability to afford different forms of tourism. This means a move away from General Interest Tourism (GIT) towards Special Interest Tourism (SIT) [34]. Krippendorf [35,36] argued that fundamental changes occurring in the tourism market in general are in line with the developments of new patterns of tourism consumption. He maintains that in the near future there will be a substantial decline in those tourists for whom *hedonism* is a dominant travel motive and for whom tourism is seen purely as a mechanism for recovery [rest] and liberation [escape from the ordinary]. Instead, the travel market will place emphasis on the environmental and social context in which tourism occurs, and the humanisation of travel [35,36]. In fact what [35,36]is saying is that there will be a move from GIT to SIT with decreasing utility in hedonistically motivated holidays.

As there is more uncertainty and hence risk associated with Special Interest Tourism (SIT), and the fact that tourism markets become more and more segmentated the need for more, frequent and reliable information increases on the part of potential tourists.

V.   RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND THE INTERNET IN TOURISM MARKETING

When traditional transactional marketing and relationship marketing were compared (Table 1) it was seen that the emphasis in relationship marketing is on customer retention through continuous customer contact. This means that effective and continuous communications need to be established with customers. As tourism is an information-intensive industry and the Internet is the most effective and efficient means in information exchange worldwide, there is a high potential for the success of the Internet in building relationships with target customers.

As a service industry, most tourist products are intangible services, they are experienced and cannot be touched, tasted, smelt or seen and therefore difficult for tourists to grasp and evaluate. Furthermore, the spatial fixity of tourist attractions and amenities means that a tourist cannot really assess their quality until s/he arrives at the destination. Tourists have, for a long time, relied on limited information from holiday brochures and other literature to evaluate tours and destinations. Comprehensive, relevant, timely information which was essential in tourists' holiday decision making was not readily available to tourists until the emergence of the Internet.

O'Connor and Galvin [37]while explaining the uses of the Internet, mention that the Internet and e-mail (electronic mail), as an application of the Internet, can be used as an important and effective tool in creating closer relationships with customers. Heinen [38] and Hoffman and Novak [39]argue that business firms can send tailor-made message contents to a smaller target audience or an individual customer. Hamill and Kitchen [40]and Hoffman and Novak [39]argue that new marketing communications paradigms may have to be developed as many of the fundamental tenets on which most marketing and marketing communications research and teaching is based are called into question by the growing popularity of the Internet. itta [41] put forward that Internet-enabled one-to-one marketing reconfigures the familiar four Ps (Product, Price, Place and Promotion) into one element-relationship. As can be seen in Table 2 below, the growth of the Internet has been phenomenal and the figures suggest that the Internet can play a significant role in communicating with customers.

Table 2 The Growth of the Internet in the World

	1995	1998	2000
Number of PCs with access to the Internet (Million)	14.2	120.4	394. 8
Number of the Internet users (Million)	13.9	97.3	170
Number of people who shop on the Internet (Million)	2 .99	22.7	58.4
Electronic commerce revenues (Million $)	296	32400	13300

Source: Ekonomist, Ekonomist Yıllığı - Türkiye 2000, 1999, p.63

It was estimated that purchases of travel products represent just 6% of all overall Internet sales and 0.5 % of all travel and tourism spending [42]In the US, Jupiter Communications forecasts that online travel bookings will grow from $ 2.2 billion in 1998 $16.6 billion by 2003, representing a market share of total travel sales of 1.7% and 9.6% respectively [43,44].

The Economist research [45]shows that with total industry turnover of 1.7% in the USA and 0.85% in Europe travel/tourism is one of the top eight categories of business that uses the Internet. With the increase in the use of the Internet, and the growth of the tourism industry in the world, the use of the Internet in the travel and tourism sector can be expected to increase. Kierzkowski

et al.'s [46] study of the potential of business categories suitable for the Internet marketing supports the view that the Internet has a high potential for businesses operating within travel and tourism services sector (Figure 1).

