



## **Designing Effective Winery Websites: Marketing-Oriented versus Wine-Oriented Websites**

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### ***Abstract:***

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increased focus in the academic wine literature and in industry trade periodicals on the need for effective winery websites. Although there have been published articles on the subject and a variety of approaches suggested for measuring effectiveness of winery websites, there has also been a lack of uniformity in measurement.

***Purpose:*** The purpose of the project was twofold. From the managerial standpoint, the primary purpose was to develop an objective website evaluation framework that will assist the wine business practitioner with creating effective websites. From the academic standpoint, the purpose was to attempt to identify structure in a complex (due to dimensionality) set of factors in the evaluation instrument.

***Design/methodology/approach:*** Fifty-six winery websites in an emerging wine region were thoroughly examined by 21 evaluators based on 95 attributes reflecting 14 constructs in a newly developed instrument.

***Findings:*** Websites were grouped based on their similarity across the constructs. By normal default options, two groups or clusters of websites emerged. The presence (in cluster 1) or absence (in cluster 2) of online shopping availability, social media presence, and wine clubs were identified as major points of differentiation between the two clusters, which were labelled as “marketing-oriented” and “wine-oriented” websites, respectively.

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***Practical implications:*** The project developed objective criteria for winery website evaluation. The study will help wineries better understand the span of options available when designing a website. In addition, the instrument may serve as a checklist for designing more effective websites.

**Key words:** Winery Websites, Marketing-Oriented, Wine-Oriented Websites

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's fast paced technology-driven world, more consumers are searching companies' websites to familiarize themselves with their businesses. It is consumers' expectation nowadays that they can find virtually any information online prior to attending a venue or making a purchase online. Today's consumers have very high expectations for websites quality. A recent study by Forrester Research (2009) has identified that the new threshold for acceptable webpage response time is now two seconds. That is, if consumers are unable to find the necessary information in two seconds, they are likely to abandon the website and a potential purchase. Poor site performance is a major cause of customer dissatisfaction. In addition to speedy functionality, the site design and content also impact consumer perceptions of the company and its products. Therefore, a well performing and informative website can be a powerful marketing tool. It is crucial for the winery's exposure to potential customers, brand loyalty with existing customers, and for generating revenue.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Winery websites have become an important part of the overall marketing strategy. In an effort to build customer loyalty, develop brand, increase traffic to the tasting room, and encourage direct purchasing, most US wineries nowadays have websites. However, a nationwide expert evaluation (Ness, 2006) revealed that few US winery websites are designed for optimal return. A winery website, however, could possibly be the very first (and sometimes the only) contact a potential customer may have with the winery. Customers' impressions are critical and the winery should strive to develop and maintain a site that is attractive, up-to-date, user friendly, and easy to navigate. Customer experiences with the website can influence customer perception about the winery. Nowak and Newton (2008) found that website quality was a significant predictor of increased trust in the winery and perceptions of the quality of the wine.

Although there is little doubt about the Internet becoming an increasingly important channel for online sales and an important marketing medium, literature on the subject is largely focused on winery websites as tools for online wine buying. A broad range of research initiatives studied wine online buying from multiple perspectives - from online business models in the wine industry (e.g., Gebauer and Ginsburg, 2003) to online wine buyers' motivations and behavior (e.g., Bruwer and Wood, 2005). Fewer studies examined factors that make winery websites effective. From the industry perspective, however, this information is exceptionally important, especially for small and medium-sized wineries that often do not have sufficient resources to hire professional expertise. The wine industry is in need for a comprehensive measure of effectiveness of winery websites.

Basically, the two main purposes of a website are transactional and informational (Bruwer and Wood, 2005). A number of approaches have been suggested for measuring effectiveness of winery websites. In the early 2000, a few studies developed evaluation criteria to examine winery websites in different world regions. For example, Bernet & Stricker (2003) evaluated websites of two regions in Germany using what they termed a "web-rapid appraisal" methodology. Their assessment of websites quality was conducted in terms of usability attributes, where the attributes were grouped in three categories: technical, design, and content. The researchers found that technical content was hard to observe without significant programming ability. Thus, design and content were considered the two crucial aspects for

websites evaluation. Several later studies (e.g., Davidson, 2004; Stevens and Burns, 2005) operated on the same set of assumptions. Yuan, Morrison, Linton, Feng, & Jeon (2004) established four major categories of criteria (technical, customer, winery internal, and marketing / partnership) to evaluate small US wineries websites. Bressolles and Durrieu (2010) provided an insightful comparison of traditional and electronic service quality. The authors suggest that given the crucial role of consumer evaluation in the services domain, an important issue is the identification of the dimensions of service quality perceptions.

This brief overview of the selected studies measuring winery website effectiveness demonstrates a lack of uniformity in measurement. The value of these studies was that the developed evaluation framework could help the industry make informed decisions when implementing a web presence or improving an existing web presence. However, the main problem with the existing instruments is that, with a few exceptions (e.g., Yuan et al., 2004), the majority of these instruments were based on subjective judgments of the evaluators. The websites were mainly user tested, where design and content attributes were subjectively rated on Likert-type scales. Although these ratings are important as they determine customer perceptions of the websites, the research cannot take into account personalities of the evaluators. Different personality traits could affect judgment. The industry would benefit from an evaluation instrument with objective criteria based on the presence /absence of certain features on the website.

