

DIGITAL MARKETING IN WINE TOURISM – INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACTIVITY

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ДИГИТАЛНИЯТ МАРКЕТИНГ ВЪВ ВИНЕНИЯ ТУРИЗЪМ – ИНОВАТИВЕН ПОДХОД ЗА РАЗВИТИЕ НА ДЕЙНОСТТА

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Abstract

Strong competition on the wine market provokes the search for new approaches in the marketing of the product, such as wine tourism. The difficult situation in the last two years, expressed in a series of lockdowns and restrictive measures in the conditions of the COVID-19, has necessitated the use of innovative solutions to ensure profitability in wineries. The aim of the present study was to establish the degree and forms of application of digital marketing in Bulgarian wine enterprises, practicing wine tourism. Data from the official websites of forty Bulgarian wineries were summarized and analyzed. The results showed that the majority of wineries use a complex of Internet-based resources to promote their activities, attract customers and make sales.

Key words: wine, wine tourism, marketing, digitalization, Bulgaria

JEL: M39, O13, Q13

Development of global markets and the growing competition between individual products necessitates the search and application of new strategies. Market sustainability is based not only on attracting customers and realizing goods and services, but also on the permanent occupation of a certain market niche and greater brand recognition. Tourism and winemaking are industries, operating in a highly competitive environment where key elements such as product quality, brand popularity and destination/region image are essential. Their unification in a common activity – wine tourism, is based mainly on these three elements (Dimitrov, 2014; Terziyska, 2020). While tourism is significantly more flexible in the implementation and use of new technologies, in winemaking technical and technological renewal occurs at a slower pace. The development of digitization and accelerated access to information gradually create conditions for crossing the boundaries of traditional, static markets, shaping the framework of digital markets of goods and services. Projection

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of the changed conditions of the market environment on marketing, and above all the need to offering goods in a new and at the same time faster way in the conditions of intensifying competition, forms the new concept of "digital marketing" (Yasmin et al., 2015, Girchenko and Ovsianikova, 2016, Sawicki, 2016, Olson et al., 2021). As a part of the more general process of digital transformation of the business, digital marketing is an element of the company's marketing strategy, which uses modern information and communication technologies to attract and retain users based on building lasting relationships with them (Slavova, 2016). According to Visser et al. (2018), digital marketing can be more effective than traditional marketing for two main reasons – it provides opportunities to share a large amount of information at relatively lower costs and allows for a more targeted allocation of the marketing budget due to the easier measurement of the effects of marketing communications.

In recent years, the tourism industry, including wine tourism, has increasingly relied on digital technology. They have established themselves as the main marketing platform for attracting customers, promoting and advertising both individual tourism products and entire destinations. Wineries are realizing the increasingly important role of digital marketing as a valuable and appropriate tool to reach consumers (Murphy, 2006, Begalli et al., 2009, Alonso et al., 2013, Pivacet et al., 2020). In a study by Thach and Cogan-Marie (2018), related to the supply of wine tourism and the attraction of customers in region Burgundy, France states that wineries need to improve their digital marketing strategies to attract more tourists and create a more positive brand perception. According to Levitskaia et al. (2020) new marketing tools applied in a digital environment acquire a particularly topical importance in the activities of wine enterprises in connection with overcoming the consequences of the COVID -19 pandemic. In Bulgaria, according to data from Kodzhai-vanova (2022), out of 350 functioning wineries, nearly 100 offer wine tourism, but according to the estimates of representatives of the industry, only 50 are those with good service and regular guests. The pandemic situation, albeit temporarily, closed their doors to visitors, which also negatively affected wine sales. In the changed situation, the use of the possibilities of the digital environment proved to be extremely important for maintaining the market positions of the wine makers.

The aim of the present study was to establish the degree and forms of application of digital marketing in wineries practicing wine tourism.

