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Social Networks at the Service of Tourism

The InforTur platform

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Abstract — As in the case of other industry and services areas, the tourism sector navigates at a different pace according to the investment capacity and the perception of the developments' owners in relation to their profitability. With a Web presence has significantly high compared to other industries, there is still much work to do in the communication infrastructure operation area, management software and CRM (Customer Relationship Management), but who's ahead begins to roam the new paths linked to social networks, the Web 2.0 and the potential of geo-referencing of content to attract new customers by addressing the economic crisis has also affected the sector.

Index Terms — Communication, Social networks, Tourism.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Serra da Estrela is a favourite destination for many tourists seeking a special place to spend their holidays or short breaks, usually associated with weekends. Visitors can stay in one of the many available offers in the region or even in neighbouring towns, choosing hotel establishments, Rural Tourism or Pousadas of Portugal. Some examples are the municipalities of Seia and Covilhã, which are closer to the central massif, that have become especially vigilant and rich with regard to tourism offers. However, there are other counties that by their proximity are also aware and interested in obtaining additional revenue from this flow of visitors.

This proposal aims to promote tourism in the region and neighbouring cities, using for this purpose the concept of Web 2.0 [1] [2].

According to Hinchcliffe (2006), this new architecture of the web (web 2.0) is marked by three fundamental paradigm shifts:

- 1) A new process of innovation that moves from a top-down to a bottom-up model.
- 2) A shift in the locus of value from the

ownership of data to the end-user's experience and redistribution of data.

- 3) The emergence of new online social structures in which power is located not in institutions but in communities.

Craig (2007) adds that users are able to access data and content, rework them through a variety of collaborative applications and create new content and redistribute them. We can say, that the great achievement of Web 2.0 is the interrelationship with the user, once it is directed to a social and collaborative vision, where the greatest value is in the content rather than in the technology itself.

In our case Web 2.0 means offering to the visitor the "responsibility" to speak by comments, pictures or videos about how they were received in this or that venture using for this purpose an electronic platform, knowing beforehand that their views might have some weight when other visitors are planning their trip to Serra da Estrela. This way a large amount of information will be generated that enriches both those who wish to know the destination as those who are directly related to the sector because it is plausible that a less favourable comment serves as an incentive to improve service in the future.

Cumulatively, the user, who must register, is connected to a social network where one

can share their experiences, helping to create or increase the expectations of other visitors to the events, attractions and activities in this geographical area, with the possibility of creating new ties of friendship or deepen existing ones.

Businesspeople involved with tourism have a powerful available tool to promote their establishments and simultaneously start to have a link to establish direct, fast and personalized contacts with members of social networking, as well as in a cooperative way, to help the development and dissemination of information of the region, because as everyone knows, the Internet is blurring the boundaries. In particular, in the tourism sector, new management practices must emerge from the advantageous use of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), using it to integrate business processes [5].

Social networks make it easier for people to interact via the Internet, but also to get to know the experiences of others. Consumers are also becoming producers of information [6]. Under this assumption and noting the growing popularity of social networks as sources of referral of experiences and getting inspiration from sites like Tripadvisor (<http://www.tripadvisor.com/>) or the HolidayCheck (<http://www.holidaycheck.com/>) we seek to develop a portal managed by a CMS (Content Management System) tailored to the needs of the main target market and the particularities of the Portuguese public (Fig. 1).

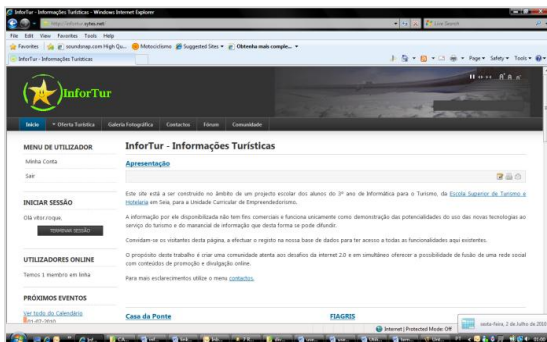


Fig. 1. Website layout.

The paper is organized into 4 main parts, besides *Introduction*, namely *Goals*, which describes the objectives to be achieved with the development of the platform, *Infortur Platform*, which describes the technologies used in implementing the solution, *Infortur Practical*, which describes the features already implemented on the platform and the *Conclusions*, where we defend the validity of

our concept/solution.

