

1. Report from the study:

Effectiveness of promotion using web-based agritourism portals in the light of their users' feedback.

Web portal model for the region

Abstract

In recent years, agritourism has become one of the most popular forms of tourism. It is not easy to promote it, so most rural tourism farms are not able to promote their services on their own. This requires special qualifications and financial resources. The solution to this situation seems to be the use of the Internet, thanks to which the owners of agricultural tourism farms have the opportunity to use specialized agritourism portals, where they can publish information about their own services for a small fee.

The author of the study decided to look more closely at this form of promotion of agritourism services. The subject of his research was the effectiveness of promotion using Internet agritourism portals in the light of the opinion of their users. The survey covered Internet portals promoting agritourism in the Łódź Voivodeship. Particular emphasis was placed on researching the portals belonging to public organisations dealing with agritourism, including the Agricultural Advisory Centres, agritourism associations, the Regional Tourist Organisation of the Łódź Voivodeship, Local Tourist Organisations, municipalities, poviats, Local Action Groups and other institutions. In order to obtain a fuller picture of the study, these portals were analysed from 3 perspectives: the analysis of the content conducted by the author of the study, opinions of owners of agritourism farms as well as opinions of private persons interested in using the offer of agritourism farms and obtaining information on them using Internet agritourism portals.

The study showed that on the Internet there are many non-integrated portals containing offers of agritourism farms from the Łódź voivodeship. The portals vary in functionality and offers presented. There is no single comprehensive portal dedicated to the region of Łódź. This causes confusion among Internet users and makes it difficult to access important information. In addition, the author noted a number of shortcomings regarding the promotion of services on existing agritourism portals. At the same time, it should be emphasized that in the author's opinion, Internet agritourism portals have much greater potential for promoting agritourism in the Łódź region than is currently used. In connection with the above, the report presents a number of recommendations which, in the author's opinion, could significantly improve the quality of these portals and help in developing a new comprehensive agritourism portal for the region, which in turn will result in attracting new tourists and at the same time promoting the entire Łódź Voivodeship.

Prepared recommendations are divided into strategic and operational ones. The first of them are addressed to the institutions responsible for setting the strategy for the Łódź Voivodeship in the scope of tourism development and innovation. This type of institution includes: The Marshal Office of the Łódź Voivodeship and self-government units in the region. The second group of recommendations was addressed directly to economic entities, including institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the region (Agricultural Advisory Centre, agritourism associations, Regional Tourist Organisation of the Łódź Voivodeship, Local Tourist Organisations, Local Action Groups), owners of commercial agritourism portals and owners of agrotourist farms of the Łódź region.

Strategic recommendations concern mainly such aspects as increasing the use of new information technologies and innovative solutions for the promotion of agritourism farms and development of a comprehensive agritourism portal for the region. The author draws attention to the need to include these issues in the strategic regional documents (i.e. Development of Tourism in the Łódź Voivodeship Programme, Regional Innovation Strategy and the Regional Operational Programme for the Łódź Voivodeship) and in the promotional strategies of poviats and municipalities, which define the scope of activities of these entities in the field of tourism promotion (agritourism). In addition, the Marshal Office of the Łódź Voivodeship, as a public institution responsible for the promotion of tourism in the region, should strive to build a new comprehensive agritourism portal for the region, integrated with existing tourism/agritourism portals. A comprehensive portal should be understood as a portal which includes 3 main functions: information, booking and communication.

In the case of operational recommendations, the author considers that owners of Internet agritourism portals (commercial and those of the institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the region) should aim to develop and improve existing portals because at present they do not present a sufficient level of technological advancement and they do not meet the needs of Internet users looking for agritourism offers. Expansion and improvement refers here to the removal of problems detected during research and adding new functionalities, including the use of innovative IT solutions. Moreover, these portals should enable the owners of agritourism farms to publish the most interesting and extensive offers and their later editing. In addition, the author pays special attention to the needs of organizing trainings, conferences, forums, publishing of articles and conducting research in the field of promotion of agritourism in the Internet. They will allow the owners of agritourism farms to be made aware of the benefits of this form of promotion and thus provide them with knowledge of how to effectively use the promotional tools offered by the Internet.

Additionally, based on the results of the study and recommendations presented by the author, a model for the construction of an online agritourism portal was created. The model is based on the principle of benchmarking and draws the best standards, e. g. from the portals which have been tested. Therefore, in the future the model can be used to build a professional and comprehensive agritourism portal for the region of Łódź..

1.1. Study background

Agritourism in recent years has become one of the most popular forms of tourism. [4] However, not everyone is able to define what is meant by this term. In the literature you can find many definitions. The author decided to introduce one of them.

“It is an alternative form of tourism, which includes recreation and leisure activities in rural areas and means the stay of guests on an active agricultural farm. An active agricultural farm, on the other hand, is one that conducts agricultural and livestock production, and thus determines in a certain way the rhythm of life in the countryside and struggles with typical problems. The most important thing for the tourist who wants to break away from the hustle and bustle is resting and becoming familiar with the most typical customs of the countryside.” [4]

The second term that the author would like to define at the outset is promotion. In this case the literature is also numerous in definitions, but the author decided to rely on the theory presented by one of the most prominent marketing experts of our times, Ph. Kotler. According to him, the promotion should be understood as:

“(…) a tool of the marketing mix which includes various types of activities undertaken by the company to inform about substantive features of the product and convince target customers to buy it.” [3]

In Kotler’s opinion, promotion is above all the provision of information on the features of the product offered, its availability, i. e. in other words, the communication between the sender and the recipient of a specific message. The promotion is a form of social communication. Thanks to it, it is possible to communicate with potential customers as well as influence their attitudes and behavior.

The promotion of agritourism is not an easy task, which means that most agritourism farms are unable to promote their services by themselves. This requires special qualifications and financial resources. European Union countries give priority to the development of tourism because they perceive it as a major factor in stimulating regional development, therefore, in all EU countries, the promotion of rural accommodation is the responsibility of professional agritourism associations, agricultural and tourism organisations, which can count on the cooperation and financial aid from the state and local authorities. [5]

In England, the promotion of leisure in rural areas is carried out by the “Stay on a Farm” organisation which conducts detailed market research, mediates in the booking of accommodation places and publishes a nationwide catalogue of offers sold at home and abroad each year. [2]

In Germany, every land, cooperating with agricultural chambers, banks, post and the Ministry of Agriculture, presents its tourist region, issuing local catalogues. [1][2]

In Austria, rural accommodation owners create „Koła Gościennych Farm” which conduct marketing activities, promotions and trainings as well as create a database of accommodation bookings and take care of the quality of the offered product. [1]

The oldest organisation of agritourism farms in Europe is the French Federation "Gites de France", which acts as an intermediary in booking and selling accommodation through a network of offices in all French municipalities. Moreover, it runs a web portal where there are over 55,000 accommodation offers from all over France. [2]

In Poland, agritourism is promoted among others by the Agricultural Advisory Centres (ODR). They popularize rural tourism among farmers and help them in organizing this activity. ODR employees develop press materials, publish regional catalogues, post accommodation offers on websites.

A major role in the dissemination of rest in the countryside is also played by agritourism regional associations gathered in the Polish Federation of Rural Tourism "Hospitable Farms". The Federation conducts the registration and promotion of agritourism farms. It also publishes a catalog with offers from all over Poland.

There are 7 agritourism associations located in the region of Łódź and 5 of them are associated in the newly established Łódź Agritourism and Rural Tourism Association.

There are many forms of promotion that can be used by owners of agricultural tourism farms. One of them is information on the Internet. The promotion of an agritourism farm depends mainly on the financial outlay that its owner is able to allocate for this purpose. Large and developed agritourism farms have their own websites with extensive descriptions of activities, attractions and a rich photo gallery. The smaller ones can use special portals and social services concerning agritourism, where they can provide information about their own services. Dissemination of this source of information and communication is so great, that promotion on websites is an important form of self-promotion and can determine the success of an agritourism farm on the tourist services market. [6][7]

The author of the study decided to look closer at the above mentioned form of promotion of agritourism services. The subject of his research was the effectiveness of promotion using web-based agritourism portals in the light of the opinions of their users. The effectiveness of promotion should be considered on several levels, in particular it should refer to the acquisition of new customers, but it can also be seen as facilitating access to information about the agritourism farm by existing customers, and also as a mean to popularize the whole agritourism industry and the region. The survey examined portals which promote rural tourism in the Łódź Voivodeship. Particular emphasis was placed on researching the portals of public organisations, including the Agricultural Advisory Centres, agritourism associations, the Regional Tourist Organisation of the Łódź Voivodeship, Local Tourist Organisations, municipalities, poviats, local action groups and other institutions. In order to obtain a fuller picture of the study, these portals were analysed from 3 perspectives: the analysis of the contents conducted by the author of the study, opinions of owners of agritourism farms and opinions of private persons interested in using the offer of agritourism farms and obtaining information on them using web-based agritourism portals.

A web portal should be understood as:

"(...) online information service extended to a variety of Internet functions, available from a single Internet address." [8]

For the purposes of the study, the author assumed that an online agritourism portal is a website meeting the following criteria:

- Containing information on more than one agritourism farm;
- Having the word "tourism" in the header, or a separate section with agritourism offers.

Based on the results of the study, a model for the construction of the web-based agritourism portal was created. This model has been developed on the basis of benchmarking and draws the best practices from the portals that were studied. What's more, in the future, the model can be used to build a professional and comprehensive agritourism portal for Łódź region. A comprehensive portal should be understood as a portal which includes 3 main functions: information, booking and communication.

1.2. Objectives of the project

1.2.1. The main objective of the study

The main aim of the study was to get acquainted with the opinions of Internet users of agritourism portals on the effectiveness of this form of promotion.

The Internet users of agritourism portals included owners of agritourism farms who use portals which enable them to promote their services as well as private persons (potential customers) who use or are interested in the possibility of using the agritourism offer and gaining knowledge about it from the Internet.

1.2.2. The specific objectives of the study

In addition to the main objective, the study has also five specific objectives:

- 1 Gathering information on selected web-based agritourism portals and their observation in terms of technical, functional aspects, content and implementation of the planned scenarios.
- 2 Getting acquainted with the opinions of private persons who use or are interested in using the offer of agritourism farms on existing agritourism portals. This part of the study was carried out using the technique of in-depth interview.
- 3 Getting acquainted with the opinions of the owners of agritourism farms on the existing agritourism web portals and opportunities to promote agritourism and agritourism services on these portals. Telephone surveys were used for this part of the study.

- 4 Identifying the strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and threats of the promotion of agritourism with the use of agritourism web portals, by carrying out a SWOT analysis.
- 5 Presenting the proposed solutions for emerging problems in this field.

1.2.3. Applicability of the study

The results of the research and recommendations prepared on their basis were presented in the form of a multimedia presentation, which is available on the project website (<http://www.turyzmdlaregionu.eu>), Voivodeship Agricultural Advisory Centre (<http://www.lodr-bratoszewice.pl>).

Based on the results of the study, a model for the construction of the web-based agritourism portal was also created. This model, in the future, can be used to build a professional and comprehensive agritourism portal for the region of Łódź which could be used by all the beneficiaries of the project, including the following: the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region, institutions specializing in promotion of agritourism in the region, owners of competitive agritourism portals and, above all, tourists wishing to take advantage of agritourism services in the area of Łódź Voivodeship.

In addition, as part of the project, the author has prepared 8 publications (including one international publication) on promotion of agritourism in the Internet. Below is a complete list of them:

- "The effectiveness of promotion using agritourism web portals in the light of the opinion of their users - the study concept" - quarterly article on the project website <http://www.turyzmdlaregionu.eu>;
- "Use of best practices in website design, based on the example of a model of Internet agritourism portal for the region" - quarterly article on the project website <http://www.turyzmdlaregionu.eu>;
- "Agritourism information on the Internet portals of poviats of the Łódź Voivodeship" - quarterly article on the project website <http://www.turyzmdlaregionu.eu>;
- "Recommendations for project beneficiaries" - quarterly article on the project website <http://www.turyzmdlaregionu.eu>;
- "Internet - an effective tool for promoting agritourism farms" - Monthly magazine of the Łódź Agricultural Advisory Centre in Bratoszewice RADA no. 12/2011;
- "Effectiveness of promotion using agritourism web portals" - Tourism and Hospitality;
- "Model of the Internet agritourism portal for the Łódź region" - Tourism and Hospitality;
- "Effectiveness of promotion using agritourism web portals" - available in conference materials - MMK 2011 International Masaryk Conference for Ph.D. Students and Young Researchers.

What's more, the author has prepared e-learning platform with trainings for the owners of agritourism farms of the Łódź region. Its main objective is to increase the knowledge of 10 owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź Municipality, in the field of using the Internet and its tools to promote agritourism services, until the end of 2011. The platform is available at <http://www.szkolonia.proakademia.eu/>.

In addition, the author was a co-organiser of the conference "Innovative management practice in the tourism sector - logistic, marketing and environmental aspects" where, for instance, participants of the project "Turism for the region" presented the results of their research. For the purpose of the conference, the author has also created its official website (<http://www.innowacyjnaturystyka.pl>).

1.3. Methodology of the study

1.3.1. Study conducted under the project

The study was divided into 5 research projects:

1. Desk research;
2. Observation of agritourism web portals;
3. Telephone interviews with owners of agritourism farms;
4. Individual in-depth interviews with private persons interested in or using the offer of agritourism farms;
5. SWOT analysis.

1.3.2. Desk research

1.3.2.1. Data sources

In order to check the existing state and the recommendations for the promotion of agritourism on the Internet, the following documents were analysed:

- 1 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Europe as the most popular tourist destination in the world, a new political framework for tourism in Europe;
- 2 Tourism Development Strategy in Poland for 2007-2013;
- 3 Marketing Strategy of Poland in the Tourism Sector for 2008-2015;
- 4 Action Plan of the Polish Tourist Organization for 2011-2012;
- 5 Tourism Development Program in the Łódź Voivodeship for 2007-2020;
- 6 Regional Innovation Strategy for the Łódź Voivodeship for 2005-2013;
- 7 Regional Operational Program of the Łódź Voivodeship for 2007-2013.

1.3.2.2. Research questions

1. What problems concerning the Internet promotion of tourism in the Łódź region have been identified in the documents analysed?
2. What recommendations for solving the identified problems of Internet tourism promotion in the Łódź region are set out in the documents analysed?

1.3.2.3. Research methods and techniques

The author conducted a desk research which is one of the methods of qualitative research, aimed at collecting and analysing data concerning a particular problem.

As a research tool, desk research instructions have been applied - directives, in the form of sentence equivalents, relating to what the researcher is looking for in the documents analysed. The following instructions have been laid down for the documents referred to in point 3.2.1:

- Issues relating to the promotion of tourism/agritourism on the Internet;
- Recommendations for solving problems of promoting tourism/agritourism on the Internet;
- Recommendations for the promotion of the region of Łódź on the Internet.

1.3.2.4. Selection of secondary data for analysis

In the case of secondary data analysis, purposive sampling of the source has been applied, according to the specific key defined by the author. Strategic documents concerning problems and recommendations in terms of the promotion of tourism (including agritourism) in the European Union, Poland and especially in the Łódź Voivodeship were analysed.