Material and methods

The object of the study was the application of internet marketing in wine enterprises in Bulgaria. Internet marketing is one of the main elements of digital marketing, along with marketing in other non-internet digital channels. Different types of internet marketing are known in scientific theory and practice – website, search engine marketing, social networks, mobile marketing, email marketing, online banners (Slavova, 2016). Considering the specific importance for wine tourism of the

new marketing methods applied in the Internet environment – promotion, attraction of new customers, creating a specific wine culture, increasing sales on the domestic and international market (Levitskaia et al., 2020), focus of the research is the marketing activities systematized in the websites of the wineries, as well as the use of social networks and video channels for marketing purposes. By means of a random selection in the Google search, a sample of 40 Bulgarian enterprises producing wine and offering wine tourism was formed by Key words on Bulgarian language "*wine tourism*", "*wine cellar*" and "*wine estate*". The data have been processed using the methods of statistical grouping, comparative and structural analysis and synthesis.

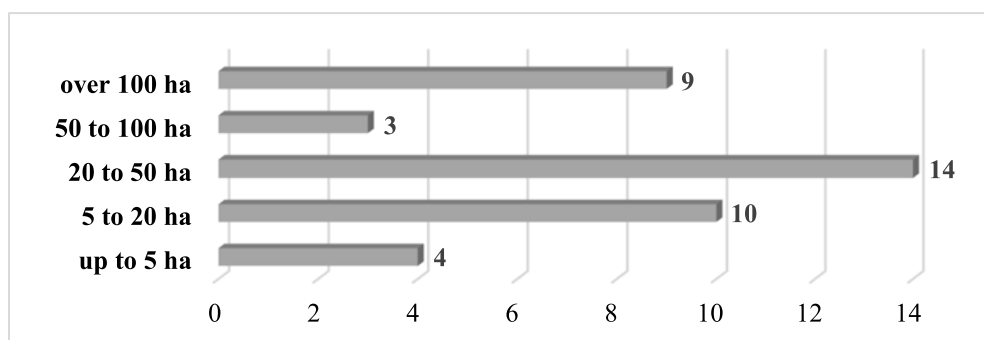
Results and discussion

Main characteristics of wineries

The study covered 40 Bulgarian wineries, which are mostly family companies. The winemaking in the enterprises is oriented towards the production of small series, boutique wines, with a grape processing capacity between 20 and 100 tons (Figure 1).

They produce white, red and rosé wines, and several wineries now also offer orange wine. The majority of them sell their products both on the domestic and international markets. The wineries grow their own vineyards and a part of the wine production is realized at a place, through wine tourism. In the vineyards of the farms, the introduced wine grape varieties are more widespread, but a significant part of the enterprises grow local varieties as well. Some of the wineries buy grapes, thus providing opportunities to diversify the offered assortment of wines.

The greater number of wine cellars are located in the valley of the Struma River, Southwestern Bulgaria and in the region of Plovdiv and region. Haskovo, South Central Bulgaria (about 70%). The rest of the wineries are located in Northwest Bulgaria (1), North Central Bulgaria (3), Northeast Bulgaria (3).



Source: authors based on online survey data, August 2022.

Figure 1. Distribution of the number of wineries depending on the cultivated area with vineyards

Product of wine tourism in the studied enterprises

The main activity offered by wineries in Bulgaria is wine tasting, led by a specialist oenologist or a specially trained guide (Table 1). Other main activities are a walk among the vineyards, which most often, depending on the season, includes getting to know the terroir and the varietal structure, cultivation and grape harvesting. An interesting activity for the visitors is to introduce them to the stages of wine production – from grape processing, through vinification, maturing/aging rooms to bottling and labeling. At the end of the tour, the best wines are offered for tasting, grouped in different tasting packages with three, five or more wines, accompanied by bites and appetizers of regional dairy and meat delicacies, and the prices per visitor are between 15 and 45 BGN. After the tasting, the guests are given the opportunity to buy from the production of the wine cellars for consumption, as a souvenir or as a gift. These activities, with few exceptions, are offered by almost all the wineries surveyed. A positive point observed in the majority of enterprises is that the product of wine tourism is not limited only to those activities typical of its scope. A long time ago, many wine producers around the world, and also in Bulgaria, have discovered the great opportunities provided by tourism. Inclusion of additional activities helps to diversify and enrich the product of wine tourism, and besides added value, they also create opportunities for synergies. Most often this is realized through the typical tourism activities such as catering and accommodation. The cellars that have built restaurants offer mainly local cuisine with local foods and delicacies (24 wine cellars). Most of them, which have a restaurant, offer accommodation in luxury hotels, bungalows or guest houses, where overnight stays for one person are priced between BGN 80 and 150 (23 wine cellars). Recently, it has been noticed that some company products offer Spa- services and areas for relaxing (16 of the wine cellars). In addition, quite a few offer various attractions for their visitors (14 of the wine cellars) – a walk in nature and cultural and historical sights, bicycle rental, horse riding, various types of sports, attractions for children, for adults and other activities.

