

## TBM Article – Jan 2011

### You, Tourism New Zealand and Social Media

By now you are probably aware that huge changes to Tourism New Zealand's online presence have started to occur. After years of being the official voice for New Zealand through [www.newzealand.com](http://www.newzealand.com), TNZ is trialling a new model: social media and user generated content (UGC).

Initially there are to be six 'hub' sites which centre on interests ('walking & hiking' and 'cycling' are online so far), and then 'regional hubs' that represent the RTO regions. Officially these hubs are a trial but given the speed they are moving, TNZ look pretty committed to the approach. If the trial is successful, the existing site will be replaced (which is a good idea as much content is dated) and it appears the hub sites will assume the primary role. TNZ are also in the process of replacing the operator database, online early this year.

The most interesting thing about these changes is that TNZ is abdicating much of its responsibility for the content on these sites. Operator data will obviously still come from operators; however, all content on the hub sites is sourced from 'users'. These users could be RTOs, commercial businesses, or even real travellers. Even more interestingly, at this stage TNZ is neither moderating content nor authenticating if the articles are accurate. Rather than dictating which content displays, an 'algorithm' calculating the popularity of articles will determine which ones float to the top. Thus, viewers of the site are left to determine the top content via their actions and allowed to 'flag' content deemed 'inappropriate' with a view to having it removed entirely.

Seem unreasonable? Maybe not. This is, after all, what social media is all about. The theory is that 'the community' can do a much better job than any individual organisation. Look at TradeMe – none of the content is theirs.

However, while I am an enormous advocate of social media, I have yet to be convinced this is the right approach for TNZ. After years of carefully crafting and promoting our brand messages, TNZ is now relying (at least in the online environment) on RTOs, commercial operators and travellers to present "brand New Zealand" to the world. Essentially what we now have is a disparate collection of people pushing their own interests, with no guarantee their claims are correct and with little or no structure. Is that the right way to promote our country? Will our advertising messages line up with the content on these sites? Time will certainly tell.

Regardless of what you or I might think, the fact is that TNZ has committed to this approach and it is vital you participate. As an operator you must at least enrich your listing when the new operator database is released. RTOs, larger commercial operators, or in fact any operators with time and desire, NEED to add content to the hub sites not only because this is our national tourism website, but because articles serve as an additional promotional tool for your business. Four key benefits of having articles published on the hub are:

1. The more articles you have, the higher your business profile on the site
2. Articles may help your SEO by indexing on your business name and keywords
3. Articles could help drive traffic to your site via links
4. You can publish and sell deals exclusively on these articles

There are two big challenges that will need to be overcome by every operator contributing to the hubs. The first is knowing what to do, how to do it and why. The second is making time to create

and manage content and deals. However you go about it, it's vital you do, and make it an important component of your marketing.

Tourism New Zealand has committed to this approach, and so should you...now! If social media and 'hubs' remain a mystery, people are out there (like our company) who can help. It's time to get on the social media bandwagon; it could be the most important thing you do in 2011.