

# Connecting with CULTURES

## HARNESSING THE INTERNET TO COMMUNICATE WITH INTERNATIONAL TOURIST MARKETS

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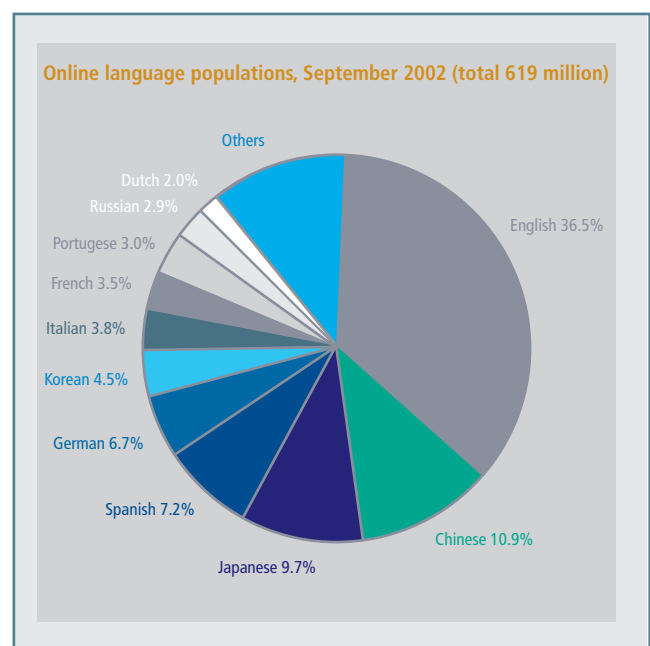
Overseas tourists, especially those from Asia, are the major potential source of growth for the European destination industry, and the internet can be a highly efficient means of communicating with these customers – if the pitfalls of cross-cultural on-line marketing can be avoided.

Local tourism destinations are being influenced by globalisation in two very simple ways: by the internationalisation of both the internet and the source markets of international tourism. The internet is no longer a plaything for white, male Americans and Europeans. In autumn 2002, the number of regular internet users around the globe passed the 600 million mark (source: [www.gltreach.com](http://www.gltreach.com)). This represents a tenfold increase of internet usage over the last five years, and means that one seventh of all adults living on our planet are now on-line, constituting the largest channel to market for the global leisure, tourism and hospitality industries.

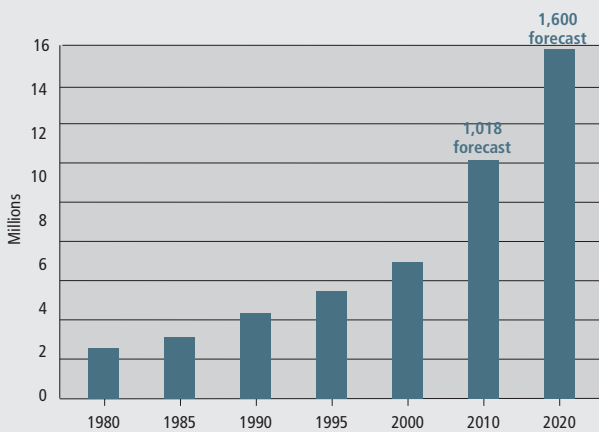
### Internet languages

The massive increase in internet usage has brought about the de-Americanisation of the medium. By now, almost two thirds of all users do not have English as their first language, and almost half of them do not come from a 'Western' cultural background. In theory, all information on all websites is accessible to everybody. But language and cultural compatibility determine which information a user can actually relate to. The five most important internet user

languages, Chinese, Japanese, German, Spanish and Korean, have a bigger combined share (39 per cent) than English (37 per cent). As internet access in English-speaking countries (except India and Germany) reaches saturation point, the share of Asian languages is expected to rise further. China, it is worth pointing out, is already



### International tourist arrivals



Source: World Tourism Organisation

the country with the biggest number of internet users and mobile phone users outside the United States. The linguistic content of the internet is reflecting this trend, with approximately one third of the three billion web pages on-line written in languages other than English.

## International tourist arrivals

In 2002, the total number of international tourist arrivals around the world grew to 715 million (source: [www.world-tourism.com](http://www.world-tourism.com)), despite 9/11 and a troubled world economy. This is double the 1987 figure, and there is no reason to doubt the well-known prediction of the World Tourism Organisation that this figure will double again within the next 15 years.

So where are all these tourists coming from? Not from Western Europe and North America, where populations are shrinking. The vast majority of the forecast two billion births over the coming decades will be in Asia. And it is highly unlikely we will see a substantial increase in the already significant levels of international travel undertaken by Westerners.