High

News   Insurance   Financial
     Software   services

Music
Selected   Books
groceries

Interactive
games   Real estate   Travel/Tourism
        brokerage   services

Sporting Toys White Autos Medical
Goods   Goods   Services

Convenience   High-end   Consumer
stores   apparel   electronics

Fine   Baby
Low Gasoline   Jewellery products

Fit with the interactive media (vertical axis)

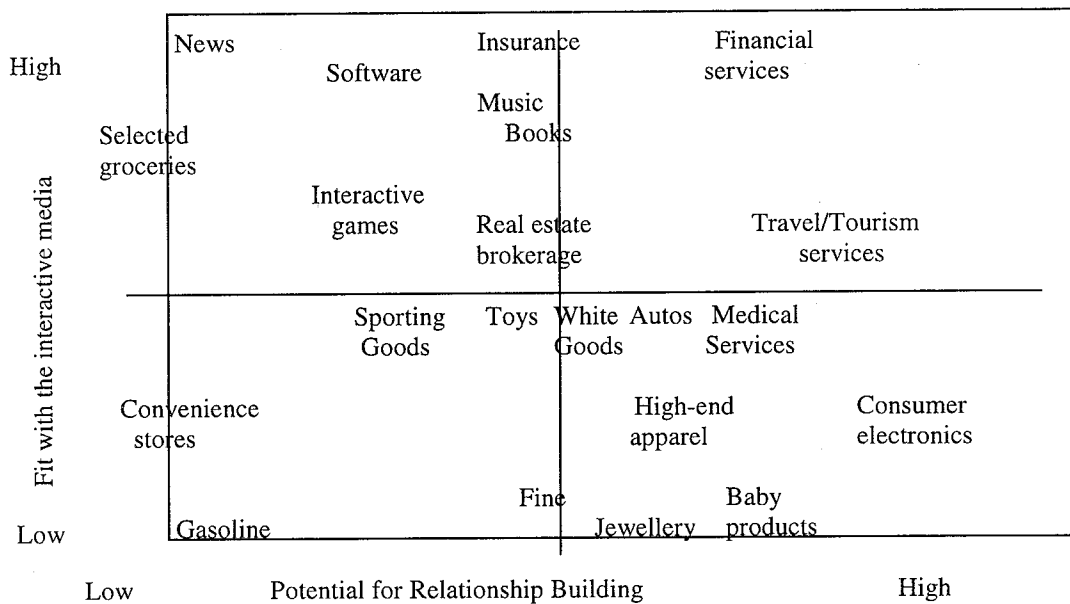Low   Potential for Relationship Building   High

Figure 1 Business Categories Suitable for Digital Marketing Source: Kierzkowski, A., McQuade, S., Waitman, R., and Zeisser, M. (2000) Marketing to the Digital Consumer, in Maureen Fitzgerald and David Arnott (eds.) Marketing Communications Classics, Business Press-Thompson, London., p.298.

Travel and tourism services have both high potential with interactive media and potential for relationship building. The Internet is capable of giving feedback in response to the actions of users perform on the computer, resulting in the sense of engagement with the computer. This two-way dialogue forms an important component of relationship marketing, and is an important factor in building customer loyalty. Customers effortlessly communicate with companies to find product information and conduct transactions with a few keystrokes while companies can easily contact customers to clarify their needs or inform them of new products. Features such as e-mail, web forms and Java applets positively encourage marketers to interact with consumers [47]. Thus, promotion through the Internet combines mass media's reach with the personalisation inherent in two-way dialogue –previously only possible in personal selling [48]. *Addressability* which enables the business firm to send tailor made-message content to a smaller target audience or and individual customer and *interactivity* [48] are the two important features of Internet for enabling relationship marketing to have paramount of importance, especially in the tourism industry.