1.3.2.5. Methods of ensuring the reliability of the study

The reliability of the study has been ensured by conducting a desk research independently by the author of the study himself. In addition, the documents were analysed specifically with respect to the earlier instructions which allowed the author to concentrate solely on the information sought.

1.3.2.6. The applied method of data analysis

The author conducted a desk research. Strategic documents were analysed (described in point 1.3.2.1.), concerning problems and recommendations in the field of promoting tourism in the European Union, Poland and in particular in the Łódź Voivodeship. The documents were analysed on the basis of earlier prepared instructions (described in point 1.3.2.3.).

1.3.3. Observation of agritourism web portals

1.3.3.1. Data sources

To check the status of Internet agritourism information of the Łódź Voivodeship on agritourism portals, the author conducted observation of 77 portals, which included:

- Portal of the Łódź Agricultural Advisory Center;
- Portal of the Regional Tourist Organisation of the Łódź Voivodeship;
- 4 portals of Local Tourist Organisations operating in the Łódź Voivodeship (one LTO did not have its own web portal),
- Portal of the Polish Federation of Rural Tourism;
- 3 portals of agritourism associations operating on the territory of the Łódź Voivodeship (4 other associations did not have their own web portals);
- 20 portals of Local Action Groups from the Łódź Voivodeship;
- Portal of the self-government of the Łódź Voivodeship;
- 22 portals of poviats of the Łódź Voivodeship (2 urban poviats do not have their own portals - they share them with the portals of rural poviats where they are located);
- 7 portals of municipalities in which the offices of agritourism associations from Łódź region are located;
- Portal of the Municipality of Łódź;
- Tourist and Sightseeing portal of the Łódź Voivodeship ziemia.lodzka.pl;
- Portal of the Łódź Horse Trail;
- 14 commercial tourist portals containing agritourism offers.

1.3.3.2. Research questions

1. What agritourism portals exist on the market?
2. Who owns the observed agritourism portals?
3. What level of technical advancement present the observed agritourism portals?
4. What features are offered to the user on the observed agritourism portals?
5. What substantive level is presented in the offers of agritourism farms on the observed agritourism portals?
6. Have the planned scenarios for the observed agritourism portals been realized?

1.3.3.3. Research methods and techniques

For the purpose of the study, an observation sheet was prepared, in which data on agritourism web portals were collected. This observation was to provide answers to research questions posed above. The portals were evaluated in terms of their technical level, functionality and substantive level of presented agritourism offers. In addition, each of the portals has been subjected to the test based on conducting specially prepared scenarios (eg. searching for specific information, reservation of accommodation, etc.).

1.3.3.4. Sampling methodology

In the case of agritourism web portals, the purposive sampling was applied according to the key defined by the author. The observations were made on the Internet portals of all poviats from the Łódź Voivodeship, agritourism associations operating in the Łódź region, the municipalities in which these associations operate, the Łódź Agricultural Advisory Centre, the Regional Tourist Organisation of the Łódź Voivodeship, Local Tourist Organisations, Local Action Groups and other institutions acting for the promotion of agritourism. Moreover, some of the most popular commercial tourist portals were evaluated which include agritourism offers.

1.3.3.5. Methods of ensuring the reliability of the study

The reliability of the study has been ensured by conducting the observations by the author of the study himself. Moreover, all data obtained from the observations have been entered into an electronic database, which definitely facilitated and improved the logical analysis of the collected materials.

1.3.3.6. The applied methods of data analysis

Analysis of the data obtained from that observation has been developed by statistical methods with the use of the MS Excel statistical package. The selection of this IT tool was caused by the fact that all collected materials were stored in the electronic database of MS Excel, which automatically improved the process of their analysis.

For the results of the study, basic statistical measures were analysed, such as: mean, standard error, median, dominant, variance, standard deviation and range.

1.3.4. Telephone interviews with owners of tourist farms

1.3.4.1. Data sources

For this research project, the main source of data is information obtained from telephone interviews conducted with 27 owners of agricultural tourism farms from the Łódź region.

1.3.4.2. Research questions

- 1 Are the owners of agritourism farms aware of the opportunities offered by promotions on the Internet?
- 2 What is the opinion of the owners of agritourism farms on the promotion with the use of agritourism web portals?
- 3 Do the owners of tourist farms use or are interested in using, the opportunity to promote their services using agritourism web portals?
- 4 What are the financial expenditures incurred by owners of agritourism farms for promotion using agritourism web portals?

- 5 Are the owners of agritourism farms satisfied with the promotion using agritourism web portals?
- 6 What are the main sources of information from which consumers learn about the offer of agritourism farms?
- 7 What is the opinion of the owners of agritourism farms on the possibility of direct accommodation booking via the Internet agritourism portal?
- 8 Would the owners of agritourism farms be interested in the possibility of offering their services at no charge on the new agritourism portal for the region of Łódź?

1.3.4.3. Research methods and techniques

Telephone surveys were conducted among the owners of agritourism farms of the region of Łódź. This study was supposed to show the state of knowledge of owners of agricultural tourism farms about online promotion, whether they use this form of advertising and how they imagine cooperation with agritourism web portals.

For the purpose of the study, an interview questionnaire was created which consists of 4 main parts:

- The introductory part, from the content of which the respondent can get information about the subject, purpose and significance of the study, and can also learn that it is implemented within the framework of the project entitled "Tourism for the Region - Integrated Program of Development for Doctoral Students", financed by the ESF.
- The main part which consists of 13 questions. These are both closed-ended and open-ended questions, the aim of which is to find answers to the research questions posed earlier.
- Data sheets with the agritourism farm data.
- An annex for an interviewer with basic information about the agritourism farm owned by the respondent.

1.3.4.4. Sampling methodology

For telephone interviews with owners of agritourism farms, simple random sampling was applied. A sampling frame was the list of agritourism farms placed on the tourist and sightseeing portal of the Łódź Voivodeship available at www.ziemialodzka.pl. On the day of sampling there were 265 agritourism farms from the Łódź region on the list. The sample size is 27 agritourism farms from the list, which is 10% of the population. In case it was impossible to interview the owner of the sampled agritourism farm, another sampling was made with the exclusion of agritourism farms already sampled.

1.3.4.5. Methods of ensuring the reliability of the study

The reliability of the study has been ensured by conducting the interviews by the author of the study himself. All data obtained from the interviews were entered into an electronic database, which definitely facilitated and improved the logical analysis of the collected materials.

100% of the questionnaires were checked for consistency and a complete record of the answers to the questions asked. This has resulted in the elimination of incomplete or unreliable research material. The reliability of the interview questionnaire was ensured by: formulating the questions in a concise, clear and understandable manner, using neutral expressions and using the correct order of the questions in order to avoid suggesting answers. Moreover, each interview was recorded in the form of an audio file.

1.3.4.6. The applied methods of data analysis

Analysis of the data obtained from that observation has been developed by statistical methods with the use of the MS Excel statistical package. The selection of this IT tool was caused by the fact that all collected materials were stored in the electronic database of MS Excel, which streamlined the process of their analysis.

For the results of the study, basic statistical measures were analysed, such as: mean, standard error, median, dominant, variance, standard deviation and range.

1.3.5. Individual in-depth interviews with private persons interested in or using the offer of agritourism farms

1.3.5.1. Data sources

In the case of in-depth interviews, the main source of data is information obtained from respondents.

- 8 private persons who have used or are interested in using the agritourism offer and seek such information on the Internet.

1.3.5.2. Research questions

1. What types of websites are most frequently used by customers searching for the offers of agritourism farms?
2. What agritourism portals are known to customers looking for agritourism offers?
3. How do agritourism customers evaluate agritourism portals known to them?
4. What kind of information are agritourism customers looking for on agritourism portals?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of agritourism portals according to agritourism customers?
6. What is the general opinion of agritourism customers on booking accommodation online?
7. What are the functions of an ideal agritourism portal in the opinion of agritourism customers?

1.3.5.3. Research methods and techniques

In-depth interviews were conducted with private individuals who have used or are interested in using the agritourism offer and seek such information on the Internet.

This part of the study was intended to identify the opinions of the respondents in terms of knowledge of existing agritourism portals, their evaluation and necessary information which according to these people should be provided on such portals.

For the purpose of the study, an in-depth interview scenario was created which consists of 4 main parts:

- The introductory part, from the content of which the respondent can get information about the subject, purpose and significance of the study, and can also learn that the study is implemented within the framework of the project entitled "Tourism for the Region - Integrated Program of Development for Doctoral Students", financed by the ESF.
- Filtering questions aimed at finding a target group of respondents - private individuals who use or are interested in using the offer of an agritourism farm from the Łódź region seeking information about such offers on the Internet.
- The main part which starts with familiarizing the respondent with the definition of the web portal, and then the respondent is asked 23 questions which are aimed at finding answers to the previously posed research questions.
- Final part including thanks for taking the time to answer the questions.

All interviews were recorded with the device recording the sound and then transcribed.

1.3.5.4. Selection of units for the study

For the purpose of this research project, purposive sampling of units for the study was applied. To participate in the study, respondents had to belong to one of the following groups:

- a) Respondents who use the Internet every day (i.e. heavy users), never used the offer of agritourism farms from the Łódź region, but they are interested in it.
- b) Respondents who use the Internet every day (i.e. heavy users) and at least 2 times used the offer of agritourism farms from the Łódź region.
- c) Respondents who use the Internet from time to time (i.e. light users), never used the offer of agritourism farms from the Łódź region, but they are interested in it.
- d) Respondents who use the Internet from time to time (i.e. light users) and at least 2 times used the offer of agritourism farms from the Łódź region.

Such a division into groups was due to the desire to make the best differentiation of the target group. The author conducted 8 in-depth interviews with 2 respondents from each group.

1.3.5.5. Methods of ensuring the reliability of the study

The reliability of the study is ensured by conducting all interviews by the author of the study himself. In addition, the questions were formulated in a concise, clear and understandable manner, neutral expressions as well as correct order of questions were applied in order to avoid suggesting answers.

Each of the interviews was recorded as an audio file and then transcribed. 100% interviews (after transcription) were checked in terms of consistency and a complete record of answers to the questions asked, allowing to eliminate faulty or unreliable research material.

1.3.5.6. The applied methods of data analysis

For this research project, the author conducted an analysis of qualitative data. At the beginning, the author selected and organised the acquired information. Then, he allocated them to the relevant analytical categories and at the end the author analysed the collected material and interpreted the results.

1.3.6. SWOT Analysis

1.3.6.1. Data sources

In the case of the SWOT analysis, the main data sources were the results obtained from previous research projects - desk researches, observations of agritourism web portals, telephone interviews with owners of agritourism farms and individual in-depth interviews with private persons who use or are interested in using the offer of agritourism farms.

1.3.6.2. Research questions

1. What are the strengths of agritourism promotion using agritourism web portals?
2. What are the weaknesses of agritourism promotion using agritourism web portals?
3. What are the opportunities of agritourism promotion using agritourism web portals?
4. What are the threats of agritourism promotion using agritourism web portals?

1.3.6.3. Research methods and techniques

After carrying out previous research projects (desk researches, observations of agritourism web portals, telephone interviews with owners of agritourism farms and individual in-depth interviews with private persons using or interested in using the offer of agritourism farms), SWOT analysis was carried out, aimed at identifying strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and threats of promoting agritourism on agritourism web portals.

1.3.6.4. Methods of ensuring the reliability of the study

The reliability of the SWOT analysis has been ensured by performing it by the author of the study himself. Moreover, for each of the research projects whose results provided a source of data for the conducted analysis, the above methods of ensuring the reliability of the study were applied.

1.3.6.5. The applied methods of data analysis

SWOT analysis was carried out for this research project, aimed at identifying strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and threats of promoting agritourism on agritourism web portals.

1.4. Research results

1.4.1. Desk research

1.4.1.1. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - A Europe of the world's most popular tourist destination - a new policy framework for the European tourism sector

The document prepared by the European Commission identifies four main objectives of the new framework of the Commission's activities in the field of tourism. One of them is to stimulate the competitiveness of the tourism sector in Europe. According to the authors of the Communication, it is innovation and new information technologies that have become the determinants of the tourism sector's competitiveness and play a fundamental role in strengthening its competitiveness with other related sectors of the economy. Public and private entities active in tourism, particularly SME, should be encouraged to use them.

As a measure necessary to achieve the above objective, the European Commission indicates information initiatives and partnerships as well as the appropriate use of national and European programs. Another recommendation put forward by the authors is to accelerate the process of integrating tools and information society services in all types of tourism activities, in particular in SME activity, as well as to facilitate access to appropriate financial instruments for the various entities in this sector.

1.4.1.2. Tourism Development Strategy in Poland for 2007-2013

Authors of the Tourism Development Strategy in Poland for 2007-2013, as one of the main weaknesses of marketing support for tourism in Poland, indicate the lack of comprehensive tourist information and booking system. Such a system, combined with the use of modern information services adapted to the changing needs of the market and integrated into international systems would significantly help in the commercialisation of Poland's tourist products.

In an attempt to eliminate the weaknesses described above, the authors of the strategy defined two actions that should be implemented.

The first is the expansion and development of integrated tourist information system (action III.1.1.). This includes the creation of digital databases, database and programs service centres, centres of coordination and sharing databases with other communication technologies, websites, electronic kiosks of tourist information and multimedia publications. Moreover, the authors assume that the digital information system will be developed on three levels: at the national level (national tourist portal of the Polish Tourist Organisation), at the regional level (portals of the Regional Tourism Organizations) and at the local level (portals of the Local Tourism Organizations), based on portals of the same structure and map.

The second planned measure is the use of modern technologies in the development of the tourist information and reservation system (action III.1.2.). The implementation of this measure will be carried out through creating and making available digital databases, linking information services with the tourism products market and developing electronic booking systems with the possibility to buy services on-line.

1.4.1.3. Marketing Strategy of Poland in the Tourism Sector for 2008-2015

The Marketing Strategy of Poland in the Tourism Sector for 2008-2015 clearly indicated the need to improve the competitiveness of the tourism sector in Poland. According to the authors of the document, a modern and well-functioning tourist information system, which is currently one of the weaknesses of the country's tourism organisation, should play a key role in the process of improving competitiveness. The authors emphasise that adapting the tourism sector to the needs of the information society is one of the EU's objectives. Tourism is a priority area for the application of information and communication technology (ICT).

In order to improve the competitiveness of Polish tourism and increase its importance in the national economy, it is necessary to unify and modernise the information and distribution base of tourist services. The 2008-2015 strategy outlined actions aimed at ensuring the functioning and development of the national tourist information system. Among the most important activities, the tasks in the field of interactive marketing and new technologies have been mentioned.

The authors of the document presented the following objectives and tasks in the field of interactive marketing and new technologies:

- Optimising the communication process with the tourist and potential tourist;
- Fully and quickly meeting its information needs;
- Increasing access to information about Poland and improving the quality and attractiveness of presented information (creating packages inspiring Internet users to active and deeper interactions);
- Providing information and promotion services electronically using new technologies (such as Internet, wireless connectivity, Bluetooth, mobile telephony, etc.) in the key areas of tourism and business activity in Poland and abroad;

- Diversification of information, promotion methods, communication channels and tools due to different market needs based on current research and statistical data.