Wineries that offer food and accommodation increasingly successfully organize various events – celebrations, family and company parties, team building, and conferences. There are also wine cellars that, together with other like-minded wineries, organize joint wine tours, such as the "South Sakar 4x4" that has become traditional in the Harmanli region, "Open doors", holiday celebrations, fairs and concerts. Offering as many activities as possible and organizing different events predispose visitors to extend their stay, ensuring a more complete recreation, which brings more income to the wineries. According to Atanasova et al. (2021), the linking of the main service – growing grapes and wine production, with the benefits of wine tourism and the attributes of the wine region should be carried out in such a way that it provides greater utility for consumers when compared with other types of benefits or destination characteristics when deciding to visit, re-visit or recommendation by

an winery or wine region. Eleven of the surveyed wineries have the full set of activities and have a complete complex product – "Villa Yustina", "Uva Nestum", Complex "Midalidare", "Eduardo Miroglio", "Villa Velis", "Zornitza Family Estate", "Zaara Estate", Complex "Seven Generations", "Villa Ovcharovo", "Salla Estate", "Chateau Copsa".

Table 1. Offer of basic and additional activities forming the product of wine tourism in wineries

Activities of the wine tourism product	Number of wineries	% of the total number of wineries
Basic activities		
Vineyard tour	37	92,5
A visit to the production	37	92,5
Wine tasting	40	100,0
Wine and souvenir shop	40	100,0
Additional activities		
Food – restaurant, catering, BBQ	24	60,0
Accommodation – hotel, guest house, bungalow	23	57,5
Spa and areas for relaxing	16	40,0
Attractions	14	35,0
Sport	13	32,5
Sightseeing	26	65,0
Visiting other wineries	18	75,0
Organizing events	24	60,0

Source: authors, based on online survey data, August 2022.

The results indicated in the table 1 show that a significant part of the wine-producing enterprises operating in the country offer a quality wine tourism product. However, there is still a large number of wineries which, due to lack of funds, poor management or lack of a marketing concept for development, are limited only in offering tastings and tours of vineyards and production premises.

Application and elements of Internet Marketing

The research activity primarily focused on internet marketing and the types of digital platforms that wineries, offering wine tourism, have targeted to advertise and attract customers to their company products. It was implemented in the period July-August, 2022 in the Google search. In the search process, two Key words were entered: "*wine tourism*", as a result of which the search offered 10 pages, each of

which shows 10 web addresses, i.e. 100 web addresses in total. Of these, they only show web pages of 12 wineries. When entering the Key words *wine cellar* and *winery*, the results showed significantly more official websites of specific businesses, but it was not clear whether they offer wine tourism. Based on a thorough review, wineries that offer wine tourism and maintain their own web pages with up-to-date information were included in the scope of the study.

When browsing the web pages, it is noticeable that the enterprises advertise their main activity, in most cases, illustrating photos of their vineyards and the winery's production building. Consumers are influenced by things as, "Historical data" on the company's activity – creation of vineyards, varietal composition, construction of production premises. Getting to know the company team, even if from a distance, also provokes a special feeling towards the wine cellar on the part of the current and potential customers, given the fact that the majority of the enterprises are family-owned. The availability of places to eat and stay is also presented visually. All enterprises provide photographic material of the wines produced, grouped according to the series, offered on the market. The majority of the wineries covered in the study maintain an "Online store", which, in addition to being a great convenience for customers and driving sales growth, provides an opportunity for producers to collect data and analyze consumer demand.

