

# DESTINATIONS ONLINE

approaches for regional tourism organisations



## **WHY DO THE RESEARCH?**

Online technologies have had an enormous influence on communications and product promotion and distribution for the tourism industry. In Australia key consumer markets are already using the Internet as a primary source of information about tourism product, and are increasingly looking to book and purchase that product online. However, despite the considerable progress, there are concerns that access to tourism products is likely to be impeded if online technologies are not effectively employed by the whole tourism industry in Australia. Regional Tourism Organisations have been brought in to this environment as a result of their perceived role in supporting SMTEs. Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) across Australia have developed Internet sites that have been reported as focussed almost entirely on promotional functions rather than issues of integration and functionality within the broad range of RTO business objectives and processes. The literature clearly identifies four considerations in developing ebusiness strategies for RTOs: governance of ebusiness applications; value adding to business objectives/practices; positioning; and evaluation.

## **WHAT WAS DONE?**

The Centre for Regional Tourism Research conducted a detailed case study with a Regional Tourism Organisation (referred to as 'Region X') to increase its understanding of the dynamics that contribute to the design of online strategies. Region X was seen as fairly typical of RTOs engaging in online business. It was managed by an industry and local government board. It had minimal in-house web skills, and had contracted an external agency to assist with the development and management of its online presence.

## **WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?**

There was a large degree of agreement between stakeholders concerning both the past experience with the web site, and the vision for the future of online technologies for the Board. Overall, there has been a high level of engagement with the project. Stakeholders have invested goodwill in the project. General perceptions of performance of the web site have been good. However, there has been a strong feeling that the project has focused on delivering the technology rather than delivering business. Local Tourism Associations have been concerned about how they integrate web based systems into their operations, and how they evaluate use of the web. There has been a poor experience with the ecommerce component of the current project where a working piece of technology (the ecommerce 'engine') has been compromised by a lack of sound business planning behind the venture.

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Significant barriers to effective use of the web were seen to emerge from a lack of direct engagement by the Board in managing the site (most site management tasks were performed by the external agency). It was also felt that the RTO web site was replicating information provided by many other public and private sector web sites, and that this was influencing the willingness of operators to participate. It was felt that using the web site strictly for promotional purposes limited the capacity to exploit its potential for communication, research, product distribution, and relationship management.

All stakeholders recognised that the sustainable future of the web project would be based on delivering information and communication consistent with the business objectives of the Board. It was generally agreed that the Board should concentrate on targeted cooperative marketing ventures, and provide a 'portal' for less structured product information housed through other RTO and individual product sites. There was also a perceived need for the Board to facilitate sustainable web applications for member LTAs, and to more effectively use the web for internal communications.

## **HOW CAN THE RESULTS BE USED?**

This research provides a framework for better planning and design of RTO Internet sites. It suggests that RTOs should consider the following:

- Where their web site sits in the total web collateral for the destination;
- What skills they need to ensure effective governance of the web site;
- How the site might be used to improve communication with members and operators, and other key stakeholders (eg. through distributing newsletters and so on);
- How the site might be used to assist operators and consumers to research the destination more effectively (rather than just providing a listing of businesses in the destination).

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