

EnglandNet

A new strategy for e-tourism in England

Andrew Duff is Head of Tourism Technology at the English Tourism Council. Here he explains the ETC's development of EnglandNet, a new nationally coordinated on-line tourism network for for England's local, regional and national tourist organisations, and why its multi-layered approach to information management should help the tourism industry to provide more effective visitor services and enhance its performance and competitiveness.

From the moment of inspiration to plan and book a trip, right up to the point of embarking on the journey, all tourism is 'virtual'. It exists only as a set of ideas, images and facts until the trip actually takes place. And when it is over, all you have are memories, some more images to store and share, and perhaps a few souvenirs. Information is thus the lifeblood of tourism, as it always has been.

It was thus inevitable that the advent of the internet and the world wide web would radically change the way the business of tourism is conducted. As surely as the invention of the printing press led to books and banknotes, the new medium brings a new mode of commerce along in its widening wake.

Remote, interactive planning and purchasing are the new imperatives for tourism, and the question is, what role do destination marketing organisations (DMOs) now have within this new economy?

How consumers are using the internet

Use of the internet has been increasing dramatically around the world - nearly ten-fold over the past six years. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) estimated that 11.4 million households in the UK could access the internet from home by September 2002, a four-fold increase in just three years (ONS, December 2003, 'Home Net Access Up', www.statistics.gov.uk).

There is every indication that this growth will continue for the foreseeable future, stimulated by web-enabled mobile phones, pocket PCs, digital interactive TV, and domestic take-up of broadband services. It is not yet clear when this is likely to reach saturation point or maturity.

Shopping and e-mail appear to be the major uses. Among 56 per cent of UK adults who had accessed the internet, 74 per cent said that they used it to find out information about goods or services and 42 per cent had used it to buy or order tickets, goods and services (ONS, 2002). Most popular purchases on-line were travel and accommodation, followed by books, magazines and CDs.

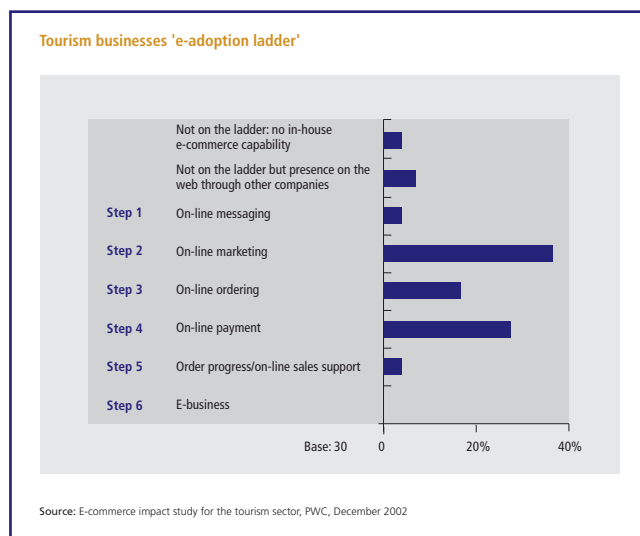
The growing importance of on-line travel planning is illustrated by the British Tourist Authority's VisitBritain.com website, which received 28.8 million visits in 2002, a 144 per cent increase on the previous year. Recent research carried out for ETC (National Quality Assurance Standards Research, June-July 2002; MEW Research for

ETC, unpublished) found that internet users enjoyed the fact that it can be used from the comfort of home (or office) at any time, and does not require additional sources of information to be obtained. The internet is seen to offer huge breadth and depth of information, and instant response on availability. The internet is the first choice of the 'web-confident' when it comes to booking accommodation.

Implications for tourism businesses

There has been a rapid adoption of e-mail and websites among tourism businesses in the last couple of years - an ETC/BTA survey in January 2003 (English Tourism Council E-Business Survey, January 2003; Keydata Group for ETC, unpublished), reveals that 91 per cent of tourism businesses now use e-mail and 81 per cent have a presence on the web. However, awareness of the potential scope for e-business remains relatively low, with only 34 per cent of tourism businesses offering on-line booking via a website, probably reflecting the predominance of small and independent accommodation operators. A study of a number of tourism businesses by PWC for DCMS reveals a similar pattern (below).