1.4.1.4. Action Plan of the Polish Tourist Organization for 2011-2012

Action Plan of the Polish Tourist Organization for 2011-2012 is a document consistent with the Marketing strategy in the Polish Tourism Sector 2008-2015 discussed in section 4.1.3. Both documents indicate the need to improve the competitiveness of the tourism sector in Poland which can be achieved through the use of interactive marketing and new technologies.

One of the main tasks outlined in the Action Plan of the Polish Tourist Organization for 2011-2012 are computerisation of the activity and construction of an information society (task 6.13.). This task is to maintain the existing IT systems and to build and implement new IT solutions. A number of activities covering the following areas have been defined as part of the subtasks:

- National tourist portal administration;
- Technical development of the system platform;
- Managing and updating content in the tourist information system;
- Development of the national tourist portal (including implementation of CRM system and Contact Center);
- The integration of tourist information systems at national and local levels;
- Development of new channels of tourist information distribution;
- Promotion of tourist information distribution channels.

1.4.1.5. Tourism Development Program in the Łódź Voivodeship for 2007-2020

The authors of the Tourism Development Program in the Łódź Voivodeship for 2007-2020, as one of the seven major tourism development problems indicate the lack of coordinated information and promotion policy of the voivodeship in the field of tourism.

According to the authors of the program, the solution to the above problem is the use of modern technologies to build a Voivodeship Tourist Information System. The basis of this system should be a professional tourist portal, which is also a place of collecting data on attractions, offers, events and tourist facilities of the Łódź region.

It is assumed that the tourism portal of the Łódź Voivodeship will be the most important, the most up-to-date and the most complete source of knowledge about the Łódź region not only for tourists but also for the inhabitants of the region. In addition, the authors emphasize that the portal should be developed in a way accessible to all users, e.g. for people with disabilities, regardless of their characteristics or possible handicaps and independently of the software and hardware they use.

1.4.1.6. Regional Innovation Strategy for the Łódź Voivodeship for 2005-2013

During the preparation of the Regional Innovation Strategy for the Łódź Voivodeship for 2005-2013, research has been carried out, which shows that the innovative potential of the Łódź Voivodeship in the area of IT and communication technologies is unsatisfactory in relation to the rest of the country. At the same time, the authors emphasize the constantly growing demand for innovation and introduction of modern IT technologies to various areas of the economy, including tourism.

Therefore, the authors indicate the need to develop information society services and knowledge-based economy in the region of Łódź. According to the strategy, the development of the information society is a prerequisite for full inclusion of the Voivodeship in the current process of economic and social transformations in which knowledge and information are significant economic resources. Effective use of information is the primary source of competitive advantages and, consequently, enables reaching out a larger group of potential customers and increases the attractiveness of the business offer.

1.4.1.7. Regional Operational Program of the Łódź Voivodeship for 2007-2013

The Regional Operational Program of the Łódź Voivodeship for 2007-2013 indicated too little emphasis on promotion and information on the current offer, which translates into a slowdown in tourist arrivals to the region, as one of the main problems of tourism in the Łódź Voivodeship.

According to the operational program, it is particularly important to develop and disseminate regional tourism product both in the region and beyond its borders. In connection with this, the authors of the document recommend, among other things, the creation of a comprehensive information system in electronic form which will provide access to information on tourism in the region of Łódź to Internet users from all over the world.

Moreover, the authors conclude that on the basis of infrastructure facilities and tourist attractions existing in the region and as a result of intensification of investment and promotion activities, a range of tourist services will develop in the nearest years in the Łódź region, and in consequence, the attractiveness of the Łódź region in terms of tourism and recreation will increase.

1.4.2. Observation of agritourism web portals

Selected portals were assessed against four main criteria:

- The level of technical advancement;
- Functionality;
- Substantive level of the presented agritourism offer;
- Possibility to perform planned scenarios.

1.4.2.1. Technical assessment of observed portals

The first criterion for the study is the technical advancement of the portals. This is an important evaluation criterion, as it will allow us to check whether the observed portals have been developed in accordance with best practices relating to the design of Internet applications, and thus whether Internet users will be able to use them without any problems.

The assessment of the technical advancement of the observed portals consists of 5 factors. The first one is the portal's position in the Google search engine ranking, which is the most popular search engine in Poland (1. The position was checked by analyzing the list of the first 100 search results for the key word "agritourism". Only 16 portals (21%) were listed in the first 100 results of which 14 are commercial portals and 2 are portals of public organisations supporting rural tourism promotion. The remaining 79% of portals were outside the first 100 search results. The above data are shown in Figure 1. The results obtained clearly show that the portals of public organisations supporting agritourism in the Łódź region are not adequately positioned in terms of agritourism information.

Klasyfikacja portal... - Classification of the observed agritourism portals in the first 100 Google search results for the key word "agritourism"; Portale sklasyfikowane... - Portals classified in the first 100 of Google ranking results; Portale niesklasyfikowane... - Portals not classified in the first 100 of Google ranking results



Figure 1. Classification of the observed agritourism portals in the first 100 Google search results for the key word "agritourism" (The number N=77).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on observations of agritourism portals.

Another two factors influencing the technical evaluation of the observed portals are the compliance with W3C and W3C CSS standards. W3C standards are a set of best practices to be

^{1.)} Data on the basis of a report prepared by the portal ranking.pl: <http://ranking.pl/pl/rankings/search-enginesdomains.html> (accessed: June 2011).

W3C standards are a set of best practices that should be followed when designing web applications. Compliance with them ensures that the portal will be displayed correctly on any web browser. In addition, compliance with W3C standards is a convenience for people with disabilities because it allows the correct operation of special settings in web browsers. In order to check portals' compliance with the standards, the author used the official W3C(2) validator. Only 14% of them passed this test successfully and has been validated as valid documents of HTML(3) language, while 86% of the portals did not pass the test, generating 102 errors and 43 warnings on average. The number of errors deviates from this value by an average of 187. While the standard deviation for the number of warnings is 86.

The W3C CSS standards, as well as the W3C standards discussed above, constitute a set of best practices that should be followed when designing web applications. However, they refer to the correct graphic design of the portal. In order to check portals' compliance with the standards, the author used the official W3C CSS(4) validator. 31% of portals passed the test successfully and were validated as valid CSS(5) style sheet documents. The remaining 69% of the portals did not pass the test, generating 21 errors and 123 warnings on average. The number of errors deviates from this value by an average of 43. While the standard deviation for the number of warnings is 250.

The fourth of the factors directly affecting the assessment of technical advancement of the portals is their performance in different web browsers. Portals have been tested on the latest versions of the 4 most popular Internet browsers in Poland, i.e. Mozilla Firefox, Microsoft Internet Explorer, Google Chrome, Opera(6). In this case, all 77 portals have successfully passed the test and worked properly on the browsers listed above.

The last of the factors making up the technical assessment of the observed portals are the language versions in which they were prepared. The basic version of all 77 portals has been prepared in Polish. 40% of them also offer users other language versions, 30 portals have English version, 20 - German version, 5 - Russian version 4 - French version, and some portals have also been prepared in Spanish, Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese and Ukrainian. The remaining 60% of the portals have been prepared only in Polish. Data concerning language versions of observed portals are shown in Figure 2.

2.) The W3C Validator is a tool to validate the HTML syntax of the validated website.

The official W3C validator is available at: <http://validator.w3.org/>, accessed: October 2011 3.) HTML (HyperText Markup Language) is a programming language for creating web pages.

4.) The W3C CSS validator is a tool to check the correctness of the validated website's CSS sheet.

The official W3C CSS validator is available at: <http://jigsaw.w3.org/css-validator/>, accessed: October 2011 3.)

5.) Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) is a programming language for describing the form of presentation (displaying) of websites.

6.) Data on the basis of a report prepared by the portal ranking.pl: <http://ranking.pl/pl/rankings/web-browsers-groups.html> (accessed: June 2011).

Wersje językowe portali

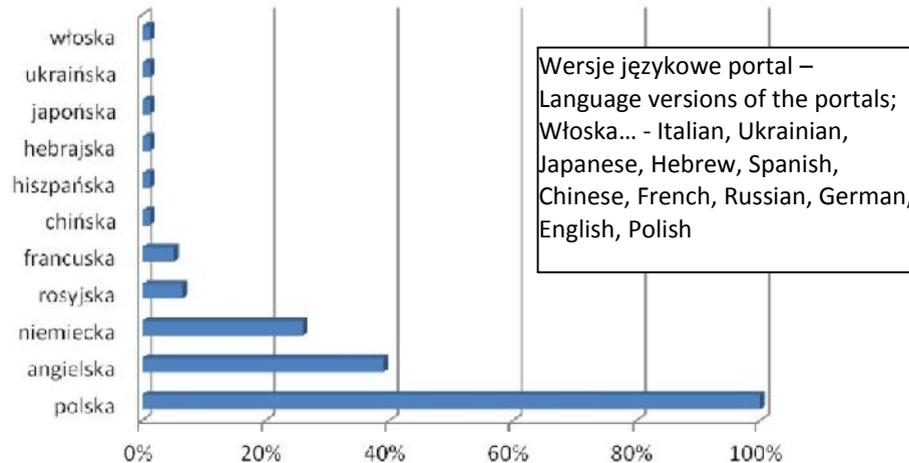


Figure 2. Language versions of observed agritourism portals (Size N=77).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on observations of agritourism portals.

1.4.2.2. Evaluation of the functionality of observed portals

The second criterion for evaluating the observed portals is their functionality. This criterion allows to check what functions the users of the observed portals can use - whether these are only basic functions or innovative solutions. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the functionality of portals is the most comprehensive criterion the evaluation of which consists of many factors.

The first of them is the possibility of placing agritourism announcements on the portal. In this case, it is checked by searching for information on the portal concerning the possibility of placing an advertisement with the offer of agritourism farms or offers. This factor applies to both placing advertisements by the users of the portal themselves as well as with the help of the administrator/owner of the portal. 50 observed portals enable publishing advertisements with agritourism offer on their pages. 32% of them offer users the possibility to place their own offer by themselves. Among these 50 portals there are 14 commercial portals - on 4 of them placing agritourism advertisements is completely free, on 3 other portals publishing advertisements is free for a trial period of 14 days to 3 months, and the remaining 7 portals offer paid advertisements (their prices range between PLN 80 - PLN 299 per year). Percentage distribution of the possibility of placing advertisements on the observed agritourism portals is shown in Figure 3.

Możliwość... - The possibility of placing advertisements on the observed agritourism portals; Portale umożliwiające/nieumożliwiające... - Portals allowing/not allowing placement of agritourism ads

Możliwość umieszczenia ogłoszenia agroturystycznego na obserwowanych portalach

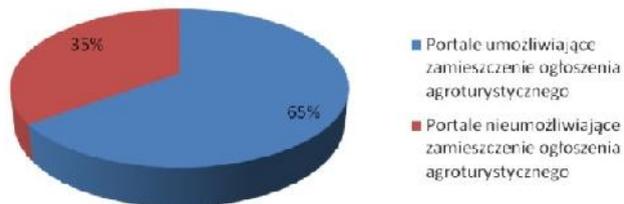


Figure 3. The possibility of placing advertisements on the observed agritourism portals (Size N = 77).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on observations of agritourism portals.

The key issue is also the number of agritourism advertisements on the evaluated portals. The 27 portals, which do not offer the possibility to publish agritourism offers, are excluded from these considerations. In the case of the remaining 50 portals, on average, 17 ads can be found on them. It is also worth mentioning that 6 of them, despite the possibility to publish agritourism advertisements, do not have a single offer.

Mapa... - The map of the portal structure based on the observed agritourism portals; Portale posiadające/nieposiadające... - Portals having/not having a structure map

Mapa struktury portalu na obserwowanych portalach agroturystycznych

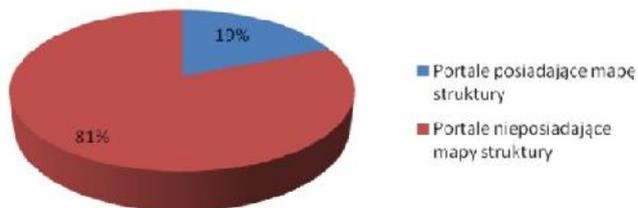


Figure 4. The use of the portal structure maps on the observed agritourism portals (Size N=77).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on observations of agritourism portals.

Another of the factors analysed by the author was whether the portal had a structure map. Such a map is very desirable component of any web site as it allows the user to find links to all sections of the site, arranged in one place, which greatly facilitates navigating through extended pages/portals. Unfortunately, only every fifth observed portal contained a reference to a map of the portal's structure. The use of maps of the portal structure on observed agritourism portals is presented in Figure 4.

Another factor influencing the evaluation of the portals' functionality are the thematic sections that the observed portals have. The author checked whether the portals have sections (separate menu items) concerning the following issues: general information on agritourism, information on agritourism in the Łódź region and information on training courses and conferences in the field of agritourism. It turned out that only 13% of the observed portals provide general information on agritourism. 12% of the portals have a section containing information on agritourism in the Łódź region. The situation is a little better when it comes to a section on trainings and conferences in the field of tourism which can be found on 23% of the portals. The use of thematic sections on the observed agritourism portals is presented in Figure 5.

Sekcje... - Thematic sections on the observed agritourism portals; Ogólne... - General information on agritourism; Informacje o agroturystyce... - Information on agritourism in the Łódź region; Informacje o szkoleniach... - Information on trainings, conferences on agritourism



Figure 5. Use of thematic sections on the observed agritourism portals (Size N=77).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on observations of agritourism portals.

Events taking place in the region can help potential customers to choose an agritourism farm in the region. Therefore, the calendar of events should be an important element of every portal promoting agritourism in the Łódź Voivodeship. However, as the study showed, only 36% of portals have such a calendar. Figure 6 shows the use of the calendar of events in the region on the observed agritourism portals.

Kalendarz... - The calendar of events in the region on the observed agritourism portals; Portale posiadające/nieposiadające... - Portals having/not having a regional event calendar

Kalendarz imprez w regionie na obserwowanych portalach agroturystycznych

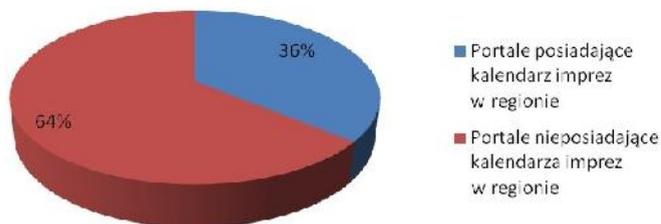


Figure 6. Use of the calendar of events in the region on the observed agritourism portals (Size N=77).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on observations of agritourism portals.

