

TOURISM VICTORIA ONLINE BOOKING NEWS

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Following a run of highly successful online booking roadshows, Tourism Victoria is releasing a free DVD covering key presentation topics.

The DVD allows you to review subjects including:

- Tourism Exchange Australia
- The internet and new technologies
- Online booking and management systems, and
- Pricing your product for profit.

Copies of the DVD will be available to tourism operators from the end of July, and can be pre-ordered by emailing paul.cooper@tourism.vic.gov.au.

You can also keep up-to-date with online developments by accessing the Online Tourism e-kit at tourismvictoria.com.au. Developed in partnership with the Australian national, state and territory tourism bodies and the Australian Tourism Data Warehouse, the e-kit is designed to help operators maximise online marketing opportunities, from how to assess your current online status through to online booking systems. The e-kit is updated every six months and can be downloaded in full or by tutorial topic.



RECORD YEAR FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

Victoria has experienced its best year on record for international visitation, with growth outperforming New South Wales and Queensland.

Results from the International Visitor Survey for the year ending March 2010 show international overnight visitors to Victoria increased by 4.2 per cent, to 1.54 million people, compared to the national average of 2.6 per cent.

The number of nights spent by international visitors to Victoria grew by 10.8 per cent to 39.7 million compared to national growth of 5.3 per cent. Expenditure in Victoria also outgrew competitors with international visitors increasing spend over the period by 4.3 per cent to \$3.8 billion – another record high for the state.

Guests venturing from the United States showed the strongest growth, while numbers from the United Kingdom and neighbours New Zealand continue to rise steadily.

China remains the state's strongest market, with Victoria receiving more than 40 per cent of all Chinese visitors to Australia. Despite experiencing a 3.4 per cent decline in numbers for the period, forecasts predict the Chinese will become Victoria's largest visitor market within five years.

National Survey figures show that domestic overnight visitor numbers to Victoria decreased by 0.8% for the year ending March 2010. This compares with a 2.7% decrease in domestic visitor numbers nationally. Day trips in Victoria increased by 10.7% for the year.



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UNDERSTANDING THE FUTURE TOURIST

Maintaining the attention of customers who seem constantly distracted by the latest gizmos and gadgets can be a daunting prospect for business owners.

But connecting with the tourists of tomorrow, who are increasingly from Generation Y and beyond, is about understanding what makes them tick, according to web specialist Sam Saltis.

Managing director of Melbourne-based company bwired, Sam spoke at the 2010 Victorian Tourism Conference about the emerging Gen Y traveller market and the drivers behind their behaviour.

"They don't understand a world without internet," Sam said after the conference. "They're sophisticated in their use of technology ... and they're impatient. They want one paragraph to decide whether a product is, or isn't, for them."

A desire for quick information affects how 'digital natives' search for options and plan their travel. They typically use multiple devices at once, keeping several web pages open at any given time ('tabbed browsing') while they compare the best deals on offer. The ability to view options and book online allows plans to be made spontaneously and instantly, where

once itineraries were set days or weeks in advance.

According to Sam, the rise of mobile internet through phones and other portable devices cannot be ignored. He expects the next two years will see mobile devices outnumber desktop devices.

"The interesting thing about mobiles is they're currently growing at about eight times the speed at which desktops are growing," he said. "For every desktop a person buys, there are eight mobiles being sold."

While more decisions are being made on the run, don't assume the younger generations make uninformed choices. Social media enables today's technology users to consult their networks with little effort when deciding which products to buy. Unlike older generations, who tend to place value in a name, younger generations use Twitter and Facebook to seek opinions.

"They don't care about history or brand," Sam said. "Credibility built on recommendations is how they drive. And they ignore ads. A lot of them have ad filters."



Fortunately, business operators keen to get the most out of the web and its growing number of users can still rely on principles that apply to older generations. It's all about getting the right balance, Sam says, and understanding your stakeholders.

"Older people have money to spend and their needs are a little bit different. Give them big text so they can see what they're reading, for example. But they can have similar needs to younger generations, too, such as not giving them too much to read."

HOW MANY WEBSITES ARE LINKING TO YOU?

Linkdomain is a free internet tool from Yahoo which can help you track how people are directed to your website.

Simply visit yahoo.com, enter 'linkdomain:' followed by your website address in the search window and click 'web search' to view a list of all the web pages that link to your website.

For example, to check Tourism Victoria's web links, enter 'linkdomain:www.tourism.vic.gov.au' followed by 'web search'. Select 'Show Inlinks: Except from this domain' from the results to exclude links between pages of your own website.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Tourism Victoria's online roadshows have helped businesses with varied online experience reap the rewards of the internet.

