The Web Portal as a Collaborative Tool

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INTRODUCTION

Discussion of portals and their relevance to destination tourism is the main focus of this chapter. Traditional definitions of portals have focused on intraorganisational information sharing. Here a broader interorganisational view of portals is adopted. Information sharing beyond organisations via portals renders them a collaborative tool, which is of real benefit to small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This applies equally to tourism destinations which are typified by many small and medium tourist enterprises (SMTEs) (Braun, 2002).

In addition to the traditional view of portals, portals have a collaborative function, and this is considered along with the phenomenon of collaborative commerce (c-commerce). Here critical elements underpinning successful c-commerce adoption are identified and their application to tourism destinations via collaborative portals are explored. It is posited that the role of a champion, community, social identity, and collaborative behaviour are important to successful collaborative portals and so, to destination marketing.

Further insights can be gained from the case study of the margaretriver.com.au Web portal which is to be found elsewhere in this publication.

PORTALS

Traditionally, a portal was considered as "a framework for the integration of all tools, applications, collaborations and information that is shared across an organisation" (Webb, 2004, p. 3), reflecting the focus of portals within the enterprise. Portals provide a single point of access through a Web browser to a range of information located on the Internet. They build on the technology underpinning Web sites.

Tatnall (2005, p.3) discusses various definitions of a Web portal concluding, that effectively a portal is an "all-in-one Web site used to find and to gain access to other sites" (Tatnall 2005, p. 3), but also has the role of protecting the user from the "chaos" of the Internet by directing them to an eventual goal (Tatnall, 2005).

Typically, portals are customer-facing and are used by the customer to view products and services, and to place orders which are trackable. The portal can also be used as a point of collaboration between businesses, allowing the exchange of business information (Turban, King, Lee, & Viehland 2004). In this manner, the portal addresses the problem of information overload and resource constraint faced by the SME.

The definition and scope of portals is changing rapidly due to the interplay of two factors – developments in information technology (IT) and changes in the way that organisations operate (Webb, 2004) as evident in the emergence of the network era. This has bought with it the need to restructure and reorganise the way business is done, resulting in revised business models, to create value for the enterprise via collaboration.

The premise behind collaboration is the realisation by a SME that as an organisation it is unable to cope with the complexity and risks generated by the environment (Cravens, Shipp, & Cravens, 1993) nor does it possess the skills and expertise needed to compete in that environment. The subsequent sharing of resources by SMEs can lead to "improve(d) performance, increase knowledge and competitive position" (More & McGrath 2003, p. 1).

It is this aggregation of information and assistance to the end user in overcoming "information overload," as well as the community building and collaborative aspects of portals (Rao, 2001) that is of interest here. These collaborative aspects are viewed in relation to destination marketing as demonstrated via the case study of margaretriver.com.au, which is considered elsewhere in this publication.

PORTALS AND THE INTERNET IN TOURISM

In the case of the tourism sector, portals can take many forms but all have a single defining characteristic. They serve as a collection point for a range of information relating to a specific tourist destination and in so doing also provide a single point of content management for information relevant to the destination. This management is a critical aspect in providing accurate and timely information to the tourist. Some portals are used to initiate customer relationship

management (CRM) allowing tourism operators to push value-added products to targeted customer segments at the customer portal (Turban et al. 2004, p. 322).

The Internet is especially relevant to tourism because it enables knowledge about the consumer or tourist to be gathered, and vice versa. This gives "rise both to global visibility of destinations and a global merging of market segments" (Werthner & Klein, 1999b, p. 258).

Benefits from IT, particularly the Internet for tourism, are substantial. These benefits are no longer dependent on proprietary information systems as has been the past experience, because the Internet is a commonly available technology. Dogac, Kabak, Laleci, Sinir, Yildiz,Kirbas, and Gurcan (2004) considers that the Internet provides many advantages to players in the tourism industry. Some of these benefits are:

- enhanced level of collaboration between tourism operators;
- prearrangements with respective suppliers no longer necessary;
- Web service discovery identifies alternatives, enabling holiday packages to be constructed by the tourist;
- greater negotiation of service and customization of services/activities; and
- generally greater levels of interoperability with internal and external applications.

The realisation of these benefits requires that a new approach be adopted by operators in the industry, particularly for SMTEs. They all point to the need for greater levels of IT adoption to be more flexible and responsive to the market, or collaboration with other players to achieve a "one-stop" planning and booking experience desired by the tourist. Gonzalez (2004) suggests that a coming together of or cooperation among small players is required to generate "coherent heterogeneity," differentiation among the players in the midst of providing an integrated tourist offering.

The Internet, however, has resulted in a proliferation of many ineffective html document-based Web sites (Joo, 2002; Palmer & McCole, 2000) which is magnified by the limited resources of SMEs. Collaboration around IT as is demonstrated by margaretriver.com.au, which is the subject of a separate chapter included in this publication, enables tourism operators to achieve this and to better represent the destination. Rather than being just transaction-based, longer term relationships need to be fostered and IT can play a role in this relationship building.

DESTINATION MARKETING AND TOURISM

Destinations are at the heart of tourism and travel decisions. Typically, tourist destinations are characterised by numerous autonomous suppliers, often SMTEs (Braun, 2002). As mentioned, the destination is often represented by multiple Web sites that fail to demonstrate the tourist experience that "is" that location that the tourist is increasingly coming to expect.

Werthner and Klein (1999a) suggest that destinations fail to facilitate the planning and booking of travel by the tourist. This reflects a lack of agreement as to a business and cooperative model for the destination (Froschl & Werthner, 1997). Often, tourist operators are vying for limited tourism dollars and the complementary nature of their operations is not understood. "Most of the destination sites are purely informational servers, booking is mostly not supported" (Werthner & Klein 1999a, p. 261). They suggest destinations need to adopt cooperative strategies over and above what may exist, for example, by way of a Web portal.

Cooperation between suppliers adds value to the "tourism destination product" (Leiper, 2004; Palmer & Bejou, 1995) in that a holistic experience of the destination is available to the tourist at the time of considering their holiday, as well as after the event in that a complementary view of the destination, reflecting the experience of the consumer, is provided while visiting a region.

A classification is provided by Joo (2002) to describe electronic tourism markets or collaborative networks. This framework identifies an evolution of electronic tourism markets as advances in Internet technologies have occurred. Joo (2002) considers that there are two important dimensions to plot this evolution; integration of processes both internal and external to the firm, and the degree of cooperation between players. Joo (2002) asserts that alongside cooperation, coopetition is an important consideration. The interplay of these dimensions results in four possible types of electronic tourism markets. These are depicted in Figure 1.

Traditionally, with respect to tourist destinations, the level of integration and the degree of cooperation and the requisite sharing of information has been low. Tourist destinations, at least in Australia, would tend to fall into quadrants 1 and 2, with SMTEs using html Web sites and with some integration of the Web with their business systems. Portals set up typically by regional tourist bureaus attempt to operate in quadrant 3 as they provide tourists with a "one-stop travel service" (Joo 2002, p. 60). These sites, however, tend to lack integration with local tourist operators and so do not fully represent a region.

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