Another feature desired by Internet users who want to use the services of agritourism farms is the possibility of booking accommodation online. It is an important feature of the portal as it enables a potential customer to book accommodation without

Systemy... - The systems of booking accommodation online on the observed agritourism portals; Portale umożliwiające pełną/wstępną rezerwację... - Portals allowing full/initial booking of accommodation; Portale nieumożliwiające... - Portals not allowing for booking accommodation online

Systemy rezerwacji miejsc noclegowych on-line na obserwowanych portalach agroturystycznych

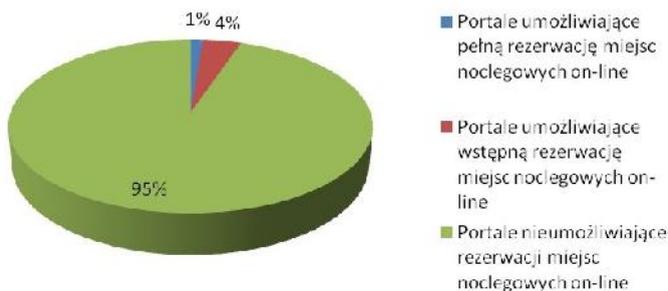


Figure 7. Use of the system of booking accommodation online on the observed agritourism portals (Size N = 77).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on observations of agritourism portals.

leaving home and is associated with considerable savings of time and money. Unfortunately, only one of the evaluated portals offers such solution. In addition, another 3 portals allow initial accommodation booking. The remaining 95% of portals do not provide this functionality. The use of online booking systems on the observed agritourism portals is shown in Figure 7.

The author has also decided to examine whether the portals observed by him include functions that are not necessary for Internet users wishing to use agritourism services, but definitely increase the attractiveness of websites. For this purpose he checked the portals in terms of the possibility of creating customer profile, exchanging opinions on the user forum, using e-learning module and newsletter subscription. 1 of the evaluated portals offers its users an e-learning module, 13% of the portals have a user forum and every 5 portal allows the user to establish a customer profile and subscribe to newsletter.

Table 1. Functionality of agritourism portals (Size N=77).

Function	The number of portals including the function	Percentage of portals containing the function in general number of studied portals
		65%
Possibility of placing an agritourism advertisement on the portal	50	
Calendar of events in the region	28	36%
Section with information on training courses, conferences, etc. related to agritourism	18	23%
Possibility of placing an agritourism advertisement on the portal by the user itself	16	21%
Map of portal structure	15	19%
Possibility of creating a customer profile	15	19%
Possibility of subscription to newsletter	15	19%
Section with general information on agritourism	10	13%
User forum	10	13%
Section with information on agritourism in the region of Łódź	9	12%
Pictograms showing facilities at the farm	9	12%
Possibility to comment on agritourism objects	3	4%
Possibility to book accommodation	1	1%
E-learning module	1	1%

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on observations of agritourism portals.

7.) Newsletter is an electronic form of a bulletin containing the latest information.

The last two factors influencing the evaluation of the functionality of the observed portals concern agritourism offers published on the portals. The author checked whether the users of the web-based agritourism portals have the possibility to comment on the offers published on the portals and whether there are pictograms at the presented agritourism offers presenting facilities available at a given site (e.g. TV, grill, horse riding, etc.). 12% of the observed portals allow the user to add pictograms to agritourism offers. However, in only 4% of cases users can comment on offers posted on the portals.

Table 1 provides information on the number of portals containing the described functions and their percentage of the total number of researched websites.

1.4.2.3. Substantive assessment of observed portals

The substantive assessment of the observed portals relates mainly to the presentation of agritourism offers on these portals. This is the most important criterion for promoting agritourism in the region. Thanks to it, the author is able to assess whether the portals enable creating and placing professional offers, and then determine whether the offers thus constructed will have the strength to break through on the agritourism services market. The 27 portals were excluded from the substantive assessment because they do not enable publishing offers at all.

The first factor influencing the evaluation of the presented agritourism offers are the farm's photos. On 61% of the portals, offers placed are accompanied by a photo of the presented farm. 49% of the portals make it possible to add an entire photo gallery. Only 6% of the portals make it possible to place photos of each of the rooms offered by a given farm. On the remaining 39% of portals, the agritourism offer is limited only to contact details.

Nowadays, when there is a huge competition on the tourism services market, usual photos presenting the offer of agritourism farms may not be enough to attract new customers. An interesting solution seems to be enriching advertisements with short films showing the attractiveness of farms and encouraging tourists to use their services. Unfortunately, none of the evaluated portals allows agritourism farms to publish advertising films at their offers.

Agritourism is not only accommodation in the countryside, it is also an active holiday and getting acquainted with the most typical customs of the countryside. That is why the author decided to check whether the offers of agritourism farms on agritourism portals contain information about the rural attractions offered by farms. As it turns out, on 45% of the observed portals, agritourism offers are enriched with such information.

Figure 8 shows the elements that can be used by owners of agritourism farms when creating their agritourism offer on the observed agritourism portals.

Elementy... - Components of agritourism offer on the observed agritourism portals; Pojedyncze zdjęcie – Single photo; Galeria zdjęć – Photo gallery; Zdjęcia poszczególnych... - Photos of individual rooms; Filmy reklamowe – Video ads; Info o atrakcjach... - Info about the attractions of country life

Elementy składowe oferty agroturystycznej na obserwowanych portalach agroturystycznych.

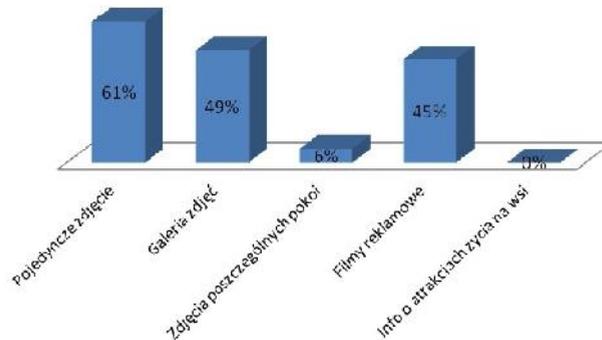


Figure 8. Components of agritourism offer on the observed agritourism portals (Size N=77).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on observations of agritourism portals.

1.4.2.4. Assessment of the implementation of planned scenarios

The last of the evaluation criteria of the observed portals is execution of planned scenarios. This is an important criterion because it allows portals to be evaluated not only from the theoretical point of view but also in the specific work with the user. For the needs of the study, the author has prepared 8 scenarios which were implemented for all 77 observed portals. Implementation of scenarios was evaluated in a 3-point scale (0-2 points). If the scenario could not be implemented, 0 points were awarded. If the scenario was implemented but with problems, 1 point was awarded. If the scenario was implemented without any problems, 2 points were awarded.

The first scenario was to find contact data to the owner/manager of the portal. 86% of the portals were awarded 2 points. 8% of the portals were awarded 1 point, while in case of 6% of the portals it was impossible to find contact details, i.e. 0 points were awarded.

In the second scenario, the portal's search engine should be used to find the definition of "agritourism". As much as 96% of the rated portals could not cope with this task. The remaining 4% had received 2 points.

The third scenario referred to finding agritourism offers on the portal and sorting them according to their prices. Also in this case, the author had huge problems with the realization of the planned task. 91% of the portals received 0 points, while the remaining 9% received 2 points.

Another scenario was to find vacant accommodation in a certain period of time. All the portals received 0 points automatically because they did not have a booking calendar available, and thus information about the available accommodation options.

The task planned for the fifth scenario was to find information on events related to agritourism in the area of Łódź region. In the case of 25% of the portals, finding such information was done without any problems. On the next 4% of the portals the information was found with minor problems. As much as 71% of the portals did not provide such information.

The sixth scenario envisaged looking for agritourism offers, choosing the most interesting offer and then booking accommodation in a selected farm online. Only 1 portal was able to cope with this task. The remaining 99% of the portals did not offer the possibility to book accommodation online.

The following scenario, like the previous one, focused on finding agritourism offers and selecting the most interesting one. The only difference was that it was necessary to find the phone number of a given farm where you could find detailed information about the offer or book accommodation. 33 portals (43%) received 0 points automatically.

- 27 of them do not offer the possibility to place offers at all, and another 6 portals do not contain a single advertisement. For the remaining 57% of the portals, the scenario was implemented without any problems.

The last scenario was to find information/help on the use of the portal. As it turned out, 95% of the portals did not have such hints, especially important for less experienced Internet users. In case of 4% of the portals the task was completed without any problems, and for 1 portal the task was completed with minor problems.

1.4.3. Telephone interviews with owners of agritourism farms

Data collected during telephone interviews with owners of agritourism farms were analysed in terms of 8 main issues:

- Knowledge of basic computer skills;
- Knowledge of various forms of online promotion;
- Knowledge of web agritourism portals;
- Opinions on the promotion on agritourism web portals and its effectiveness;
- Expenditures on promotion on agritourism web portals;
- Sources of information from which consumers learn about the offer of tourist farms;
- Opinions on online booking of accommodation;
- Interest in publishing advertisements on the new web-based agritourism portal.

The interviews were conducted among 27 owners of agritourism farms of the Łódź region. The author decided to briefly characterize the respondents in terms of sex, age, size of the farm, number of rooms in the farm, number of bed places and agritourism associations to which the respondents belong:

- In 48% of cases the owners of the farm were married couples, 30% females and 22% males.
- 52% of the owners belong to the age range 31-50 years old, 37% to the age range 51-65 years old, 7% are over 65 years old, while only 4% are under 30 years old.
- The area of 56% of farms participating in the study was between 5 and 10 ha (hectars). In case of 26% of farms the area is smaller than 5 ha. 7% of farms have an area of 11-15 ha and 7% over 20 ha. For the remaining 4% the area is 16-20 ha.
- Farms participating in the study offer an average of 3.8 rooms for rent, with 11 beds.
- 52% of the respondents declare that their farms do not belong to any agritourism associations. 44% of the respondents say that they belong to a regional association operating in the municipality where they run their agritourism farm. The remaining 4% belong to other associations mainly to the Local Action Groups.

1.4.3.1. Knowledge of basic computer skills;

At the beginning, the author tried to get information about basic knowledge of computer skills among owners of agritourism farms. This is an important issue because it affects the use of the Internet for the promotion of agritourism services - the main subject of the author's study. The assessment of knowledge of basic computer skills consists of 4 factors.

The issue from which the assessment process starts is to check whether the owners of farms have a computer with Internet access. 85% of the respondents answered this question in the affirmative. The remaining 15% of the respondents do not have a computer.

Another 3 analysed factors relate to the ability to use a computer with MSWindows system, a web browser and an office suite (e.g. MS Office or Open Office). 70% of the owners of agritourism farms interviewed declare that they know how to use a computer with Windows system and a web browser. Another 15% of the respondents who have a computer admit that they do not know how to use it (they usually indicate children as users of the computer and the Internet). 59% of the respondents declare that they know how to use the office package.

Figure 9 illustrates the knowledge of basic computer skills among the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region.

Znajomość... - Basic computer skills; Posiadanie komputera... - Owning a computer with Internet access; Znajomość obsługi systemu MS Windows/przeglądarki internetowej/pakietu biurowego – MS Windows/Internet browser/Office package handling skills

Znajomość podstaw obsługi komputera

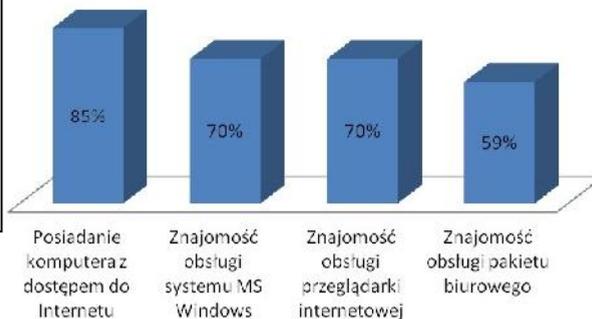


Figure 9. The knowledge of basic computer skills among the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region (Size N=27).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on telephone interviews with the owners of agritourism farms.

1.4.3.2. Knowledge of various forms of online promotion

Knowledge of various forms of online promotion among owners of agritourism farms is another issue analysed by the author. This analysis started by checking whether the owners of agritourism farms use or have ever used online promotion. In the case of an affirmative answer, the author tried to find out what form it was. Subsequently, the respondents were presented with other forms of promotion on the Internet, different from the ones they mentioned.

96% of the respondents claim that the use or formerly used the online promotion. The leading forms of promotion are agritourism portals and own websites which are used respectively by 85% and 63% of the owners of agritourism farms. Out of the respondents who declared having their own website, 29% of them use techniques for Google search positioning⁸.

Other forms of promotion on the Internet are definitely less frequently used by owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region. 33% of the respondents declare that they placed their farm offers on Internet tourism portals. 7% of the farms have a profile on the social networking portal and advertise their own services on Internet forums.

8.) Search Engine Optimization (SEO), also known as Web Positioning) - actions aimed at achieving the highest possible position in the results of organic search engines for particular keywords and expressions (based on the definition from Wikipedia.pl portal).

Only 4% of the respondents promote themselves via an advertising banner on other websites. None of the study participants use mailing. The above data are shown in Figure 10.

Znajomość różnych... - Knowledge of various forms of online promotion; własna strona – own website; portal społecznościowy – social media; portal agroturystyczny – agritourism portal; banner reklamowy – advertising banner; fora internetowe – internet forums; pozycjonowanie strony – website positioning

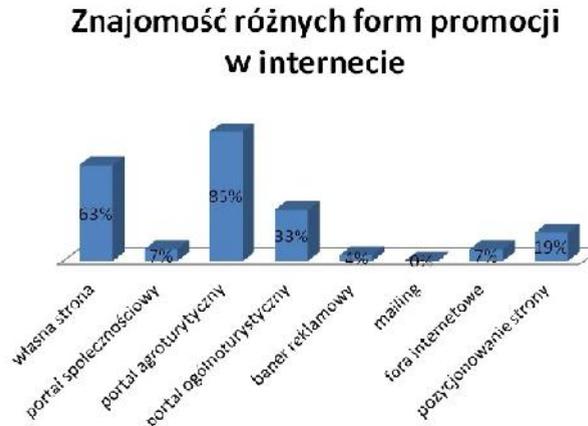


Figure 10. Knowledge of various forms of online promotion among the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region (Size N = 27).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on telephone interviews with the owners of agritourism farms.

1.4.3.3. Knowledge of agritourism web portals

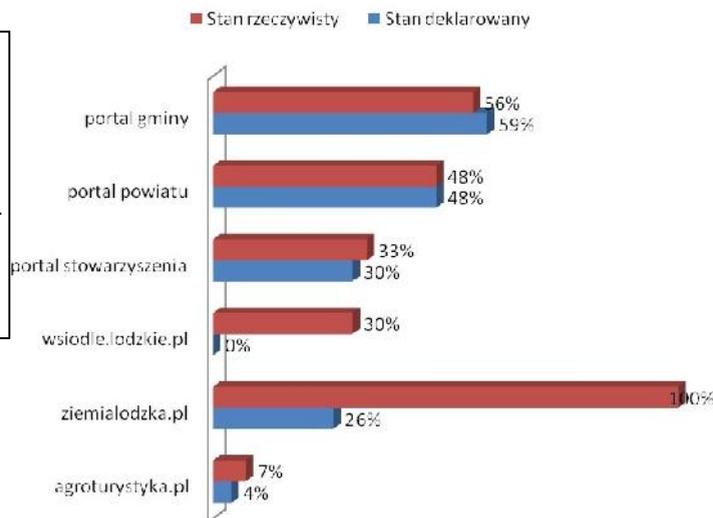
Another analysed issue is the knowledge of agritourism web portals among the owners of agritourism farms. For this purpose, the author mentioned to respondents 6 agritourism portals (agroturystyka.pl, ziemialodzka.pl, wsiodle.lodzkie.pl, agritourism association portal, powiat portal, municipality portal) and asked them to identify those portals on which they post or posted their offers (possibly other agritourism portals they use). The most frequently mentioned portals were the websites of municipalities and poviats which were indicated respectively by 59% and 48% of the respondents. 30% of the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region declare that they publish their offers on the portals of agritourism associations. 26% use the ziemialodzka.pl website. In individual cases, the respondents declare that they placed their offers on such portals as: agroturystyka.pl, e-holiday.pl, agrowakacje.pl, urloppolsce.pl, oto.wakacje.pl, etc. However, none of the respondents place offers on the wsiodle.lodzkie.pl portal.