Furthermore, from the academic standpoint, findings of the previous studies were part of bigger research objectives. The evaluations by themselves mainly provided a picture of the level of development of different world regions winery websites. Nevertheless, the abundance of dimensions in the evaluation framework indicates a need for structure of the website evaluation measurement.

### **3. PURPOSE**

The purpose of this project was twofold. From the managerial standpoint, the primary purpose was to develop a website evaluation framework that will assist the wine business practitioner with creating effective websites. From the academic standpoint, the purpose was to attempt to identify structure in a complex (due to dimensionality) set of factors in the evaluation instrument.

### **4. RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **4.1. Sample**

The study was conducted in the state of Texas, USA. Although Texas has come a long way since the emergence of the first wineries in the late 1970s, the region is still new to the development of its wine and grape industry. Texas currently is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest wine producing state in the United States, with over 180 wineries and \$1.7 billion economic contribution from the wine and grape growing industry to the state of Texas (Texas Wine Marketing Research Institute, 2008). Texas thus provides a good setting for an emerging wine region. The sampling frame was divided into strata based on size and geographical location of the winery to ensure that all size and different location (e.g., urban and rural) wineries from across Texas were comparatively represented. The sample included 56 winery websites.

## 4.2. Evaluators

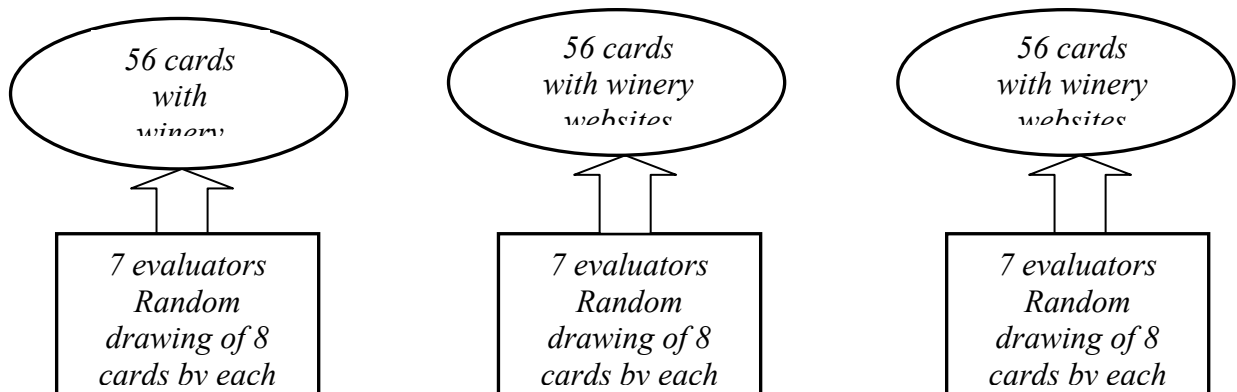
Twenty-one students in a Wine Marketing class served as evaluators of the websites. Each evaluator had a coder number for anonymous evaluation. University students represented an appropriate choice of websites evaluators. As heavy users of the Internet, evaluating websites performance was a relevant task for this technology-savvy population. Evaluators were also enrolled in a wine marketing course, thus indicating at least some interest in the product. All evaluators were over the age of 21 – the legal drinking age in the US.

Each winery website was evaluated three times - by three different evaluators who worked independently. For validation purposes, the three evaluations of one website were later compared by the researcher. Any inconsistencies across the three evaluations were checked on the wineries' websites, reevaluated and corrected by the researcher. Since the characteristics were objective in nature, 100% inter-rater reliability was achieved.

## 4.3. Procedures

Evaluators randomly drew cards with website addresses from a stack. The evaluation took place in a controlled research setting (computer lab) under the supervision of the researcher, who was present at all times to respond to evaluators' inquiries and to ensure that research procedures were followed correctly. During one evaluation session (1 hour 30 minutes), evaluators were able to evaluate approximately 2 websites. The project was completed in 4 sessions. Each evaluator examined a total of 8 websites.

## 4.4. Research Design Model



## 5. METHOD

### 5.1. Evaluation Instrument

One of the main objectives of this project was to develop an evaluation instrument with specific emphasis on the development of objective criteria for winery website evaluations. Dimensions used in previous research were used as the basis. After expanding the number of previously used items, an initial list of winery websites evaluation criteria was created by the researcher. Next, before starting working on the project, the 21 evaluators suggested their lists of criteria for winery website effectiveness. The criteria were screened for possible duplication and refined by the researcher. To maximize the face validity of the instrument, the pool of items was emailed for review to 5 experts. The expert panel consisted of the wine

industry professionals and wine educators who are knowledgeable in the content area. Based on the experts' insightful comments on individual items, the final pool of items was developed. It is important to note that factors in the instrument included only objective criteria for evaluation and required a *yes* or *no* response. These criteria were evaluated on the basis of presence or absence of a specific feature (“*yes*” = present, coded as 1; “*no*” = “not present”, coded as 0).