'Micro-businesses' make up the largest proportion of the tourism industry, but are generally less able to keep up with new technology





Windermere TIC's new public internet access point

and on-line business practices. For many, embracing e-commerce (bookings) would require a radical change in the way they run their business.

The challenge for destinations

The fragmented and dispersed nature of the tourism industry is often acknowledged, and this is further hindered by a lack of joined up communication facilities. Communication and consolidation of information is thus difficult both within the industry and with consumers.

At local and sub-regional level, many tourism destinations have implemented systems initially designed to provide better information, but later extended to cover marketing, administration and research. While many of these are comprehensive for the destination, there are a number of different software solutions in use and there is little coordination between them (see Dr R. Carter, M. Hodgson and G. Renault, July 2001, 'Towards E-Business - best practice in tourism destination systems', *Insights*, ETC).

This has resulted in a patchwork of separate systems offering selections of tourism products rather than a coherent and comprehensive market place in which consumers can readily search, compare and book.

An 'e-tourism' strategy for England

One of the key priorities for the English Tourism Council has been to focus on the potential of e-business and to work towards solutions for the industry as a whole. Working with strategic partners including Regional Tourist Boards, Regional Development Agencies and destination representatives, a strategy for 'e-tourism' in England, by which we mean the application of new media and e-business services in support of tourism, was published in July 2002. This sets out a framework within which tourism in England can make best use of new information and communications technology, provide more effective visitor services and enhance the performance and competitiveness of the industry.

This cannot be achieved simply by building another tourism website. It requires the dynamic integration of information between national, regional and local systems. The strategy therefore proposes a *federal* approach, which allows local destination management

organisations (DMOs) and tourism providers to exchange information within a nationally coordinated on-line tourism network, while still maintaining the integrity of their own systems. In short, it is a vision for 'joined up tourism'.

To achieve this, the strategy sets out an agenda for action, which can be summarised as follows:

- **Mobilise small businesses:** develop awareness, training, and support programmes to encourage take-up of new e-business services.
- **Provide needed information:** ensure that comprehensive information is delivered to tourism businesses for planning and exploiting tourism growth.
- **Enhance business processes:** ensure that product creation, marketing, sales, booking and fulfilment use the most effective business processes.
- **Recommend technology:** ensure that reliable and effective ICT is matched to the recommended business processes.
- **Establish an e-business network:** which will form the basis of marketing and sales partnerships and national and international distribution.

EnglandNet

The key to the delivery of this strategy is EnglandNet. The objective is to provide e-business services to England's local, regional and national tourist organisations, enabling them to strengthen the services they offer to their customers. In particular, EnglandNet will provide a national tourism distribution system for England - in effect, the wiring and power transformers for a tourism national grid.

At its core, EnglandNet will provide a set of new infrastructure services, including:

- **Community Building Services** to enable businesses, professionals and consumers to interact more effectively with each other. The first example of this service is already being introduced to the 500-plus Tourist Information Centres across England.
- **Content Management Services** to enable tourist boards to acquire, edit and publish tourism information for marketing.
- **E-commerce Services** to enable end-consumers and re-sellers to access the whole tourism product of England, search, book and pay for it through a single application.

This must, of course, serve the needs of the consumer to access well organised, comprehensive information offering new visit experiences and a wider range of booking options. EnglandNet will therefore:

- Provide live real time content on the availability of accommodation, tours, transport and ticket bookings.
- Enable this to be combined and presented in exciting new ways to meet the needs of different markets.
- Help tourism businesses and organisations to make the most of commercial opportunities and enable them to use new forms of marketing.
- Ensure that tourists can access well-organised, comprehensive information via a wide range of traditional and new media channels.

EnglandNet will thus provide a broad framework to allow tourism destination and product information to be shared much more widely and quickly. Proper integration between national, regional and local systems will become a reality, producing enormous advantages for both the consumer and the tourism industry.