The author suspected that the above declarations could differ from the actual state of affairs and decided to verify whether the respondents actually posted their offers on the 6 selected portals. As it turned out, in the case of 2 portals the actual state differs significantly from the declarations of the respondents.

On the ziemialodzka.pl portal there are offers of all agritourism farms participating in the study, while only 26% of the respondents declared that they placed their offers there. In turn, 30% of the farms participating in the study have their offer placed on the wsiodle.lodzkie.pl portal. For other portals, the declared results are similar to the actual ones.

Figure 11 presents a comparison of the actual and declared state of knowledge of particular agritourism web portals among owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region.

Znajomość internetowych portali agroturystycznych



Znajomość internetowych... - Knowledge of agritourism web portals; stan rzeczywisty/deklarowany – Actual/declared; Portal gminy – commune portal; portal powiatu – powiat portal; portal stowarzyszenia – association portal;

Figure 11. Comparison of the actual and declared state of knowledge of particular agritourism web portals among owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region (Size N = 23).

Source: Own elaboration based on telephone interviews with the owners of agritourism farms.

1.4.3.4. Opinions on the promotion on agritourism web portals and its effectiveness

The fourth analysed issue were the opinions of the owners of agritourism farms on the promotion on agritourism web portals. The author asked respondents a number of questions that allowed to learn about their general attitude towards promotion on the Internet, experience of using this form of promotion and opinions on the effectiveness of promotion on agritourism portals.

At the beginning, the author tried to learn about the respondents' attitude towards the promotion of agritourism farms on the Internet and asked them for their opinions on 4 statements. 59% of agritourism farm owners fully agree with the statement that promotion of their agritourism farm on the Internet will allow them to gain new customers. Another 37% rather agree with this statement, and only 4% believe the opposite. In case of the statement that the promotion of an agritourism farm on the Internet will make it easier for customers to find out the most recent information about the services offered by the farm, 55% of the respondents fully agree with the statement, almost 41% rather agree with it and 4% rather disagree with the statement. The third statement says that the promotion of agritourism farms on the Internet will lead to the popularization of the entire agritourism industry. 52% of the owners of agritourism farms fully agree with the statement, 29% rather agree with it, and 19% disagree. In turn, 48% of the respondents completely agree with the statement that the promotion of agritourism farms in the Internet will lead to the popularization of the Łódź region. Another 48% rather agree with this thesis, and the remaining 4% have no opinion on this matter.

As it was already mentioned earlier, 85% of the respondents who participated in the study declared that they currently use the Internet agritourism portals to promote their services. That is why the author decided to find out whether the owners of agritourism farms are satisfied with this form of promotion, or whether they have any reservations.

Stan zadowolenia... - Satisfaction with promotion on the Internet agritourism portals; Zdecydowanie zadowoleni – Definitely content; Zadowoleni, ale z zastrzeżeniami – Content, but with reservations; Niezadowoleni – Not content

Stan zadowolenia z promocji na internetowych portalach agroturystycznych

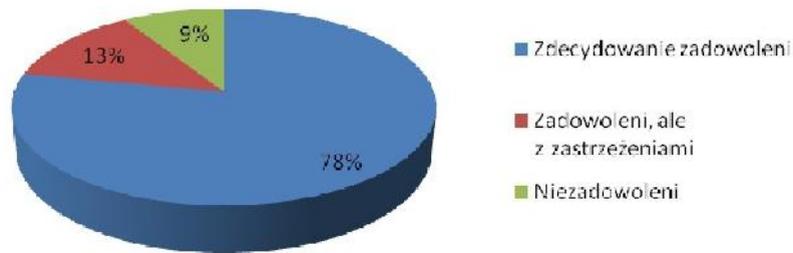


Figure 12. Satisfaction with promotion on the Internet agritourism portals among the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region who use this form of promotion (Size N=23).

Source: Own elaboration based on telephone interviews with the owners of agritourism farms.

78% of respondents using the promotion on agritourism portals showed clear satisfaction. Another 13% are satisfied but have some reservations. Mostly they do not like the fact that the offers on portals are often outdated and unattractive (there is no possibility of adding photos and more information) which makes it difficult to stand out from the competition. The remaining 9% of the respondents are definitely dissatisfied, they complain that the portals contain outdated offers and there is no possibility to edit/update them. Figure 12 presents the state of satisfaction with promotion on the Internet agritourism portals among the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region who use this form of promotion.

The effectiveness of promotion on the Internet agritourism portals can be measured as the number of customers who have benefited from agritourism farm services thanks to the offer placed on such portal. As it turns out, all owners of agritourism farms who use the promotion on the Internet agritourism portals declare that they have gained new customers thanks to it. However, as much as 57% of them are not able to determine which of the agritourism portals used is the most effective in terms of the number of customers gained. 17% of the respondents indicate the portals of agritourism associations as the most effective ones, 9% believe that the portals of municipalities are the most effective, another 9% - poviats, while single respondents mentioned also e-holiday.pl and oto.wakacje.pl portals. The percentage distribution of opinions is shown in Figure 13.

Najskuteczniejszy... - The most effective Internet agritourism portal; trudno określić – hard to say; ; Portal gminy – commune portal; portal powiatu – poviat portal; portal stowarzyszenia – association portal; inne portale – other portals

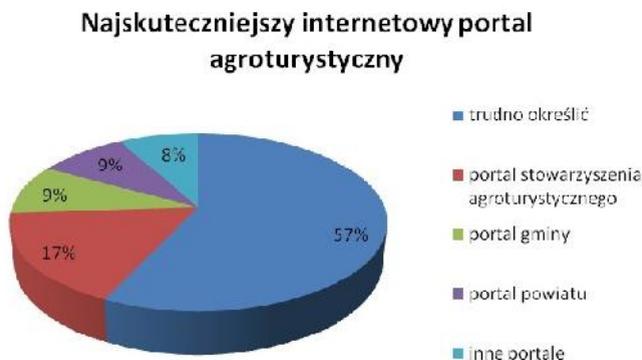


Figure 13. Opinions on the most effective Internet agritourism portals according to the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region (Size N=23).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on telephone interviews with the owners of agritourism farms.

1.4.3.5. Expenditures on promotion on agritourism web portals

Expenditures of owners of agritourism farms on promotion on agritourism web portals are another issue of interest to the author.

Therefore, the author decided to check what were the expenditures in 2010 and what financial resources for this purpose in the year the respondents are able to allocate in the future.

As the results showed, 78% of the respondents used promotion on free agritourism portals in 2010, as a result of which they had no expenditure. Another 13% of the owners of agritourism farms spent less than PLN 500, and 4% of the respondents spent the amount in the range of PLN 500 - PLN 1000, and 4% in the range from PLN 1000 to PLN 2000. Moreover, more than half of the owners of farms in the Łódź region (56%) do not want to invest in promotion on agritourism web portals in the future. 33% of the respondents would be willing to spend less than PLN 500 for this purpose, while 7% would spend between PLN 500 and PLN 1000. Only 4% would like to invest the amount between PLN 1000 and PLN 2000 in the promotion of their services on the agritourism portals. Figure 14 shows a comparison of expenditures on promotion on agritourism web portals in 2010 with planned expenses.

Wydatki... - Expenditures on promotion on agritourism web portals; Planowane wydatki – Planned expenditures; Wydatki w 2010 roku – Expenditures in 2010; Brak wydatków – No expenditures;

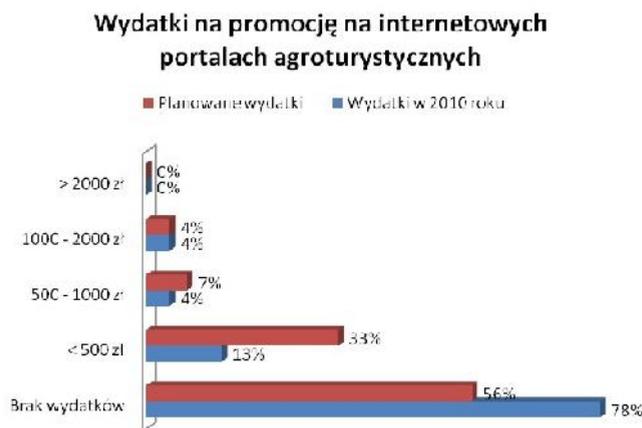


Figure 14. Comparison of expenditures on promotion on agritourism web portals (Sze N = 23).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on telephone interviews with the owners of agritourism farms.

1.4.3.6. Sources of information from which consumers learn about the offer of agritourism farms

Another issue that the author considered worth analyzing are the sources of information from which consumers learn about the offer of agritourism farms. This is important information which can help to correct or prepare a new, appropriate marketing plan for a farm.

In order to obtain this information, the author had to first find out whether the owners of agritourism farms from the region of Łódź ask their customers how they found out about their offer.

It turns out that 37% of the respondents always ask customers about it, 44% usually ask such question, and 11% do so, but very rarely. While 8% of the respondents have never tried to get this information from their customers. The above data are shown in Figure 15.

Częstotliwość... - Frequency of questions about the source of information from which the customer learned about the farm's offer; Zawsze – Always; Zazwyczaj – Usually; Bardzo rzadko – Seldom; Nigdy - Never

Częstotliwość pytań o źródło informacji, z którego klient dowiedział się o ofercie agroturystycznej

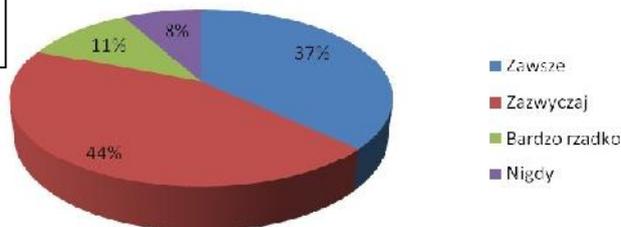


Figure 15. Frequency of questions about the source of information from which the customer learned about the farm's offer (Size N = 27).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on telephone interviews with the owners of agritourism farms.

Najważniejsze... - The most important source of information from which customers learn about the offer of an agritourism farm; Znajomi i rodzina – Friends and family;

Najważniejsze źródło informacji, z którego klienci dowiadują się o ofercie gospodarstwa agroturystycznego

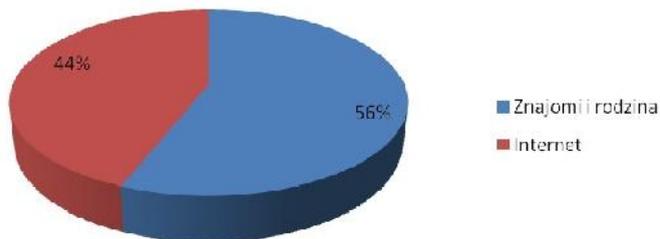


Figure 16. The most important source of information from which customers learn about the offer of an agritourism farm (Size N = 27).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on telephone interviews with the owners of agritourism farms.

Then, the author asked the owners of agritourism farms to choose 3 of their most important sources of information from which consumers learn about the offer of their farm and to organise them in descending order of significance. As it turned out, as much as 56% of the respondents indicated friends and family as the most important source of information. The remaining 44% believe that the Internet is the most important source of information. These results are shown in Figure 16. The Internet (48%), friends and family (24%), tourist fairs and information folders (8% each) were the second most frequently mentioned. The majority of respondents could not indicate the 3rd source of information in terms of the significance, in individual cases, indicating the Internet, fairs and an accident.

In addition, the responses of respondents asked for an estimated percentage of customers who learned about the farm's offer from the Internet show that this is less than half of the customers (48.2%).

1.4.3.7. Opinions on online accommodation booking systems

Online accommodation booking systems allow the customers to search for available accommodation within the dates specified by the user, to book the accommodation and to confirm the booking immediately. This is connected with considerable savings of time and money. That is why they are the advantages of agritourism portals. The author decided to check whether the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź Voivodeship benefit from this functionality.

Wykorzystanie... - Use of online accommodation booking systems among the owners of agritourism farms from the region of Łódź;
Korzysta obecnie – Currently used;
Nie zna takiego rozwiązania – No such solution known; Nie korzysta – Not used;

Wykorzystanie systemów rezerwacji miejsc noclegowych on-line wśród właścicieli gospodarstw agroturystycznych z regionu łódzkiego

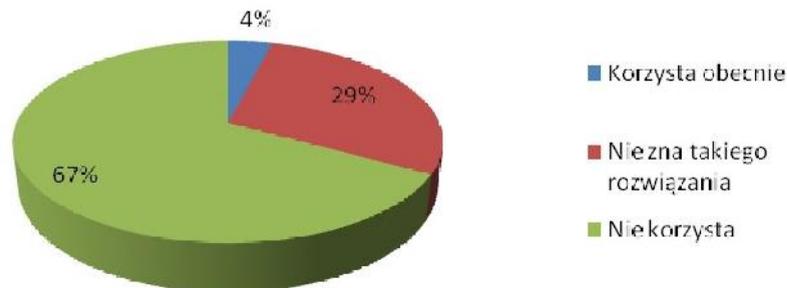


Figure 17. Use of online accommodation booking systems among the owners of agritourism farms from the region of Łódź (Size N = 27).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on telephone interviews with the owners of agritourism farms.

The results of the study show that only 4% of the owners of agritourism farms declare that they currently use the possibility of booking accommodation online in their farms. As much as 29% of the respondents say that they do not know the solution. The remaining 67% do not use the possibility of booking accommodation online, supporting this decision by: lack of a computer with access to the Internet, lack of time to fill in the booking data, lack of funds for promotion or complete obliteration of lack of free rooms. These results are shown in Figure 17.

1.4.3.8. Interest in placing advertisements on the new agritourism portal

At the end, the author checked how popular among the owners of agritourism farms would be the new agritourism portal, where they would have the possibility of posting free advertisements. 74% of the respondents declared that they definitely would like to post their offers on this portal. Another 19% said they would rather do it. On the other hand, 7% of the respondents stated that they would not be interested in such portal, mainly due to lack of free rooms and the impossibility to accommodate a larger number of guests than before. Figure 18 shows the interest in placing advertisements on the new agritourism portal among the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region.

Zainteresowanie zamieszczeniem ogłoszeń na nowym portalu agroturystycznym

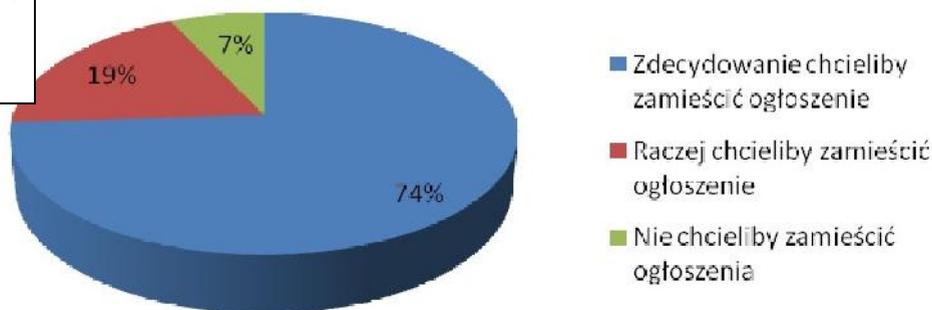


Figure 18. Interest in placing advertisements on the new agritourism portal among the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region (Size N = 27).