Joining the ranks of international tourists is a major aspiration of the growing middle classes of Asia: China and South-East Asia are the fastest growing source markets with Greater China (China, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan) overtaking Japan as the leading Asian country of origin among the world's international tourist base. Japan and Greater China are already among the top five spenders in international tourism.

According to UNESCO, this development will lead to another doubling of figures: whereas in 1996 only a meagre 3.5 per cent of the global population travelled to another country within the year, seven per cent will have the opportunity to do so by 2020.

## Consequences for the European destination industry

These two basic trends lead to two conclusions with major consequences for the tourism industry. Yes, we will continue to grow strongly, but the new customers, half of all customers worldwide, will be different from the occidental, recreation-orientated and by

now sophisticated international tourists of the first three decades of mass tourism. And, yes, we do have an easy way of communication, as most of the Asians who can afford international travel are regular users of the internet.

But – and this is a big but – both the tourism products of the European destination industry and the form and content of on-line communication have to be adapted to the cultural backgrounds, expectations and preferences of the different new source markets.

## On-line communication challenges

The internet is the cheapest, most convenient and most efficient way to address these potential customers in distant countries. Internet marketing to foreign, especially to non-European, potential customers, however, has to meet the requirements of successful cross culture web-based incoming tourism communication. Potential customers have to:

- **Find the information.** This requires effective marketing of websites, which means: creating the right web address or URL (Universal Resource Locator) – [www.ourcity.co.uk/index\\_chinese](http://www.ourcity.co.uk/index_chinese) will not do; ensuring that websites are specifically geared to users from target markets, who are searching the web using keywords in their own native languages; and creating an effective network of links to the site from other websites.
- **Understand the information.** It is vital that information is available in the correct language and also that the information provided is relevant and useful – maps illustrating travel connections to the destination in question, for example, or information making it known whether there is a mosque offering Friday prayers, as opposed to longwinded explanations about the architectural merits of a place's cathedrals and churches.
- **Feel comfortable with the content and the way of presentation.** This is the hardest but most important demand. Even if the user knows some English, they will feel much more welcome if information – or at least just a greeting – is given in their native tongue. Colours and symbols have very different meanings in different cultures. The expected carriers of trustworthy information will vary – they will be 'the authorities' for some and peer group members for others. Monolingual websites and websites that give updated and current information in English, but which only have outdated or static pages in other languages convey a clear statement: non-English speakers are not welcome.

## What tools are to be used?

Effective internet communication across cultures is about much more than having a static website with maybe just a few pages translated into German or French. Interactivity is the main key.

- Give the visitor the possibility to get access to downloads, e-postcards, newsletters and images from webcams.
- Ask visitors about their wishes and ideas.
- Invite visitors to comment on the information provided or their experiences during a visit in their own language.

- Give visitors the chance to communicate among themselves by (monitored) guestbooks, testimonials and tips ('Mein Lieblings-Internet-Café in Cardiff', for example).
- Allow visitors to post their own snapshots of previous years' holidays in your destination on-line; this will generate not only increased traffic through the site and goodwill towards your destination but can also create a treasure chest of important information about your product.

One point has to be made crystal clear: interactivity is not about on-line hotel room booking. The majority of overseas guests are either travelling in a fixed group arrangement or have not enough information available to decide on precise itineraries before departure. Interactivity is about using the internet as a communication tool, which succeeds both in conveying that a destination is interesting and offers something for visitors of the relevant source market, and tells the potential customer that his point of view and experiences are welcome.

It is vital that the information provided is up to date. Static facts about sights and history can be found in any guidebook, while information about events, for example, cannot. Perhaps the most effective tool for the communication of real-time information is the

webcam. As the old saying goes, a picture says a thousand words – especially if you have no common language.

Simply put, the challenge is to convey the message that in a destination you will feel welcome and understood ('They thought of me'), even if this is done simply by including a single line on your website that says to visitors from, for example, the Phillipines in Tagalog: 'Welcome, sorry for giving no information in your language, please feel free to send us an email with your questions.' Or perhaps ask your visitors about helping you to translate some basic information about your destination into, lets say, Czech – you will be surprised how many patriotic people will respond without any payment except a public on-line 'Thank you'.