All the figures presented on this paper are from the Infortur Platform that can be accessed on the temporary link <http://infortur.sytes.net>.

2 GOALS

The Infortur platform is based essentially on a concept of promoting places, products that the company sells, availability of rooms or tables, pricing, promotions, ways to make a contact and the geographical location of the establishment. This promotion can be made using text, photos and videos, with the possibility of being altered by the client-companies at any time and when they so choose, in the online space that is reserved for them, because they are allowed to change their own contents by the CMS.

Customers of these companies are expected to complement the provided information with comments or pictures and experiences on their views about the establishment concerned.

Another possibility is based on the ability of promoting events, using the relevant newsletters and social network. How many times one wishes to participate in fairs, seminars or any other type of festivities and does not know for sure the date, location or alignment? Well, from now on, anybody in the region has more tools for the promotion of their event and can simultaneously function as an electronic communication channel [7].

3 INFORTUR PLATFORM

The portal and social network prototype Infortur is being developed with open source software and is based on the Apache web server with PHP extensions, the MySQL database server, and the web code corresponds to the Joomla package [8].

The choice of Joomla was due to being a CMS that provides a number of interesting features such as easiness of use, versatility, different possibilities for customization and also an available comprehensive set of templates, extensions and plugins [9]. The extensions forums, calendar and events, Google maps, reservations, newsletters, image galleries, search, are some of the available features (Fig. 2).

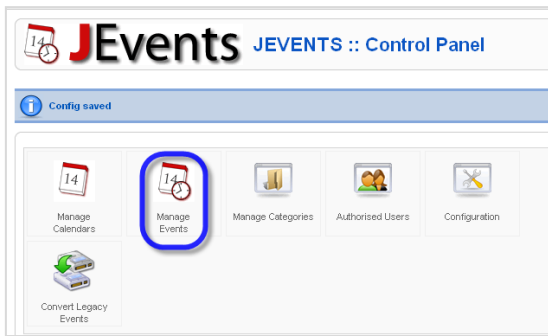


Fig. 2. JEvents extension.

The Joomla CMS is a framework, a website/pre-programmed portal "skeleton" with basic resources for pre-defined maintenance and administration, which provide the bridge between the operating system, the Apache server, the MySQL database, the PHP programming language and the computer browser. Users who obtain approval from the administration can directly create content on the site where the editor is similar to WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get).

The InforTur platform offers users the responsibility for content management, access to the administration panel (Fig. 3) where one can manage or moderate content, manage the contacts of registered users, for example define which projects will appear on the front page of the portal and for how long, etc.

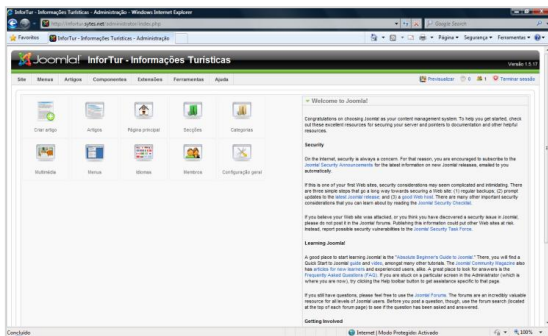


Fig. 3. InforTur administration panel.

The account of super-user is also provided to define the layout, manage and maintain databases where the information in the portal is stored, adding extensions or plugins to Joomla with new functionality and, ultimately, to make the system administration (Fig. 4).

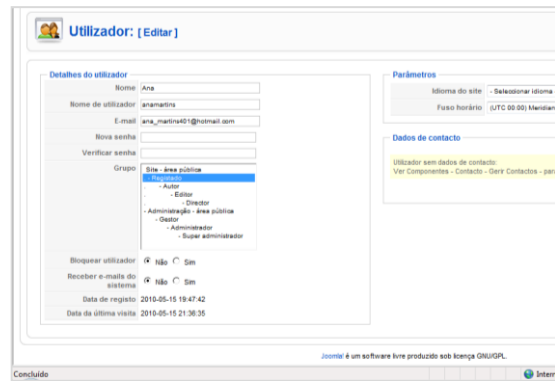


Fig. 4. InforTur administration panel, super-user.

4 PRACTICAL INFORTUR

The scenario, presented here, is an example of an application, based on the portal and social network InforTur prototype.

