

STATE OF THE DESTINATION

Speaking the right language

Now that the dotcom boom and bust is history, we can see more clearly the true effects of the world wide web on our lives, businesses and, above all, communications.

Commercial use of the internet continues to grow at an amazing rate. Along with 'e-tail' giants such as Amazon and leading innovators such as eBay, travel and leisure operators have been among the most successful champions of the internet as a new channel to market.

At the front of this charge have been airlines, particularly the budget carriers, and on-line booking agents, from the field leader, lastminute.com, to others such as Opodo, ebookers and Travelocity. These businesses have all developed effective ways of communicating with their audience as well as easy-to-use on-line ordering systems, and all manage to deliver great value for money to consumers - particularly in comparison to the prices still being charged by their traditional bricks-and-mortar competitors.

Now it is time for destinations themselves to get their act together.

In the UK, the English Tourism Council, which is to merge with the British Tourist Authority in April 2003, is developing EnglandNet, a new nationally coordinated on-line tourism network (see pages 47-9). EnglandNet is designed to provide a broad framework that will allow tourism destination and product information to be shared much more widely among both visitors and destination managers. It will bring to consumers a wider range of visitor information, and booking options, whilst helping tourism businesses and organisations to make the most of commercial opportunities. EnglandNet is due to go live in March 2004. It is vital that the good work of Andrew Duff and his team at ETC continues to be well supported at the BTA following the forthcoming organisational merger.

While the development of EnglandNet is to be applauded, many of the UK's Regional Tourist Boards need to make big improvements to their own on-line operations. A brief research exercise conducted recently by Professor Dr Wolfgang Arlt of the University of Applied Sciences in Stralsund, Germany, revealed that, astonishingly, there is currently no foreign language content on over half of the RTBs' websites (see pages 45-6). As Professor Arlt points out, this not only prevents overseas visitors from accessing information in their own tongues, it also communicates that they are not welcome.

The irony of this is that there is no real financial barrier preventing RTBs from providing this sort of service to overseas audiences. The internet is by definition one of the cheapest channels through which to find and retain interested consumers around the world, and many on-line operators, in tourism and other sectors besides, have found innovative and highly cost-effective ways of building communities of interest. Certainly one of the most powerful examples of this to date has been the weekly newsletter service pioneered by lastminute.com. Having started out in 1998 as a fun way of keeping in touch with the company's few early subscribers (interested users wanting to know more about the deals on offer), the service has evolved into a highly sophisticated, multilingual offering to nearly seven million subscribers worldwide. This permission-based form of marketing is one of the main reasons why the cost to lastminute.com of acquiring each new customer is now under £10. As Martha Lane Fox, the co-founder of the business, explains in our interview with her (pages 8-13), lastminute.com has progressed so far in such a short time as a result of continuous investment in technology and a commitment to customer service. These same principles should be guiding the RTBs in developing their own websites.

When the internet offers such affordable and accurate marketing opportunities, there is no reason why all RTBs are not already offering newsletters and other such services to

their virtual visitors. There is also further room for improvement in the extent to which RTB websites provide connections through to the myriad operators who actually do the business of tourism, the thousands of enterprises dependent upon visitor revenues, be they hotels, attractions, museums or others besides.

Exploiting the internet as a communications and booking tool was one of the many issues discussed by delegates at the Locum Forum seminar, focusing on the future of regional tourism, which was held in Manchester in February (see special report, pages 56-65). The new tourism role handed to England's Regional Development Agencies has dominated debate over recent months. How will the RDAs work with RTBs and local authorities? How will they work with the industry itself? What do they hope to achieve? James Berresford has been leading the Northwest Development Agency's efforts to rethink the vision and strategy for tourism in the Northwest region, and he shared with delegates the processes and outcomes of this work to date. The key aspect of Berresford's message was that future efforts to promote tourism to the region would revolve around destination brands, rather than political boundaries.

Indeed, the importance of strong destination branding was a recurring theme throughout the event. Chris Collier, the chief executive of Cumbria Tourist Board, reinforced Berresford's call for brand focus among authorities and operators, whilst at the same time identifying operational challenges to smaller tourism businesses, which she believes the NWDA and its counterparts nationwide should be addressing as a matter of urgency.

Locum's Sue Warren, meanwhile, referred to New Zealand as a nation that has successfully branded itself in terms of both tourism and trade. Warren, a former chief executive of The New Zealand Way, the award-winning organisation responsible for formulating New Zealand's current brand values and

international positioning, was quick to stress the importance of the internet as a front-line marketing tool. The current '100% Pure New Zealand' campaign, being run by Tourism New Zealand, incorporates a highly successful website, www.purenz.com, which has become an increasing factor in driving up physical visitation. Like the branding itself, this site stands as a shining example to other national tourism organisations seeking to achieve competitive differentiation in an ever-shrinking world.

What of the UK's operators? What can they expect from the RDAs? Locum chairman Richard Tibbott, speaking to hotel general managers at the 10th Master Innholders Conference in January (see pages 50- 54), argued that the RDAs' involvement should be seen as a very positive step, given their considerable powers and genuine desire to consult with the private sector in planning and delivering an improved environment for tourism. Tibbott also suggested, however, that the potential benefits of new regional branding initiatives, such as those being led by the NWDA, would only be truly effective if the national branding being done by the BTA becomes more focused on connecting with contemporary culture.

And so we return to the medium itself, and how it is used to communicate. In today's truly global culture, it seems, destinations can only succeed if they are able to speak the right language. Winning destinations communicate with target markets in the correct tongues using brand-led, consumer-focused terminology, which conveys clear propositions to potential visitors. How well is your destination communicating?