Source: Source: Own elaboration based on telephone interviews with the owners of agritourism farms.

Zainteresowanie... - Interest in placing advertisements on the new agritourism portal; Zdecydowanie... - Would definitely want to place an ad; Raczej... - Would probably want to place an ad; Nie chcieliby... - Would not want to place an ad

1.4.4. Individual in-depth interviews with private persons interested in or using the offer of agritourism farms

1.4.4.1. The websites most commonly used by customers seeking the offers of agritourism farms

The first issue, which the author considered worth analysing from the point of view of the study, are websites which are most often used by customers looking for agritourism offers. It will allow to identify forms of promotion in the Internet which are best targeted at the customer / potential customer, which is extremely important information when establishing the e-marketing strategy of individual agritourism farms.

The analysis showed that customers / potential customers looking for agritourism offers use different types of agritourism websites. Some of them use agritourism portals (including the portals of agritourism associations), while others prefer private websites of individual farms. Interestingly, most of the respondents declared that they found the agritourism-related websites by Google search engine - it is an expressive signal, showing how important role in the process of promotion of agritourism plays the positioning of websites for Internet search engines. The following is a statement of one of the respondents which is consistent with the replies of most of the other respondents.

"I go to Google and type "agritourism" plus possibly a place where I want to go. This is how I select the best offers of agritourism farms."

In individual cases, the source of knowledge about the existence of a given agritourism portal were the respondent's friends or an accident.

1.4.4.2. Knowledge of agritourism web portals

Another of the analysed issues was knowledge of agritourism portals among customers / potential customers looking for agritourism offers on the Internet. The author explained to the respondents how they should understand the term agritourism web portal and then asked them if they knew this type of portal, and if so, what it was. In case when the respondents were not able to mention any portal, the author presented to them, in his opinion, the most popular agritourism portals (www.agroturystyka.pl, www.ziemialodzka.pl, www.wsiodle.lodzkie.pl, portals of agritourism associations from the Łódź region, portals of municipalities or poviats where agritourism farms are located.

The interviewees showed very poor knowledge of agritourism portals. None of them could mention the name of this type of portal. The following is a characteristic response of one respondent.

"Unfortunately, I don't know any of them, at least, not by name. I have no head for that sort of things. It may be possible that I've seen their offers - I'm not ruling it out. But I can't say anything about them."

After the author's suggestions, two people admitted that they more or less know all of the above mentioned portals. The other two people stated that they only heard about the www.agroturystyka.pl portal. While the remaining respondents were not able to tell if they ever visited or heard something about these portals.

What is more, none of the respondents ever used foreign agritourism portals.

1.4.4.3. Evaluation of agritourism portals

Having information on the knowledge of agritourism portals among customers looking for the offers of vacation in rural areas on the Internet, the author has decided to learn subjective opinions of the respondents in terms of the mentioned portals. For this purpose, he asked customers / potential customers of agritourism services to evaluate the portals in terms of content and aesthetics (graphics) as he found these two factors to be the most important from the point of view of the portal's user.

The opinions of the interviewees were divided - some of them assessed the substantive and aesthetic aspects of the portals positively, while others had reservations about them. Respondents who assessed the portals positively emphasized that they were transparent and contained many interesting offers. While those who evaluated the portals negatively drew attention to the fact that they were not distinguished by anything special in relation to the competition and often included outdated agritourism advertisements. The following is a statement by one of the respondents, which reflects the opinions of the other interviewees well.

"Some are better, others are worse. I'm surprised to the fact that they are not super amazing, despite massive competition"

In the case of the question whether the respondents consider these agritourism portals to be worth recommending, the situation seemed similar - opinions were divided. The respondents claimed that some portals were better and others worse. They clearly emphasized that people who wanted to find agritourism offer had no bigger alternative.

1.4.4.4. Information sought on agritourism portals

The fourth issue which the author decided to analyse in this research project was the information that the users of agritourism portals are looking for. The author tried to determine which of this information are the most important and which are less important, whether the respondents find the information they are looking for and what information is missing.

Respondents declared that they are most often looking for information about the price of agritourism services. Apart from the price, the following information were mentioned as the most desirable ones: photos of the rooms, the opinions of people who visited the farm, information about free accommodation and attractions which are offered by the farm. The answer of one of the respondents is presented below.

"Mainly I look for price information, browse photo gallery of rooms and check if there is free accommodation."

Most of the users of agritourism portals, with whom the author talked, stated that unfortunately they can not find all the necessary information. Information about available rooms and attractions offered by agritourism farms is mentioned as the most frequently missing one.

1.4.4.5. Opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of agritourism portals

The next issue which the author decided to look at were the opinions of the users of Internet agritourism portals on the strengths and weaknesses of such portals. The analysis of this issue will make it possible to gain information about what the users of such portal like and what they do not like as well as what changes are expected.

The biggest advantage of agritourism portals, for most of the respondents, is the fact that they provide the possibility to see a large number of offers which can be compared and then choose the best one. The second advantage of agritourism portals mentioned was the possibility of reaching the opinions of customers who already used the services of a given agritourism farm.

As for the disadvantages of this type of portals, their users most often indicate outdated agritourism offers, lack of necessary information and lack of online accommodation booking system. In addition, when asked about what would need to be improved in addition to the above mentioned weaknesses, the respondents stated that many portals should have a more attractive graphic design.

1.4.4.6. Opinion on online accommodation booking system

Online accommodation booking system is another issue which the author believes is important to analyse. Such systems allow the user to search for available accommodation within the dates specified by the user, to book the accommodation and to confirm the booking immediately. This is connected with considerable savings of time and money. It is precisely because of this that this is one of the most desired functions of tourism/agritourism portals. The author decided to see what opinions on such systems are held by customers / potential customers looking for agritourism offers on the Internet

The majority of respondents declare that they use online accommodation booking systems. At the same time, only one of these people booked accommodation in an agritourism farm (using the www.agroturystyka.pl portal) and the other one was present during the booking process (could not indicate the exact portal). Other people used online bookings for domestic and foreign trips, different from agritourism.

All respondents who declared that they use such systems consider online booking systems to be simple and intuitive enough for all Internet users.

1.4.4.7. Opinions on the features that an agritourism portal should have

The last issue that the author decided to look at as part of this research project were the opinions of people looking for agritourism offers on the Internet on the functions that an ideal agritourism portal should have. The analysis of this issue will make it possible to finally determine what functions are expected by customers / potential customers of agritourism farms and, consequently, present and future users of agritourism portals.

Respondents, when asked about what they would like to find on the ideal agritourism portal, indicated the following things: many interesting and up-to-date agritourism offers, as much information as possible on the offer (particularly about the price and availability of rooms), rich photo galleries and films presenting a given farm, the possibility of booking accommodation as well as a description of the attractions of rural lifestyle offered by farms. Below is the answer of one of the respondents.

“First of all, the updated offers. A lot of photos, short videos, possibility of booking accommodation.”

What is important, the respondents unanimously stated that if their requirements were met, they would use such agritourism portal more frequently.

1.4.5. SWOT Analysis

1.4.5.1. Strengths of agritourism promotion using agritourism web portals

For the owners of agritourism farms in the Łódź region:

- The possibility to quickly reach a large number of potential customers from all over the world.
- The possibility to present an interesting offer (with a detailed description of the offered attractions, photo gallery, contact details, price, etc.) to the target group of customers who visit agritourism portals to find the best vacation destination for themselves.
- According to the results of the study, about half of the customers of agritourism farms find out about their offer from the Internet.
- In most cases, posting advertisements on agritourism web portals is free.

For people who want to benefit from agritourism services in the Łódź region:

- The possibility to see and compare a large number of agritourism offers in one place.
- The possibility to reach detailed information on a given agritourism farm.
- According to the results of the study, the majority of owners of agritourism farms declare that they post advertisements on agritourism portals.

1.4.5.2. Weaknesses of agritourism promotion using agritourism web portals

For the owners of agritourism farms in the Łódź region:

- Agritourism portals do not have e-learning modules so the owners of farms are not able to increase their knowledge in the field of agritourism through the Internet.
- Customers usually can not mention the names and addresses of agritourism portals - they get there through search engine or by accident.

For people who want to benefit from agritourism services in the Łódź region:

- Most of the analysed portals are outside the top 100 results of Google search for the keyword “agritourism” what makes it difficult to reach such a portal.
- More than half of the observed portals has been prepared only in Polish version which may significantly impede access to information for foreign tourists.
- Most of the analysed portals do not have a section with general information about agritourism and agritourism in the region of Łódź.
- More than half of the observed portals do not have a calendar of events in the region.
- Most of the analysed portals do not provide information about available rooms and do not have the possibility of booking accommodations online.
- Most of the observed portals do not allow commenting on posted tourism offers.
- Most of the analysed portals lack basic functional features, i.e. newsletter, user forum etc.
- Agritourism offers are often outdated and unattractive in terms of content and visual aspect.
- Lack of certain information sought, i.e. price, information about available rooms and attractions offered by the farm.
- The lack of innovative solutions that allow for competitive advantage and attract the attention of a larger group of Internet users.

1.4.5.3. Opportunities of agritourism promotion using agritourism web portals

For the owners of agritourism farms in the Łódź region:

- The opportunity to gain new customers.
- The opportunity to expand their knowledge of tourism.
- The opportunity to compare their offers with offers of competition.
- The opportunity to gain a competitive advantage by enriching the posted offer with new elements, e.g. short films promoting the farm.
- The opportunity to improve business through the use of online accommodation booking system. For people who want to benefit from agritourism services in the Łódź region:
- The opportunity to acquire basic knowledge of tourism.

- The opportunity to save time by using the online accommodation booking system.
- The opportunity to learn the opinion of people who visited a given farm.
- The opportunity to obtain all the necessary and up-to-date information on a given farm.
- The possibility to use innovative IT solutions.

1.4.5.4. Threats of agritourism promotion using agritourism web portals

For the owners of agritourism farms in the Łódź region:

- A large number of agritourism offers in one place - strong competition.
- According to the results of the study, about half of the customers do not search offers on the Internet, they reach an agritourism farm on their friend's/ family's recommendation.

For people who want to benefit from agritourism services in the Łódź region:

- The possibility to miss out a unique agritourism offer among many offers posted on the agritourism portal.

1.5. Limitations

During the execution of individual research projects, the author encountered several limitations. The first one concerns a desk research during which the author had a problem with reaching all documents referring to the existing state and recommendations concerning promotion of agritourism on the Internet. At present, there is no list indicating which of the documents are the most important and what are the relationships between them (which of the documents is or should be the result of which), thus, the author himself had to establish these relationships.

The second limitation relates to the next research project which was the observation of agritourism web portals. 77 agritourism portals were subject to observation, including portals of poviats from the Łódź Voivodeship, agritourism associations operating in the region of Łódź, municipalities in which these associations operate, Łódź Agricultural Advisory Center, Regional Tourism Organization of Łódź Voivodeship, Local Tourism Organizations, Local Action Groups and other institutions for the promotion of agritourism in the Łódź region. Moreover, some of the most popular commercial tourism portals were evaluated which include the offers of agritourism farms from the Łódź region. At the same time, the author realizes that the study is not complete because some of the institutions mentioned above do not have their own portals (2 urban poviats, 4 agritourism associations and 1 LTO) and it is impossible to analyse all the commercial portals on which there are agritourism offers from the Łódź Voivodeship.

Another limitation has been encountered during the telephone interviews with owners of agritourism farms. The problem here was the lack of a uniform and up-to-date list of agritourism farms from the Łódź region. The author managed to reach two lists with farms made available by the Łódź Agricultural Advisory Center and the www.ziemialodzka.pl portal. However, their authors stressed that those lists were not complete and were not 100% up-to-date. Another of the limitations of this research project was the fact that some of the randomly sampled farms ceased their agritourism activities and getting to the other ones was difficult because of outdated contact details.

The last limitation concerns individual in-depth interviews conducted by the author with private persons using or interested in using the offer of agritourism farms. For the purposes of this research project, purposive sampling was applied which made it difficult for the author to find an adequate number of people in each of the groups into which the respondents were divided.

1.6. Summary of the study results

The study carried out by the author has been divided into 5 research projects. The first one was desk research which covered 7 strategic documents concerning problems and recommendations in the field of tourism promotion (including agritourism). In order to find a broader context of the problems and recommendations mentioned, the author first analysed a document issued by the European Commission (EU), then documents issued at the level of Poland, and finally regional documents concerning the Łódź Voivodeship. The documents analysed clearly indicate the need to introduce innovations and computerisation of the entire tourist industry, including agritourism. At the same time, they clearly show that modern information technologies are a good direction in the development of agritourism industry, even the chance for effective promotion and, consequently, gaining new customers. What is more, these documents provide that the skillful use of modern IT tools will provide a guarantee to increase the attractiveness of the business offer of the sector.

The second research project focused on the observation of agritourism web portals. The study covered 77 portals which were analysed against four main criteria: the level of technical advancement, functionality, substantial level of the presented agritourism offer as well as the possibility of implementation of the planned scenarios. The author noticed and presented serious shortcomings of observed portals for each of the above mentioned criteria.

In the case of technical evaluation, the main problem is poor positioning of the analysed portals for the keyword "agritourism" in the Google search engine ranking. The author recommends that their owners/administrators use positioning techniques for this keyword as it is the fastest way to reach an ever-growing group of Internet users who are looking for agritourism offers, and thus to promote the entire Łódź region.

In addition to positioning the portals, the author also sees a need to better adapt them to W3C standards. This will allow for proper functioning of portals on every web browser and will facilitate the use of portals by people with disabilities.

Another weak point of most of the observed portals is their functionality. They often do not provide their users with access to the basic functions that should be required of portals promoting agritourism in the region (e.g. the possibility of placing agritourism offers, opinions on them or finding basic information about agritourism in the region). What is more, none of the portals use the innovative solutions that could attract new users and encourage them to visit the area of the Łódź region. Therefore, the author recommends adding basic functionalities (described in section 1.4.2.2) and an attempt to implement innovative solutions (e.g. e-learning platform, booking accommodation online) which will provide a competitive advantage.

The substantive level of the agritourism offers presented on the portals leaves much to be desired. Portals usually allow owners of agritourism farms to place only contact details in their offer, sometimes enriched with a photo of the farm and its short description. There is a lot of competition in the agritourism services market and such offers may not be convincing enough for customers who have not yet decided where they would like to relax. That is why the author draws particular attention to the need to improve the substantive part of the offers presented on the portals. Owners of agritourism farms should be able to publish professional and extensive descriptions including not only contact details but also extensive descriptions of the attractions offered, rich photo galleries, pictograms showing farm facilities or short advertising films encouraging potential customers to visit the farm.