While Kierzkowski *et al.* [46]emphasised the positive influence of the Internet on travel and tourism

firms, Calder [49] argued that the Internet posed threats for travel agencies. He put forward that travel agencies would be severely affected by the Internet as there will be fewer people using traditional travel agencies, and many of the consumers will prefer to purchase their holidays from Internet web sites, which provide a 24-hour-a-day service.

Kofteoglu [50]put forward that the threat of the Internet for travel agencies has already been felt in the USA, and the American Association of Travel Agencies is trying to get the support of their members to start a legal process to ensure the sovereignty of travel agencies in their field. Kofteoglu [50] states that although in Turkey there is currently no threat from the Internet for travel agencies, travel agencies should unite and protect their rights.

On the other hand, Bigné and Andreu [51] asserted that the Internet does not pose a threat for travel agencies. They explained that although the use of the Internet as a marketing tool is increasing, it will never become a substitute for travel agencies, as people have preference for dealing with firms that can provide a full array of holiday services for all types of travel products, using human beings to interact directly with the consumer. Bécherel and Vellas [52] support Bigné and Andreu [51] and state that travel agencies have distinctive strengths based on proximity to the user, and on their know-how in their field of activity and holiday/products and services. The researcher believes that these above strengths mentioned by Bécherel and Vellas [52] and Bigné and Andreu [51] can be further enhanced through the use of the Internet to develop competitive advantage for travel agencies already operating in a market.

VI. RESEARCH METHOD

This study aims to explore the extent to which travel agencies, which are shown as one of the top three information sources used by tourists in general [53,54]) use e-mail (which is an application of the Internet) in communicating with their customers as a marketing communications and relationship marketing tool to build relationships with their customers.

Fourteen major travel agencies operating in the Turkish domestic market with web sites and e-mail addresses have been identified. For each travel agency ten simple customer e-mail holiday inquiries, have been sent with a different query, a different name and a different e-mail address. A month after the first e-mail queries were sent, follow-up e-mails were sent to the travel agencies. The total number of e-mail queries made in two stages of the study were 280.

It might be argued that since relationship marketing is about establishing continuous and a long-term relationship, sending one-off e-mail queries, even though the e-mail queries may be followed up by further e-mail queries, does not demonstrate fully the extent to which a travel agency is relationship-marketing oriented. However, it should be borne in mind that, in order to establish the extent to which travel agencies are relationship marketing oriented, first of all, it should be established how *prepared* these travel agencies are to start or to build relationships with their customers as each e-mail query can mean a potential customer for the travel agency. For this reason, it is believed that the study has relevance and value for both academics and practitioners.

VII. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Two issues appeared to be significant in analysing the extent to which the travel agencies were marketing oriented and interested in building relationships with their potential customers:

a) Speed of the response to the customer inquiry
b) The content and the length of the message

65% of customer e-mail inquiries sent have not been responded to at all by the travel agencies. The low level of response rate to the customer e-mail inquiries clearly show that whatever the reason is, travel agencies operating in the Turkish domestic tourism market lack a solid understanding of marketing concept

It was also observed that the speed of limited responses to the customer queries were erratic . The time lapse between the sending of the inquiry and the receiving a response from a travel agency varied between 1 hour and 186.5 hours for a particular agency. In some others there were variations in terms of the time lapse between 2 to 33 hours, 2.5 to 71.5 hours, 8 to 20.5 hours, 43 to 130 hours and 9 to 64.

Six of the travel agencies, although they had web sites and their e-mail addresses were provided in these web sites for their potential customers to contact, did not respond to any of the sixty e-mail inquiries (ten for each). Remaining eight travel agencies responded to only 49 of the inquiries (61.25% response rate) out of 80. No travel agency responded ten (all) of the inquiries. Two travel agencies responded 8 of the 10 (80% response rate) e-mail inquiries sent to them. However their responding time was erratic and ranged between 2.5 hours and 71.5 hours, and 9 hours and 67 hours. The average responding time to 8 messages in the first travel agency was 36 hours and in the latter was 35 hours.