## How is Britain doing?

Is all this relevant for the British destination industry, given that the native tongue, English, is the 'world language'? The simple answer is yes. BTA figures for 2001 show that only 7.4 million out of 22.8 million overseas visitors (32 per cent) came from English-speaking countries, spending £3.8 million out of £10.7 million (36 per cent of all overseas visitor spend). Additionally, Britain is currently becoming

### Multilingual and multicultural content of UK tourist board visitor websites

		February 2003	
Tourist Board	Website/s	Summary	Rank
Scotland	<a href="http://www.visitscotland.com">www.visitscotland.com</a> <a href="http://www.ecossetourisme.com">www.ecossetourisme.com</a>	Detailed, up-to-date and customised information in French, German, Dutch, Flemish and for US visitors; links to multi-language websites of Glasgow and Perthshire	1
London	<a href="http://www.visitlondon.com">www.visitlondon.com</a>	New pages in German, French, Spanish and Japanese accessible from homepage; event information one month out of date and not available in Japanese	2
Wales	<a href="http://www.visitwales.com">www.visitwales.com</a>	Brand-new website with large Welsh, French, Dutch, German content including FAQs, How to use, On-line Lucky Draw	3
South-East England	<a href="http://www.southeastengland.uk.com">www.southeastengland.uk.com</a>	Detailed basic information about the different parts of SE England in French, German, Dutch	4
Jersey	<a href="http://www.jersey.com">www.jersey.com</a>	Entry pages in more than a dozen languages, including Japanese, Finnish, Norwegian etc., mainly giving links to airlines and travel companies in the relevant country; press centre in French and German	5
Cumbria	<a href="http://www.golakes.co.uk">www.golakes.co.uk</a>	Some German (with some spelling mistakes) and Japanese pages; no events; link to <a href="http://www.UKknow.or.jp">www.UKknow.or.jp</a>	6
East of England	<a href="http://www.eastofenglandtouristboard.com">www.eastofenglandtouristboard.com</a>	Short greeting pop-ups in French, Dutch, German	7
Guernsey	<a href="http://www.guernseytouristboard.com">www.guernseytouristboard.com</a>	No foreign-language content / link to foreign-language content	8-16
Heart of England	<a href="http://www.visitheartofengland.com">www.visitheartofengland.com</a>		
Northumbria	<a href="http://www.visitnorthumbria.com">www.visitnorthumbria.com</a>		
Isle of Man	<a href="http://www.gov.im">www.gov.im</a>		
North West	<a href="http://www.visitnorthwest.com">www.visitnorthwest.com</a>		
Northern Ireland	<a href="http://www.discovernorthernireland.com">www.discovernorthernireland.com</a>		
Southern England	<a href="http://www.southernntb.co.uk">www.southernntb.co.uk</a>		
South West England	<a href="http://www.westcountrynow.com">www.westcountrynow.com</a>		
Yorkshire	<a href="http://www.ytb.org.uk">www.ytb.org.uk</a>		

Source: Professor Dr Wolfgang Arlt



less popular with Asian tourists, while many other European destinations can boast double-digit annual percentage increases.

Using a research method that I first developed to measure the degree of 'internationality' of non-German language websites of destinations in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, using 83 weighted indicators, a survey was conducted in August 2002 and again in February 2003 to test the multilingual and multicultural content of the websites of the Regional Tourist Boards.

The table shows that, by February 2003, more than half of all tourist board websites were still completely monolingual, and some of them have URLs that show that they are even ignorant of the fact that England is not the only country in the world with a southern or southwestern region. This is not a question of money, as the [www.visitbritain.com](http://www.visitbritain.com) website contains readily available pages with basic information about all areas in languages such as German, French, Portuguese, Japanese and is furnished with a link precisely back to the Regional Tourist Board sites.

Encouragingly, London, Wales and Cumbria strongly improved their performance in the six months between the two surveys. Specifically customised pages that offer more than a simple translation, however, are only to be found on the websites of Scotland and Jersey, and interactivity only on the pages of the Welsh Tourist Board.



## Conclusion

Most European tourist destinations have a potentially rosy future, considering the fact that almost a billion newcomers, mainly Asians, will enter the international travel market in the next two decades. The British Isles will continue to be one of the preferred destinations, because culture and heritage, albeit on a rather superficial level, is a more important topic for the new tourists when travelling to Europe than palm-lined beaches.

The internet is a new, fast and economic channel of communication with potential customers around the world, which presents many more opportunities for up-to-date, one-to-one, cross-cultural marketing than any printed brochure can provide. The internet is primarily a communication tool, not an online booking-machine.

The first step for destination marketing organisations is not to invest large sums of money in website development but simply to acknowledge the changes afoot and the chances and risks they bring. Taking on board the customer's perspective is more difficult when your customers come from a different cultural background. But taking your overseas customers seriously by establishing lines of communication with them through the internet can bring destinations significant advantages.

For further information on Professor Arlt's ongoing studies in this area, he can be contacted at [wolfgang.arlt@fh-stralsund.de](mailto:wolfgang.arlt@fh-stralsund.de).