Similarly to the previous criteria, the result was not satisfactory also in case of assessing portals in terms of the implementation of the planned scenarios. This criterion was very important because it allowed us to check how the portals work in a specific interaction with the user. Unfortunately, in most cases, the planned activities were not completed. What is more, the author realizes that the scenarios planned by him could detect only basic problems related to the user's interaction with the portal. Therefore, the author recommends that the portals owners create special mailboxes to which users of the portal could send information about any problems and errors. In the author's opinion, this solution will allow portals to easily detect errors, react quickly and make a significant contribution to making them more user-friendly.

The next stage of the study were telephone interviews conducted with 27 owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region. The survey results showed that most respondents have a computer with Internet access and can use it. Moreover, almost all respondents declared that they use or used promotion of their services on the Internet.

The form of promotion most frequently used by the respondents is promotion on agritourism web portals. At this point it is worth emphasising that the vast majority of owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region are satisfied with this form of promotion. Some people have some reservations - they do not like the fact that advertisements on agritourism portals are often outdated and unattractive (no possibility to add photos and more information) which makes it difficult to distinguish themselves from the competition. Moreover, it is noteworthy that most of the respondents declared that they would be willing to promote their services on the new agritourism portal for the region of Łódź. According to the author, the above arguments clearly testify to the great interest of owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region in promoting their services on the Internet agritourism portals. Therefore, the author recommends the improvement of existing agritourism portals and construction of a new, comprehensive portal for the Łódź region.

The fourth research project consisted in conducting individual in-depth interviews with people who were interested in taking advantage of the agritourism offer. As the study showed, most respondents were not able to indicate the addresses of agritourism portals and they visit websites on this subject mainly thanks to the Google search engine, which clearly shows how important in the process of agritourism promotion is the role of positioning website for search engines. The opinions of the interviewees on agritourism portals are divided - some of them evaluate them very positively, claiming that they provide the possibility of comparing a large number of agritourism offers, while others have some reservations. The defects of existing agritourism portals most frequently mentioned by their users include posting outdated agritourism offers, lack of all the necessary information concerning offers and lack of online accommodation booking system. In addition, it is worth noting that the respondents unanimously stated that they would use these types of portals more willingly if they could find interesting and up-to-date agritourism offers on them, as much information about the offer as possible (particularly about the price and availability of rooms), rich photo galleries and films presenting a given farm, possibility of booking accommodation as well as a description of the attractions of rural lifestyle offered by farms. This is an extremely valuable suggestion of what should be done by the owners/administrators of existing portals in order to make them more efficient, and thus to attract Internet users to them.

Summing up, many non-integrated portals can be found on the Internet, which include the offers of agritourism farms from the Łódź Voivodeship. The portals vary in functionality and offers presented. There is no single comprehensive portal dedicated to the region of Łódź. This causes confusion among Internet users and makes it difficult to access important information. In addition, the author noted a number of shortcomings regarding the promotion of services on existing agritourism portals. At the same time, it should be emphasized that Internet agritourism portals have much greater potential for promoting agritourism in the Łódź region than is currently used. Moreover, the presented observations and recommendations may significantly improve the quality of these portals and help in developing a new comprehensive agritourism portal for the region, which in turn will result in attracting new tourists and at the same time promoting the entire Łódź Voivodeship.

1.7. Recommendations for project beneficiaries

The prepared recommendations were divided into strategic and operational ones. The first of them are addressed to the institutions responsible for setting the strategy for the Łódź Voivodeship in the scope of tourism development and innovation. This type of institution includes: The Marshal Office of the Łódź Voivodeship as well as the municipalities and poviats of the region. The second group of recommendations was addressed directly to economic entities, including institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the region (Agricultural Advisory Centre, agritourism associations, Regional Tourist Organisation of the Łódź Voivodeship, Local Tourist Organisations, Local Action Groups), owners of commercial agritourism portals and owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region.

1.7.1. Strategic recommendations

The author presents the following conclusions and strategic recommendations:

Conclusion 1:

New information technologies and innovative solutions are too rarely used to promote agritourism farms in the region.

Recommendation 1:

Public institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the Łódź region should aim to increase the use of new information technologies and innovative solutions for the promotion of agritourism farms, as they are currently a determinant of the competitiveness of the tourism sector, including agritourism.

The need for innovation and informatization of the tourism sector (including agritourism) should be more widely included in regional strategic documents, i.e.: Development of Tourism in the Łódź Voivodeship Programme, Regional Innovation Strategy and the Regional Operational Programme for the Łódź Voivodeship.

In addition, it should be included in the promotional strategies of poviats and municipalities defining the scope of activities of these entities in the area of promotion of tourism (agritourism).

Conclusion 2:

The Łódź region does not have a dedicated agritourism portal.

Recommendation 2:

The need to build an agritourism portal for the Łódź region should be included in the strategic regional documents, i.e.: Development of Tourism in the Łódź Voivodeship Programme, Regional Innovation Strategy and the Regional Operational Programme for the Łódź Voivodeship.

In addition, the Marshal's Office should strive to build a new comprehensive agritourism portal for the region which should be integrated with existing agritourism portals.

A comprehensive portal should be understood as a portal which includes 3 main functions: information, booking and communication.

1.7.2. Operational recommendations

The author presents the following conclusions and operational recommendations:

Conclusion 3:

Existing agritourism portals present a low level of technological advancement and fail to meet the needs of Internet users looking for agritourism offers from the Łódź region. The weaknesses of the portals most frequently mentioned by their users include low attractiveness of the presented offers and lack of basic functionality.

Recommendation 3:

The owners of Internet agritourism portals (commercial and those of the institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the region) should aim to develop and improve existing portals because at present they do not present a sufficient level of technological advancement and they do not meet the needs of Internet users looking for agritourism offers from the Łódź region.

The owners/administrators of agritourism portals should optimize the source code of the portals so that they are fully compliant with W3C and W3C CSS standards, which will ensure their highest quality, performance on each web browser and will make it easier for people with disabilities to use such portals.

Moreover, agritourism portals should have at least functions such as:

- Section with general information on agritourism;
- Section with information on agritourism in the region of Łódź;
- The possibility of placing and editing advertisements of agritourism farms from the region;
- Information on training courses, conferences, etc.;
- Calendar of events in the region;
- Uniform online accommodation booking system;
- The possibility of creating a user profile;
- User forum;

- Newsletter;
- The possibility of commenting on accommodations;

Conclusion 4:

Agritourism offers posted on existing agritourism portals are often outdated and unattractive.

One of the reasons for this situation is the fact that the owners of Internet agritourism portals usually do not make it possible to publish extensive offers and edit them.

On the other hand, owners of agritourism farms do not make full use of the promotional opportunities offered to them by agritourism portals.

Recommendation 4:

The owners of Internet agritourism portals (commercial and those of the institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the region) should strive to allow the owners of agritourism farms to post the most extensive and the most interesting offers.

Agritourism offers should consist of at least such elements as:

- Short description of the agritourism farm;
- Information on prices and room availability;
- Description of the attractions of rural lifestyle offered by farms (e.g. horse riding, making bread, etc.);
- Photo gallery of the farm;
- Photos of the rooms offered;
- Short films presenting the farm;
- Pictograms presenting facilities at the farm.

On the other hand, owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region should make full use of the promotional potential that thematic portals provide them with by posting the most up-to-date and extensive offers on as many agritourism portals as possible. This will allow them to reach a larger group of potential customers.

Conclusion 5:

Existing agritourism portals occupy low positions in Google's search engine ranking for the keyword "agritourism", which makes it less likely that Internet users will find them.

Recommendation 5:

Owners of Internet agritourism portals (commercial and those of the institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the region) should constantly use the techniques of website positioning or outsource this task to a professional company.

The basic techniques of positioning the portal include:

- Exchange of links and banners with similar websites, placing websites in thematic catalogues;
- Abandonment of navigation based on additional technologies, e.g. JavaScript, Flash or frames, improving the ability to navigate the page, using the page map;
- Removal of errors (e.g. syntax ones) of the code of the page;
- Code optimization, removal of redundant HTML tags;
- Good description of page elements, e.g. title of the page or alternative content for graphics;
- Clear description of references (avoiding “here” or “click” descriptions and using ones which better describe the content of the page to which they lead);
- Using “friendly” addresses (e.g. <http://example.com/sklep/drukarki/laserowe/> instead of <http://example.com/index.php?page=236&id=32>);
- Highlighting (e.g. bold, underline) the most important words, the use of headers.

Conclusion 6:

A large number of existing agritourism portals do not have any foreign language versions, which makes it impossible for foreign tourists to use them.

Recommendation 6:

Owners of Internet agritourism portals (commercial and those of the institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the region) should strive to allow viewing the portals to foreign tourists by the preparation of at least one foreign language version (English version by default).

Conclusion 7:

Existing agritourism portals are not equipped with systems of direct booking accommodations online.

While the owners of agritourism farms and Internet users looking for agritourism offers express an interest in using such systems.

Recommendation 7:

Owners of Internet agritourism portals (commercial and those of the institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the region) should strive to build and implement a system of direct online booking of accommodation which is of interest of both the owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region and Internet users looking for agritourism offers.

Such systems can be built from scratch or purchased in the form of ready-made modules which only need to be integrated into the portal.

Conclusion 8:

Existing agritourism portals do not provide innovative IT solutions which could ensure a competitive advantage as well as encourage users to use the portals more frequently.

Recommendation 8:

The owners of Internet agritourism portals (commercial and those of the institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the region) should strive to implement innovative solutions that will be able to provide a competitive advantage, and thus attract Internet users. It is proposed to use at least one of the following innovative solutions which have proven themselves on web portals of companies from other industries, virtual advisor, e-learning module or Ivona WebReader speech synthesizer.

Conclusion 9:

The Internet is one of the main sources of information from which customers learn about the offer of a given agritourism farm.

However, not all owners of agritourism farms use this medium to promote their services.

One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the fact that owners of agritourism farms have no knowledge in the field of promoting services on the Internet.

Recommendation 9:

The owners of Internet agritourism portals (commercial and those of the institutions responsible for the promotion of agritourism in the region) should make the owners of agritourism farms aware of the benefits of promotion on the Internet by organising trainings, conferences, forums, publishing articles and conducting research on this subject.

On the other hand, the owners of agritourism farms should take an active part in training courses, conferences, forums on the promotion on the Internet, and then use the acquired knowledge in practice (e.g. by posting offers on agritourism portals).

1.8. Model of the Internet agritourism portal for the Łódź region

Based on the results of the conducted research, the author has created a model of creating the Internet agritourism portal the task of which is to effectively promote agritourism in the Łódź region. It is important that the model be competitive against the models prepared by the market leaders and, what is more, stand out from them. This is a prerequisite for winning and then retaining customers,

- Internet users. According to the author, this condition can be met, among others, through an innovative approach to management. In this regard, the model was built on the principles of benchmarking.
- It draws from the best practices of both the native and foreign web portals.

For the purpose of the study, benchmarking is defined as a tool that allows to identify and understand good/best practices and then to apply them for one's own business needs. Its application brings a lot of benefits, including: increasing competitiveness, identifying the potential of own development, defining market leaders and then making it possible to become one of them.

The author decided to split his model into two parts. The first one are the best practices observed during the study and the respondents' suggestions which according to the author are indispensable for the construction of every agritourism portal. Then, the author focused on the innovative solutions chosen by him, which in his opinion provide a competitive advantage and make it possible to become a leader on the market of agritourism portals of the Łódź region.

1.8.1. Necessary solutions

According to the same key which was used for the second research project - observation of existing agritourism portals, necessary solutions were divided into technical, functional and substantive aspects.

1.8.1.1. Technical aspects

The first of the technical aspects, on which the author puts particular emphasis, is the positioning of the portal in search engine rankings, especially Google search engine. This action is aimed at achieving the highest possible position in the results of search engines for particular keywords and expressions. In this case, the keywords should be "agritourism" and "Łódź agritourism". The higher the position of the portal for these expressions, the greater the chances that Internet users will find the portal and use it.

In addition to the selection of appropriate keywords, in order to position the portal, the author proposes to optimize the code and content of the website, exchange links and banners with similar websites as well as to use the so-called “friendly” url addresses.

The second factor that increases the technical evaluation of the portal is its compliance with W3C standards. W3C standards are a set of best practices to be followed when designing websites. Compliance with them ensures that the portal will be displayed correctly on any web browser. Moreover, the use of W3C standards is a great convenience for people with disabilities. Thanks to being compatible with them, special settings of browsers used by disabled people will almost always work properly.

The last technical aspect that the author proposes to use for the portal is its multilingual character. The basic version of the portal will be prepared in Polish but its users will also be able to use English, German and Russian language versions. This is an important aspect as it will allow to promote the region of Łódź outside Poland, and therefore it should attract foreign tourists.

1.8.1.2. Functional aspects

The first and the most important functionality, which cannot be missed on any agritourism portal, is the possibility to place agritourism offers. The author has decided that the users of the portal will be able to place offers concerning their own farm by themselves, however, the added offers will be verified by the administrator before being published on the portal. Importantly, adding farm offers will be completely free of charge. The author’s idea is that all agritourism farms from the Łódź region place their offers on the portal. More detailed information on the substantive issues of the presented offers can be found in section 1.8.1.3.

An equally important aspect is to ensure order and clarity of the portal. Due to this, the author attached a map of the portal structure which contains links to all sections of the website organised in one place, making it much easier to navigate through such an extensive portal.

Another factor influencing the increase in the assessment of the portal’s functionality are thematic sections from which users of the portal can derive information. The author proposes to introduce sections (separate menu items) for such issues as: news, general information on agritourism, information about the region of Łódź and its attractions, detailed information on agritourism in the Łódź region, information on training courses, conferences, agritourism fairs, accommodation.

Events taking place in the region may be an additional stimulus which will encourage potential customers to choose an agritourism farm from the region. For this reason, the portal model includes a calendar of events in the region, informing about all cultural and sporting events taking place in the Łódź Voivodeship.

Another important function that should be met by agritourism portals is a communicative function. In connection with the above, in the author’s model he makes it possible to exchange views on a specially prepared forum of users.

Moreover, in order to enable the users of the portal to reach as quickly as possible the most up-to-date agritourism information from the Łódź region, the author has introduced a free newsletter which can be subscribed to by any user.

1.8.1.3. Substantive aspects

PRZYKŁADOWE... -
Exemplary
agritourism farm;
Opis – Description;
Atrakcje –
Attractions; Pokoje
– Rooms; Zdjęcia –
Photographs; Filmy
– Videos;
Udogodnienia –
Amenities; Zdjęcie
gospodarstwa... -
Photo of the
agritourism farm;
Mapa dojazdu... -
Map of access to
the farm; Dane
kontaktowe –
Contact details;
Opis gospodarstwa
– Description of the
farm; Komentarze -
Comments

PRZYKŁADOWE GOSPODARSTWO AGROTURYSTYCZNE

Opis	Atrakcje	Pokoje	Zdjęcia	Filmy	Udogodnienia
Zdjęcie gospodarstwa agroturystycznego					
Mapa dojazdu do gospodarstwa					
<p>Dane kontaktowe: Nazwa: Właściciel: Powiat: Gmina: Ulica: Kod pocztowy: Miejscowość: Telefon: E-mail: WWW:</p> <p>Opis gospodarstwa: Tutaj znajdzie się opis gospodarstwa agroturystycznego. Tutaj znajdzie się opis gospodarstwa agroturystycznego.</p>					
<p>Komentarze: Tutaj znajdują się komentarze użytkowników dotyczące prezentowanej oferty. Tutaj znajdują się komentarze użytkowników dotyczące prezentowanej oferty. Tutaj znajdują się komentarze użytkowników dotyczące prezentowanej oferty.</p>					

Figure 19. Scheme of the proposed presentation of offers on the agritourism portal for the Łódź region.

