Web Portals as an Exemplar for Tourist Destinations

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INTRODUCTION

Continuing on from an earlier article in this publication that considers portals and their relevance to destination tourism, this article investigates the case study of the Margaretriver.com Web portal. Margaretriver.com is based on a brokerage model of portals and this structure has been important to its development. Also critical to its success is the collective approach taken by small and medium tourist enterprises (SMTEs) as they have coalesced around shared assets that belong to the region.

The evolution of the Margaret River Tourism Association and its coordination of tourism in the region culminating in the portal as it is today, suggest that the role of a champion, community, social identity, and collaborative behaviour are important to successful destination marketing. These factors have been identified earlier in this publication as being important antecedents to collaborative commerce (c-commerce) of which this portal is an example.

WEB PORTAL: MARGARETRIVER.COM

A discussion of portals, portals and the Internet, information technology (IT) and tourism destination marketing, and the role of collaboration around IT, including collaborative commerce (c-commerce), was the subject of an earlier article in this publication. This article serves as an illustration of that discussion and considers the collaborative aspects of Web portals via Margaretriver.com—a successful exemplar of c-commerce. Some of the reasons for this success are outlined and issues and challenges for the future are discussed.

Margaret River is a small region located around 300 kilometres south of Perth, Western Australia. The region is a thriving one characterised by small businesses associated with rural pursuits—agriculture especially dairy and the wine industry, and tourism.

Margaretriver.com is akin to a cooperative. Around 450 local SMTEs have taken up membership of the local Margaret River Tourist Association, which oversees the portal in conjunction with a local IT enterprise—Queensberry Information Technologies Pty Ltd. It was the coming together of the Association and this IT expert that led to the development of the portal (see Figure 1) and the Bookeasy system that supports it.

According to various categories of business models observable on the Web, portals can take many forms (Rappa, 2006). Margaretriver.com is an example of the brokerage model. Brokers are effectively market makers bringing buyers and sellers together facilitating transactions and unifying, in this case, SMTEs to more effectively represent the region. In this case, 1% of the value of each transaction is apportioned to the visitors centre, which funds its operation and that of the portal.

Leadership, vision, and the motivation from a champion was critical to the development of the portal and its subsequent success. The pioneering champion understood the industry and developments therein, being a boundary spanner and networking within and beyond the industry. This generated exposure to developments in IT, tourism, and the consumer behaviour of the tourist, which are reflected in the portal.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PORTAL

The approach to the portal has been a progressive or iterative one. Early collaboration occurred manually—the establishment of off-line processes was important in that they could be replicated online once the decision to go online was made. This evolution has been important to the success of the system and the development of processes, relationships, and the region itself.

There have been three systems preceding the Bookeasy system that support the present portal. The first was Clippa in 1991, then in 1994 Travel with Windows was adopted.

In 2000, Queensberry Information Technologies Pty Ltd came to the region and a fully booked system was installed and used for a 12-month period. In 2001 a Web site and an off-line booking system were introduced, however, it was realised there was a need to go online and so fully integrate the system.

The portal has been in existence for around 3 years. The achievement of time and cost savings, and the ability to manage and attract increased tourist volumes—especially since growth was at around 10% pa—were important to the system being introduced. Backend bookings were quite labour intensive and their automation was important in the decision to go online.

The Tourist Association saw the huge opportunities that going online presented. It was important to have a system that enabled tourists to *visit* the region, to interact, and to book remotely. This required a cohesive *picture* of the region and so required a comprehensive membership base with accurate information that was responsive to the market, which increasingly was becoming international. Effectively the portal provides a consolidated view of the region and its product and provides the visitors centre a mechanism to manage inventory, the product, and image of the region and convey this to the market. It also provides a way to deal with distressed Web sites. A recent feature to the portal has been a section offering deals to clear inventory that is close to expiration.

Critical to the success of the portal was the identification of the benefits of collaborating around IT. For SMTEs, this became apparent after some time. Also, it was important for SMTEs to think about what motivates visitors to come to Margaret River enabling SMTEs to *see past their own business* and understand the need to represent the destina-tion in a cohesive way. Once this realisation and vision was achieved, the need to collaborate became clear.

Collaboration via membership has meant that SMTEs have had to invest in IT—purchasing computers, linking into broadband and an ISP, and input inventory data daily to the Web site. Most members were not e-commerce adopters at the time of joining but have realised the need to do so in order to obtain the benefits from membership and have accepted this. Assistance and training is given to help SMTEs to set up and upload information online and in some instances, members have assisted other members as required.

MEMBERSHIP AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

The decision to become a member therefore is based on the realisation that success depends on success of the region. Also an understanding of the consumer behaviour of the tourist—and their increased use of the Internet in their travel decision making—is influential in fostering membership and in encouraging SMTEs to adopt e-commerce. Markets are becoming more dispersed and SMTEs began to realise they could not effectively reach this market on their own or alternatively they would have to upload information to many sites updating inventory, price information, etc. for each site. In this way, membership was seen as an effective and efficient way to be *known* in the marketplace.

The collaboration between the members and their willingness to share data re occupancy rates, price, etc. has been critical to the success of the portal. This reflects the importance of relationships via membership of the Tourist Association. At the heart of the portal is the centralisation of

Figure 1. Home page of Margaretriver.com
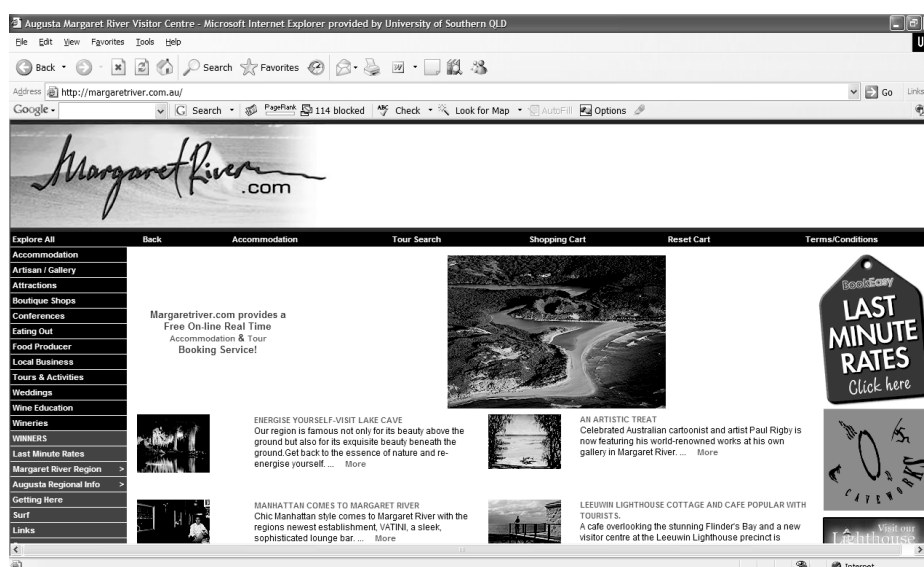
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