## 6. MEASUREMENT AND DATA ANALYSIS

The final instrument included 95 attributes under 14 categories. Sample questions are provided for each category:

1. *Ease of Navigation*: “Home” button available from all pages? Site map or index?
2. *Ease of Contact*: Direct email address available? Mailing address available?
3. *About Us*: History / story about winery available? Profile of winemaker available?
4. *Operational Information*: Hours of operation available? Availability of tour of winery?
5. *Facilities*: Information on wine production facilities available? Gift shop information?
6. *Product Information*: Description of wines available? Price of wine available?
7. *E-commerce*: Online shopping cart available? Method of payment identified?
8. *Strategic Marketing*: Mission statement / Vision statement available?
9. *Branding/Positioning/Image*: Logo and winery name on every page?
10. *Public Relations*: Media updates / Latest news?
11. *Partnership*: Links to local lodging? Local attractions? Local restaurants?
12. *Interactive Functions*: Online sign-up for wine club available? E-mail newsletters sign-up (mailing list) available?
13. *Marketing Research*: Customer Feedback available?
14. *Educational Opportunities*: Recipes on food pairing with the winery's wine? Tips /info on wine tasting?

The binary responses to the objective questions were summed into 14 constructs. These summates were standardized to avoid over-weighting constructs with more items. In order to find website groupings, the website by construct data matrix was transposed in order to perform Q-factor analysis. That is, instead of finding variables that are similar to one another (R-factor), websites were grouped based on their similarity across the constructs. By normal default options, only two groups or clusters of websites emerged.

## 7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The two clusters that emerged were then subjected to content analysis with a purpose of finding points of differentiation between the clusters. The researchers identified initial differing factors. Next, twenty-two hospitality students (different group from the evaluators in the original study) each evaluated the two clusters for potential differences. The results of their analyses were compared to the researcher's original results.

The main differing factor between the two clusters was determined to be the presence of the following features that are present in cluster 1, but not in cluster 2:

- 1) Online shopping availability
- 2) Links to winery's social media pages (Facebook, Twitter, or Blogs)
- 3) Wine clubs featuring

The clusters were thereafter given descriptive names based on the factors that were specific to each cluster of websites. The two clusters were labeled, (1) “*marketing oriented*”, and (2) “*wine oriented*”, respectively, factors which have been shown to have a significant impact on the success of a winery (our award winning journal article).

One of the major contrasting factors between the two clusters was the availability of online shopping in the marketing oriented cluster of websites. Wine is an old traditionally established business with traditional sales channels – mainly centered on either direct sales from the winery or a network of established agents. Within the last decade, however, there is an evident trend in the wine industry throughout the world for wineries to transfer at least part of their businesses to electronic media. In fact, some researchers believe that wine is perfectly suited for internet retailing due to its benefits for educating with tasting notes and its ease of price comparison and search capabilities for unique wines (Lockshin, 2000) and because product differentiation is high and the industry is highly fragmented (Bernet and Stricker, 2003).

The second differing factor was the presence (in marketing-oriented websites) or absence (in wine-oriented websites) of links to wineries’ social media pages, such as Facebook or Twitter, as well as to wineries’ blogs. While websites still serve as a primary means of online communication for a brand, the stream of information primarily flows one way - from a brand to the consumer. With the introduction of social media, however, the balance of communication has shifted from one-way communication to two-way communication, providing consumers new ways to interact with brands in a public forum. Most wineries are aware of the popularity of social media, but few seem sure how it can help them and how to exploit it. By launching a winery Facebook or Twitter page with engaging, relevant content, a brand can create relationships with existing and potential customers through incidental exposure.

The last point of differentiation between the two clusters was wine clubs. Wine clubs reflect on developing long-term relationships with customers instead of just securing one-time transaction (Teaff, Thach, and Olsen, 2005). One of the most important goals in maintaining a wine club is to continuously seek new members. By featuring wine clubs on their websites, wineries strive to build club membership beyond typical face-to-face opportunities.

The brief overview of the contrasting factors between the two clusters of winery websites reveal that marketing-oriented websites focus more on the market (online shopping, social media, and wine clubs), while wine-oriented websites feature mainly their winery and its products. Quality of a winery’s website reflects on the scope of its marketing activities and influences its position in the competitive wine business environment. In order for the website to be effective, it has to communicate the winery’s position to the consumer. The more effective the website, the more effective the message, and hence, the better the winery’s position.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The project aimed to extend the website evaluation framework developed by previous research and to develop objective criteria for winery website evaluation. In addition, the study identified structure in a complex set of factors in the evaluation instrument. For the industry, the results of this study may serve as a checklist for designing more effective websites for

their businesses. For the academe, this research signals the need to explore in greater depth the notion of the effectiveness of winery websites.

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