Source: Own elaboration.

There is a lot of competition in the agritourism services market and simple offers containing only contact details of the farm may not be convincing enough for customers who have not yet decided where they would like to relax.

In connection with this, the author decided to make it possible for owners of agritourism farms from the Łódź region to place as interesting and extensive offers as possible. The model of the portal provides that apart from contact details, owners of agritourism farms will be able to place: description of agritourism farm and attractions of rural lifestyle offered, access map, information on prices and availability of rooms, expanded photo gallery, photos of all rooms offered, short films presenting farm values and pictograms presenting facilities at the farm. Moreover, the users of the portal will be able to comment on agritourism offers.

Figure 19 shows a scheme of the proposed presentation of offers on the agritourism portal for the Łódź region, including all the above-described elements.

1.8.2. Innovative solutions

The Internet portals market is developing very dynamically. Practically every day new, interesting solutions are created, thanks to which the websites are becoming more attractive to its users. However, it should be noted that the application of too many such solutions may lead to the opposite effect than is desired, the user will be overwhelmed by the number of previously unknown functions, which in turn will discourage him from using the website. That is why the author has chosen only four solutions which according to him are the most interesting, and at the same time they match the specificity of the designed portal and will allow to provide a competitive advantage, and thus become a leader on the market of agritourism portals of the Łódź region.

1.8.2.1. User's interaction with the virtual tourist advisor website

The first innovation which the author applied in his model of agritourism portal is a virtual tourist advisor. The author has decided to use this method of user's interaction with the website for two reasons. The first is the ever-increasing popularity of this solution. The second reason is that virtual advisors are able to provide users of the portal with fast and easy access to information on particular topics. They are a particular ease of access to information for people with low computer skills.

Virtual advisor should be defined as a computer program, whose task is to conduct a conversation using natural language or text interface, giving the impression of being intelligent. The aim of this solution is to convince the user that it talks with a living human being. Virtual advisors are often used to replace real consultants and answer questions from customers about the services and activities of a given company⁹.

According to the study on the use of virtual advisors in business, conducted by Dr. K. Kuligowska from the Faculty of Economics of the University of Warsaw, addressed to Polish companies which implemented a virtual advisor on their website, almost all of them declared that the implementation of a virtual advisor improved the image of their brand.

9.) <http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chatbot> (accessed: June 2011)



Figure 20. Virtual tourist

Source: <http://www.travelasystement.pl> (accessed: June 2011).

As many as 62% of the respondents said that a virtual advisor facilitated direct communication with customers. Research has shown that using a virtual advisor increases the number of visitors to the website. The analysed companies recorded an increase in the number of visits by 10%, 15%, 30% and in one case even by 400%⁽¹⁰⁾.

At the same time, the research conducted by the author shows that only one Polish portal dealing with a wide range of tourist topics uses such a solution. It is a portal of Internet travel agency travelasystement.pl, which the author used as a benchmark. Figure 20 shows a virtual advisor implemented on this website.

1.8.2.2. Adapting the portal to the needs of the blind and partially-sighted

Around 100 thousand blind people live in Poland, of whom over 82 thousand are members of the Polish Association of the Blind. It is also worth to note the second group which are partially-sighted people - their number is estimated at several hundred thousand⁽¹¹⁾. More and more agritourism farms sees these two groups as potential customers and is trying to adapt its services to meet their needs.

The problem is still about reaching these people with the agritourism offer. The best solution seems to be the Internet, the use of which is becoming increasingly popular among the blind and partially-sighted. Therefore, a very important task is to adjust the agritourism portals so that these people can freely use them.

One of the main solutions to this problem is, already mentioned before, designing websites according to W3C standards. In this case, these are W3C WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) standards which constitute a set of documents with recommendations for creating accessible websites.

In addition, the author has decided to introduce two innovative features into his model, which refer to the best practices observed on the official website of the Polish Association of the Blind.

10.) Dr. K. Kuligowska's report on the use of virtual advisors in business. Available at: [Http://www.marketing-news.pl/message.php?art=29717](http://www.marketing-news.pl/message.php?art=29717) (accessed: June 2011).

11.) <http://www.widzialni.eu> (accessed: June 2011).

The first of these are icons shown in Figure 21, which are becoming more common on all sorts of websites and web portals. They allow the user to change the font size or return to the default settings with just one "click".



Figure 21. The icons for changing the font size.

Source: <http://www.pzn.org.pl> (accessed: June 2011).

The second solution is based on the use of Ivona WebReader application that allows users to listen to content of the website. Using the methods of artificial intelligence, such website is divided into "points" - logical fragments such as: menu, footer, paragraph, message. Also in this case, the user starts the application with a single "click", then it may switch between "points" using keyboard shortcuts¹².

An additional advantage of using Ivona WebReader is the opportunity to take advantage of the fact of using this mechanism for promotional purposes. Blind or partially sighted people use portals cataloguing websites tailored to their specific needs. Registration in such databases is free of charge and, as there is no competition from other agritourism portals, being on the first page in this category may be noted by the community.

1.8.2.3. Online booking system

In today's world, the tourist trip begins on the Internet. It is with its help that the tourist finds the offer, books tickets and accommodation. All these activities are carried out without the need to leave the house and are associated with considerable savings of time and money. And it is precisely these two features that have a major impact on the growing popularity of online booking systems - another innovative module that the author would like to use in the model being developed.

Only one of the observed agritourism portals offers the possibility of booking accommodation online. However, this is not a complete solution because after the booking is made, the user has to wait for an e-mail reply from the owner of the agritourism farm. Often, the answer is negative, since the term selected by the user turns out not to be available. This leads to frustration and discourages the customer from using the portal in the future.

However, there are online booking systems which solve this problem. An example of such a system is the portal <http://www.booking.com>. It makes it possible to search for available accommodation on the date specified by the user, to book a selected accommodation and to confirm the reservation immediately. The user is able to book the accommodation within 2 minutes and will receive confirmation by e-mail or text message. This booking system is shown in Figure 22.

12.) <http://www.ivona.com/> (accessed: June 2011).

DOSTĘPNE POKOJE						
<p> pokoje dostępne od Wto 05 Lip 2011, do Śro 06 Lip 2011 (Zmień daty) Obalanie: nocowanie w tym miejscu zawiera śniadanie wczesną, o 21:24, kraj: Chiny</p>						
Rodzaj pokoju	Warunki	Maksymalnie	Cena za 1 noc	Liczba pokoi	Rezerwacja	
 Pokoje Dwa osobowe Pula leżankowa, do 1 noc. Wliczone w cenę pokoju: 0% VAT, Śniadanie w formie bufetu. Informacja o pokoju	- Oferta promocyjna - Śniadanie wliczone w cenę • BEZPŁATNE anulowanie rezerwacji • Śniadanie wliczone w cenę	11 11	PLN 310 PLN 310 PLN 140 PLN 340	1 (PLN 310) 0 0	Zarezerwuj tylko 5 minut Zostaw tylko 2 dni Zarezerwuj tylko 5 minut Zostaw tylko 2 dni	
 Pokoje Jednosobowe Pula leżankowa, do 1 noc. Wliczone w cenę pokoju: 0% VAT, Śniadanie w formie bufetu. Informacja o pokoju	- Oferta promocyjna - Śniadanie wliczone w cenę • BEZPŁATNE anulowanie rezerwacji • Śniadanie wliczone w cenę	1 1	PLN 250 PLN 250 PLN 100 PLN 220	0 0 0 0	Zarezerwuj tylko 5 minut Zostaw tylko 2 dni Zarezerwuj tylko 5 minut Zostaw tylko 2 dni	
 Pokoje Brzo Twarz Pula leżankowa, do 1 noc. Wliczone w cenę pokoju: 0% VAT, Śniadanie w formie bufetu. Informacja o pokoju	- Oferta promocyjna - Śniadanie wliczone w cenę • BEZPŁATNE anulowanie rezerwacji • Śniadanie wliczone w cenę	11 11	PLN 310 PLN 310 PLN 140 PLN 340	0 0 0 0	Zarezerwuj tylko 5 minut Zostaw tylko 2 dni Zarezerwuj tylko 5 minut Zostaw tylko 2 dni	
 Apartament (2 osoby) Pula leżankowa, do 1 noc. Wliczone w cenę pokoju: 0% VAT, Śniadanie w formie bufetu. Informacja o pokoju	• BEZPŁATNE anulowanie rezerwacji • Śniadanie wliczone w cenę	11 11	PLN 590 PLN 590	0 0	Zostaw tylko 2 dni Zostaw tylko 2 dni	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Najlepsza oferta Gwarantujemy						

Figure 22. Booking accommodation online at Booking.com.

Source: <http://www.booking.com> (accessed: June 2011).

The author conducted a survey among 27 owners of agritourism farms operating in the Łódź region, which shows that the use of this type of online booking system is currently minimal, mainly due to the lack of ready-made solutions. Moreover, the owners of agritourism farms declare their willingness to benefit from the online booking system and claim that it would be beneficial solution for both them and their customers. The ideal solution assumes that all agritourism farms posting their offer on the portal would benefit from a dedicated online booking system. In reality, however, the author realizes that this is practically impossible. One of the main barriers is the necessity to record in the system all bookings made via other channels than the Internet. Therefore, according to the author, the implementation of the system in at least 50% of agritourism farms posting their offers on the portal would be satisfactory and would allow them to gain a competitive advantage.

1.8.2.4. E-learning module

The last of the author's assumptions was to create such a model of Internet agritourism portal which would be eagerly used not only by the tourists but also by owners of agritourism farms. The author decided to use the e-learning module to draw attention of the representatives of the latter group.

Thanks to the implementation of e-learning, the portal will have a chance to become one of the factors that make it possible to potentially improve agritourism standards in the Łódź region. The author would like the owners of agritourism farms to treat the training courses prepared on this platform as an opportunity to develop their business and improve the quality of offered services, which would directly lead to a better perception of agritourism in the Łódź Voivodeship.

The observation shows that only one portal presenting agritourism offers from the region of Łódź has a dedicated e-learning module, however, it is not attractive enough to be considered as the best practice. The author, on the other hand, managed to reach out to professionally prepared e-learning training courses which are offered by the Polish Tourist Organization and they will be used as a benchmark. Figure 23 shows an example screen shot from such a training course.

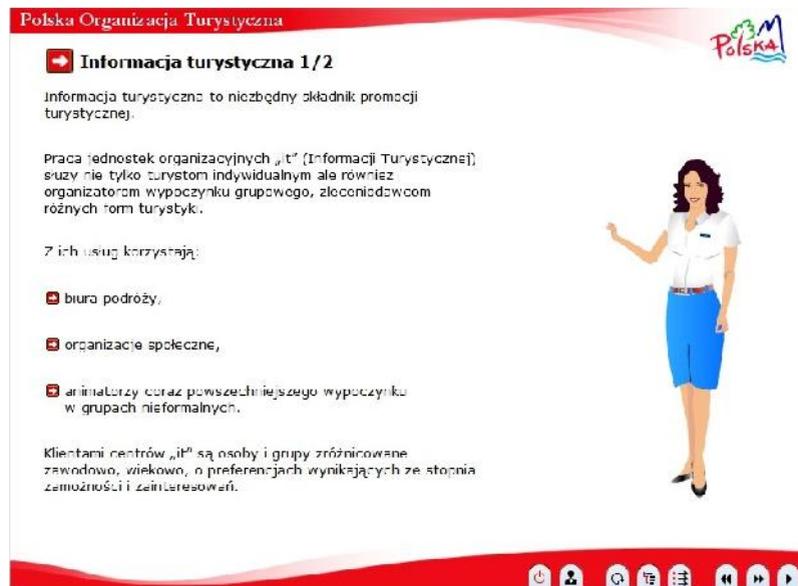


Figure 23. Example of e-learning training course provided by the Polish Tourist Organization.

Source: <http://www.pot.gov.pl> (accessed: June 2011).

1.8.3. Scheme of the home page of the model of Internet agritourism portal for the region

The author prepared an example scheme of the home page of the model of Internet agritourism portal for the region which contains all the above mentioned elements. This scheme is shown in Figure 24 below.

Portal
agroturystyczny –
Łódź Region
Agrotourism Portal;
Logo portalu –
Portal logo;
Wirtualny... - Virtual
tourist advisor;
Kalendarz imprez w
regionie – Calendar
of events in the
region; Moduł e-
learningowy – E-
learning module;
Wyszukiwarka... -
Łódź region
agrotourist offer
search engine;
Aktualności – News;
Wiadomość –
Message

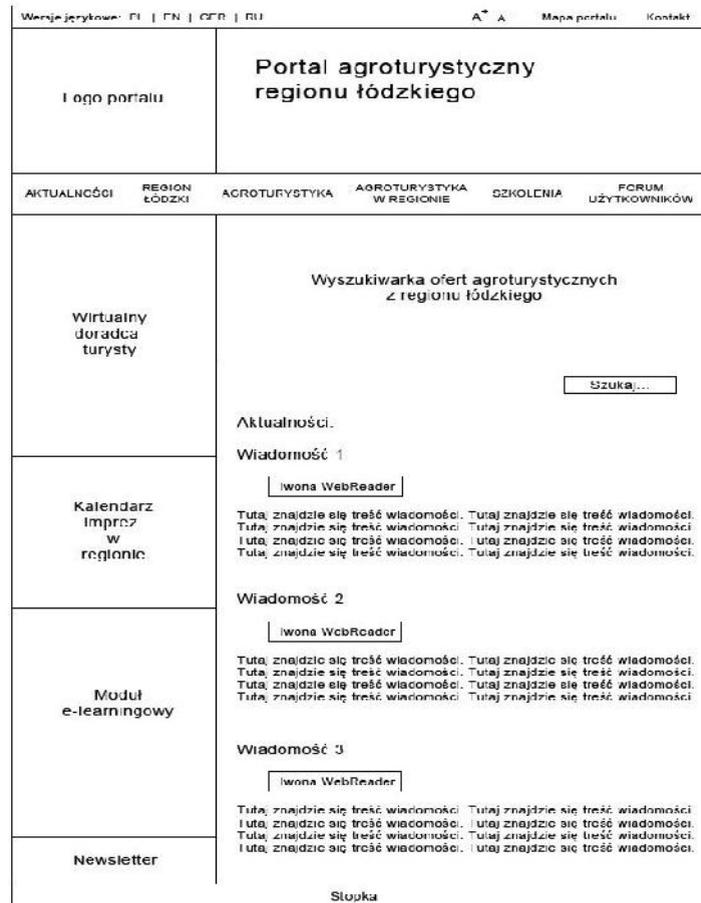


Figure 24. Scheme of the home page of the model of Internet agritourism portal for the Łódź region

Source: Own elaboration.