Responses of the travel agencies were categorised according to the length and the content of the message as follows:

Table 3 – Categories of Responses to Customer Queries

Category /Grade	Explanation
0	No response at all.
1	A short response (E.g. "please visit our Web-site")
2	A short response but providing a telephone number for the potential customer to ring for detailed information.
3	A full response containing a direct response to the potential customer's inquiry; asking questions for further clarification; showing interest in the customer; providing telephone numbers for the customer to get in touch; asking the customer to provide a phone number so that the travel agency can contact the customer; and providing details about the web-site/pointing out to links for the customer to view.

When the responses were analysed, it was noted that only 31 of the messages which account for 22.1 % of all messages were more or less suitable for category 3 responses. The results were very much similar for the follow-up e-mail queries too (Table 5) which were sent a month after the first e-mail queries, though there was a slight increase both in grade 2 and 3 responses and a slight improvement in the terms of the speed of the responses. The overall responses to the original and follow-up e-mail queries and their categories appeared to be as follows

Table 4 – An Analysis of the Categories of Travel Agency Responses Given to Potential Customers

Type of Response	N	%	Average Time
Number of no (Grade 0) responses	91	65	No response
Number of Grade (1) responses	17	12	33.6 hours
Number of Grade (2) responses	1	0.7	15 hours
Number of Grade (3) responses	31	22	52.5 hours
Total	14 0	100	

Table 5 – Travel Agency Responses to Follow-up E-mail Queries

Type of Response		%	Average Time
Number of no (Grade 0) responses	8	63	No response
Number of Grade (1) responses	4	10	33.4 hours
Number of Grade (2) responses		2	14.2 hours
Number of Grade (3) responses	5	25	51.5 hours
Total	40	10 0	

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Maintaining ongoing contact with the target audience is essential to developing relationships with the target audience. The analysis and interpretation of survey show that travel agencies operating in the Turkish domestic tourism market are not using their e-mail facilities effectively in creating and building relationships with their potential customers. The results of this survey can be said to be supportive of Arat's [55] who argued that in Turkey, businesses are increasingly establishing company Web sites, mainly for prestige reasons without really being aware of their consequences. He warned that if these Web sites are not regularly updated and maintained well, the Internet might eventually have a negative influence on the reputation of these business firms.

As mentioned above the low level of response rate to customer e-mail queries is also attributable to a lack of an understanding and awareness of the marketing concept among the travel agencies operating in the Turkish domestic tourism market. According to Koc [56] the lack of understanding and awareness of the marketing concept among the travel agencies operating in the Turkish domestic tourism market can be attributed to the market structure, the ownership structure of travel agencies, and the infancy of the Turkish domestic tourism market. Koc [56] argued that the market structure was particularly a

significant factor in the adoption of selling orientation rather than the adoption of marketing orientation.

In the Turkish domestic tourism market larger travel agencies made their package holidays available to their customers through smaller travel agencies. Although smaller travel agencies sold the package holidays of larger travel agencies under the name of these larger travel agencies, there was not much control over their operations. Coupled with this lack of control, low profit margins in a traditionally inflationary economy led smaller travel agencies to become short-term sales oriented. However, the results of this survey show that these larger travel agencies themselves are not marketing oriented as customer e-mail queries were sent to their headquarters. This lack of marketing orientation may be attributable to two of the other factors cited by Koc [57], which are the ownership structure of the travel agencies

(individually or family owned without professional organization) and the infancy of the domestic tourism market in Turkey.

In conclusion, domestic travel agencies in Turkey are not using e-mail effectively which is a powerful tool in developing relationships especially in the tourism market effectively. The installation of a Web-site and e-mail facilities and other information technology tools do not appear to mean much unless the management of organization believes that these systems can be used to the advantage of the business.

IX.   ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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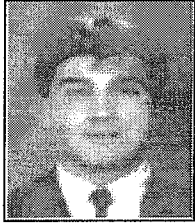
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