By the time it is completed in March 2004, EnglandNet will provide new channels to existing markets and extended reach to untapped markets. Improved business-to-business services will also enable the development of new products and joint marketing initiatives.

Implementing the strategy

Whilst EnglandNet is the core vehicle for implementing this strategy, this will not happen in isolation. The EnglandNet team is working closely with its core partners the English Tourism Council and the Regional Tourist Boards, and also at national level with organisations such as the British Tourist Authority, Countryside Agency, DCMS and other Government departments, and other public and private sector organisations.

At the time of writing, the English Tourism Council is in the process of being merged with the British Tourist Authority. This will result in a new national lead body for tourism from 1 April 2003, which will have a re-focused leadership role in support of marketing and e-tourism. This will include:

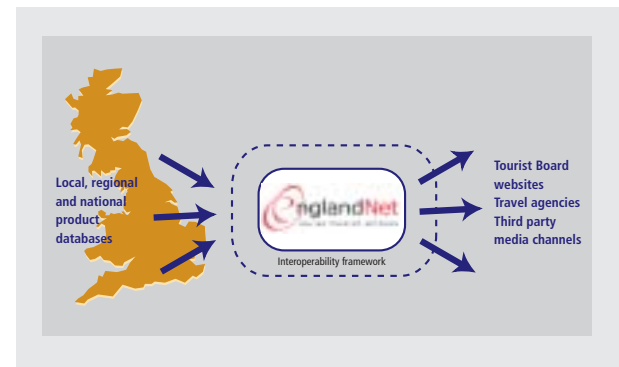
- Leading work to develop the use of EnglandNet e-commerce services at national level, alongside and integrating with the e-tourism systems of Scotland and Wales.
- Coordinating an e-business awareness and training programme to be delivered by the national and regional tourism organisations, and supported by the Small Business Service and other partners.
- Promoting the widest possible adoption of common data standards.
- Working with national and regional tourism organisations on marketing, e-tourism, and the promotion of product and customer service quality standards.
- Ensuring data is available to support national marketing requirements, including national campaign websites such as VisitBritain, publications, overseas offices information systems, and industry research.

Regional Tourist Boards are now managing the rollout of EnglandNet within the regions, integrating this within their own e-tourism strategies and marketing plans, and working closely with Regional Development Agencies, Local Authorities, Tourist Information Centres and other stakeholders. The RTBs are also delivering a range of activities to promote e-business awareness and skills for tourism providers.

Regional Development Agencies have a key role in support of regional economic development. This includes developing cross-sectoral ICT strategies for the development of e-business and for the supporting communications infrastructure (including broadband access) required for the future.

Destination Marketing Organisations invariably have the closest contact with local tourism providers, often made tangible via local TICs. DMOs have an important part to play in encouraging local tourism providers to adapt to e-business, and to participate in the

EnglandNet as a data integrator and distribution system



Source: E-commerce impact study for the tourism sector, PWC, December 2002

extra business generated by EnglandNet by connecting destination management systems and TICs to the EnglandNet infrastructure. The success of EnglandNet will be very much linked to the achievement of demonstrable added value at destination level. DMOs are thus vital customers of EnglandNet.

Many other organisations, trade associations and suppliers have interests and responsibilities relevant to EnglandNet and are therefore being encouraged to support this strategy and play a part in the process.

The success of this strategy depends on our ability to deliver a national e-tourism system that can meet the needs of both consumers and industry. Thanks to Government funding support, the EnglandNet project is now being developed as the core solution to meet this requirement.

As the English Tourism Council passes on the 'baton' to the new national tourism body, it is with real hope that tourism destinations and providers in England will become more competitive and profitable as they realise the new e-business market opportunities that EnglandNet will open up.

The 'E-Tourism in England' strategy document is available to download from the ETC website: www.english-tourism.org.uk. For further information on EnglandNet, visit the project website, www.EnglandNet.org.uk. This includes Regional Tourist Board and EnglandNet team contact details. The author can be contacted directly by e-mail at Aduff@english-tourism.org.uk.