

Expect and embrace change: the future of your business depends on it

The impact of the internet has been massive and there is plenty more to come, says LAWRENCE SMITH

If you were asked today what impact the internet has on your business, you'd most likely say significant. Some businesses would say the Internet was their business. But what if you were asked the same question 10 years ago? Think back, you might even have asked what the internet was. Hard to believe!

For many tourism businesses now, the internet is a central part of their operation. We communicate primarily by email, we rely on our website to profile our business, we're listed on many online directories, and of course, increasingly, there is a reliance on direct bookings. We've gone from no reliance a decade ago to today having a heavy reliance on this "new" technology. Companies such as THL are even restructuring their businesses to better leverage these changes.

In the next few years it's not unrealistic to expect that for many businesses the majority of their bookings will be made and paid online. Sure, some operators have yet to catch up, but for the rest of us there are some very big questions – what's next? Have we reached the end? Can things possibly change as much in the next 10 years?

Without a crystal ball it's always hard to say, but current trends suggest there will be rapid change in a number of areas, and these changes will have a major

impact on how people find out about you and how they book.

What sort of changes can we expect?

New technologies or combinations of them (called mash-ups): Innovation online is occurring at breakneck speed, as is the convergence of technologies. This might change the way we access or buy tourism product with an interesting example being www.farecast.com. Farecast's models forecast the rise or fall of airline fares in the US and predict the best time to buy. Essentially, brand is being replaced by price and you can expect more of this.

Beyond the Browser: Currently most people access information via a web browser on a desktop computer but that will soon change. Technologies such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication – see Glossary) will soon easily deliver information to different websites, or allow you to access it in different ways such as mobile or email. With 1.3 billion people forecast to have internet capable cell phones by 2008, the prospect of change is very real. At present they are difficult and clumsy devices to access information from, they are designed as phones after all, but this is changing and they are a device that most of us carry.

User influence: With the advent of blogging and social networking sites such as MySpace, Flickr, YouTube and numer-

ous others, your visitors can influence how other people perceive your business. They are blogging about you; posting videos about you, often without your knowledge and other visitors are listening. In fact, they are more likely to believe someone that has experienced your product, rather than your official marketing spin. You can manage this to some extent by monitoring blogging sites and responding where necessary, but the best approach is simply to be great!

New ways of searching: You use Google right? What about Technorati, Digg or del.icio.us. No? Well millions do and new user-driven search models like these are gaining in popularity. Personalised search may also be the next big thing. Search models are changing and those people only focussed on getting top 10 rankings in Google are missing a raft of opportunities.

So what can you do?

Firstly, expect and embrace change, the future of your business depends on it. Secondly, choose a great online partner.

It's not realistic for you to keep up with all the changes and a good partner can help you make appropriate choices.

Thirdly, ensure that you have allocated appropriate resources for new media. If 90 percent of people find out about you online, isn't this where you should spend your precious marketing dollar?

Finally, be the best you can. We live in a new world where consumers are increasingly cynical and depend heavily on the opinions of others. The internet is like 'word of mouth' on steroids. Every customer is a potential media outlet who can contribute to your failure or success.

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Glossary

BLOG – short for web log. Often a personal online diary.

RSS – Really Simply Syndication. People might subscribe to an RSS feed or RSS might be used to allow content to be viewed on another website.

PODCAST – an audio file for download to playback on an iPod or computer.

SOCIAL NETWORKING - interaction of friends or people with similar interests online. Typically via blogs or sites such as MySpace and YouTube.

MASH-UP – a web site or application that combines content from different sources into one.

TAGGING – often a user driven and more accurate way of organising items you are interested in online, as opposed to a hierarchy of categories.