As a main disadvantage it can be pointed out that on the majority of cellar web pages, in the "Wine tourism" section usually only two to three types of tasting packages are listed, without detailing what visitors can see and expect further on the visit. There are no more suggestions for activities that can be further offering and organizing. There are a few photos that shows the tasting rooms, most of them lack shots of other activities of the company's tourist product.

Presence of a "Blog" section in official pages of the companies is also important for maintaining image and popularity of the brand. It turns out that just over half of the surveyed wineries have such a section on their websites. There is the place where data of the most different nature is placed – from possibilities of visits; upcoming events to rich photo and video material.

The possibilities of advertising through social media show that almost all wineries, with the exception of only one, use at least one social media. Most often it is Facebook – 39 wine cellars, followed by Instagram – 26 and Twitter – 21 (table 2). Facebook is establishing itself as the most popular social network for advertising and reaching customers among wineries. A similar conclusion was reached by Levitskaia et al. (2020), according to which social media is increasingly being used as a communication tool in the wine business. The authors point out that Facebook is the most used social network, including in the wine industry. In a study by Canovi and Pucciarelli (2019), it was found that 16 out of a total 20 studied wineries in the North Italian region of Langhe use Facebook, 11 use Instagram, and only 10 use

Twitter. The authors explain winery owners' preference for Facebook with the more limited features of micro blogs, such as Twitter.

Table 2. Application of Internet Marketing

Types of Internet Marketing	Number of wineries	% of the total number of wineries
Web page	40	100,0
Social media		
Facebook	39	97,5
Instagram	26	65,0
Twitter	21	52,5
Blog	21	52,5
Video channels		
You Tube	27	67,5

Source: authors, based on data from online survey, July-August 202

Under the conditions of the present study, it was found that in order to realize the search on *Instagram* and *Twitter* of a specific winery, its name must be entered in Latin letters. Searching for Cyrillic did not yield results for some of the cellars. This would probably create difficulties for some Bulgarian users. For this reason, website development and social media presence should be based on both the Cyrillic and the Latin alphabet.

Video channels on the Internet are among the most popular media for direct communication with the customer. The most used are *YouTube* and especially among the youngest users preferred *TikTok*. The data from the present study shows that 27 of the wineries use *YouTube* to promote their activities, relying on the potential of the video channel to reach a wider audience.

Conclusion

The survey showed that the Bulgarian winemaking enterprises are increasingly successfully using the Internet, both to advertise their wine production, and for direct communication with customers and offering wine tourism. Most of the surveyed entities offer a quality product of wine tourism, the basis of which are tastings, visits to the vineyards and the production premises, complemented by dining and accommodation options. Only eleven of the wineries, covered by the study, offer a full range of the listed main and additional activities, including Spa and relaxation areas, attractions, sports, sightseeing, visiting other wineries, organizing events. The websites of these enterprises, offering a diverse tourism product with all activities from grape harvest, wine tasting with gourmet, to accommodation in luxury hotels with spa and relaxation areas, as well as many other entertainments and attractions, are the best developed. Practically, these sites include everything –

from the history of the cellar, presentation of the wines, online store, to a blog with rich photo and video material. In addition, the sites of these wineries have options to view the content in English and, in fewer cases, in other languages (French, German and Russian). This provides access to a much larger range of potential customers, both in the domestic and international markets. Advertising and communication in social networks is a widely applied means of contact with consumers by almost all wineries studied. *Facebook* is the most frequently used social media, and the fewest wineries advertise on *Twitter*. All this shows that internet marketing is being used more and more successfully by wineries. For most of them, there is potential to improve the application of marketing activities in the online space, especially in terms of the maintenance and layout of the web pages and facilitating access to them in social networks. It is necessary to expand the presence of wine producers in video channels, by publishing videos and advertising messages.

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