To access all the available features the user must register on InforTur. The binomial username / password in accordance, allows them to enter the website.

As mentioned, this portal will address only the Tourism in Serra da Estrela, so any information available will necessarily have a link to Serra da Estrela. Note that the content made available may be moderated by the administrator, which may or may not be regarded as publishable information.

In this initial version, only the following menus were considered (1) Home (2) Tourism Offer, (3) Photo Gallery, (4) Contacts, (5) Forum and (6) Community, however, new options can be easily added (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. InforTur options.

The menu Tourism Offer includes Offer Tourist Cottages, Restaurants, Hotels and Events (Fig. 6). In this menu you can view all information on each of the available options. Here, visitors to the site can leave their opinions with other visitors about the places visited as well as ask questions about them (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Tourism Offer menu.

The Photo Gallery is vitally important because it will allow the upload of photos on a given situation and automatically making its online publication and thus becoming immediately available to all users (Fig. 7). Who has not heard the expression: “A picture is worth a thousand words”. Based on this concept, the display of positive aspects or others will be encouraged, so that visitors of a particular hotelier have the opportunity to experience and thereby contribute to the additional information that will be available for future parties.



Fig. 7. Photo Gallery menu.

The Forum will permanently become a bridge of communication to solve any issue that may arise, and, a channel of "assistance" to provide any information service, is almost available in real time, in a transparent, reliable and free manner (Fig. 8).

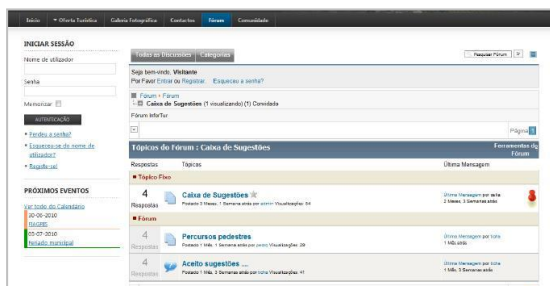


Fig. 8. Forum menu.

The Community is the visible part of the social networking site where registered users can interact with each other, send messages, make friends, invite to chat, post photos and personal messages, initiate or participate in groups and write comments to the profile of others (Fig. 9). This is where members can let their creativity flow and write something like: "I went to Aveiro last week and discovered this bar or that restaurant and it was wonderful because it was sunny and the weather was fine and the Ria de Aveiro is very beautiful". Suddenly, the consumer is becoming a producer who shares their experience [6].

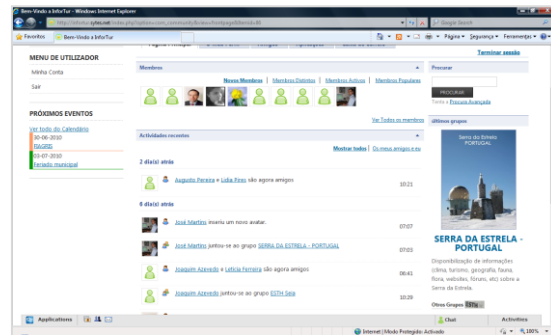


Fig. 9. Community menu.

5 CONCLUSION

The present scenario indicates that consumers have become more familiar with new technologies and requiring more flexible, specialized, interactive and innovative products and services. In the tourism sector, in particular, new management practices must emerge from the advantageous use of IT, using it to integrate business processes. Social networks on the Internet are no longer just a place to find friends lost in time. Today they are used for numerous purposes such as launching applications to find bone marrow donors or donations to an orphanage in Uganda. These are just some examples of the variety of purposes that Portuguese and all most over the world currently give to social networking on the Web. Virtual spaces that, according to experts, allow "much more" than to interact with friends or relatives, since they provide the sharing of common interests and activities, which can then have effects on the real world. This technology allows people to find affinities between them and stick together and organize themselves according to their own interests or causes, which then leads them to create groups and specific initiatives. All the potential created within the virtual world turns out to be transposed into reality, since people who organize themselves in

networks with certain ends meet and encourage these contacts in the real world. A tool of this nature can contribute greatly to the increase and adoption in terms of use of new information technologies by entrepreneurs in tourism, with the advantage of using a social network as Internet users prefer today.

InforTur - Tourist Information is a platform that aims to foster a good relationship between the people involved, whether producers or consumers and is therefore contributing to the development of the region.

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