The online veteran

Catherine and Brian Smith were early adopters of internet marketing, running one of the first motels in Ballarat to offer an online booking system. When they took over the Beechworth Carriage Motor Inn two-and-a-half years ago, getting online was the first priority – with some family help.

"My son's a computer geek. He works for IBM and has always been up with the latest things and what's happening," Catherine said. "He built us a secure online booking system for our first motel."

Even with an understanding of online booking, Catherine said the constantly changing online landscape encouraged her to attend an online booking roadshow to keep up-to-date with developments.

The roadshow presentations explained how the new national online platform, Tourism Exchange Australia (TXA), would affect her business. The opportunity to ask questions enhanced her understanding of web search optimisation, a term she had heard about but didn't fully understand until she attended the roadshow. Talking with like-minded business people also boosted her motivation.

"The roadshow reinforced we're heading in the right direction. Running your own business, you can be very isolated, and unless you network, keep informed and up-to-date, things can become quite stale," Catherine said.

Catherine and Brian have decided to list their business with TXA, and continue to use the internet as a marketing tool through third party providers such as Wotif. Catherine insists researching and booking accommodation and airfares online is simply what the modern customer wants.

"They want it instantly. They don't want to send an enquiry email and wait for a response," she said. "They want to know then and there. Accommodation is often a spur of the moment emotional decision, and you don't want to miss the moment to get a booking."

The online convert

Robena Binks avoided online booking for much of the six years she and her husband have owned Kensington C&C, an inner Melbourne bed-and-breakfast.

Priding the business on the motto, 'country value in the city', Robena felt online booking didn't fit with the personalised service enjoyed by guests. But a firsthand experience while travelling in Europe a year ago encouraged her to reconsider.

"It was before leaving Switzerland that I was keen to secure accommodation in Verona close to the Arena, as we had tickets for the first opera of the season," Robena said.

She jumped online while staying with family friends and was able to access a live booking system and secure an immediate hotel booking before heading to Italy.

"We didn't want the hassle of looking for accommodation before that exciting occasion.



So it was reassuring to know our bed was booked at such a busy time in the city."

After returning to Australia, Robena decided to investigate online booking options by downloading the Online e-kit and attending a roadshow to discuss the 'nitty-gritty' of various systems. The roadshow prompted a complete review of the business' marketing, operation and management, including a website upgrade.

Going online has reduced the workload previously dedicated to staying in touch with regular guests, without losing that personal touch.

"A lot of our enquiries are return guests wanting to know about availability, and they still have the ability to contact us through phone or email," Robena said. "I don't know how we did it before!"

ONLINE ROADSHOWS

Tourism Victoria's online roadshows have helped business operators around the state learn about how they can benefit from online booking. The roadshows have finished, but if you would like to take part in a group training workshop on online booking, Tourism Victoria can help facilitate an opportunity. Talk to your local tourism authority about this option.

NEWS FROM THE INTERNET HIGHWAY

Online Booking News caught up with Paul Cooper, Tourism Victoria's man on the road who has spent the past 12 months connecting regional operators with online booking.

What is your role?

My job at Tourism Victoria is two-part. Firstly, I educate and inform tourism operators around the state about the internet and how developments impact their businesses. Secondly, I introduce people to the online environment through the various booking systems available to them, so they are better equipped to make a judgement on which systems work best for them.

How do the tourism operators you speak to feel about the internet and online booking?

Online take-up is a worldwide phenomenon that continues to grow at a rapid rate, led by big companies such as Expedia and TripAdvisor. Many regional operators I come into contact with hold the view that growth is happening way too fast, and are reluctant about having an online presence because they simply don't know where to begin. Others are keen to get online but don't want to pay fees associated with online booking systems. But once people have a chance to talk about the various systems and what online means for their business, they realise it's not as daunting as they thought.

Are commission fees a standard part of introducing an online booking system?

Commission is a natural part of the distribution stream, and the advantage for our industry is operators only pay when they make a sale. It is really important for

operators to view online booking in terms of the overall advantages they can reap for their business. Commission is not a threat to business. Quite the opposite – paying a 10 to 15 per cent commission can open doors to new income.

What is the most common question raised by operators at the online booking roadshows and workshops?

The most commonly asked question is 'Which online booking system should I choose?' Our aim is to provide education and training so that people can make the right choice. Every business is different, and their needs are different. The features offered by one system will be useful for some businesses, but irrelevant for others. Our objective is to educate the operator to make a more informed decision.

How do you view the web and its role in relation to the tourism industry?

I use the analogy of a surfer waiting to catch a wave to describe the growth of the internet and online space. There will always be another wave of development, and operators can choose to ride the next one, or the one behind it. But it's something that will continue to evolve and impact on business growth and product distribution. We aim to give operators the tools and training to help them navigate the internet, so it is less of a mystery and they have the confidence to get on the surfboard.



What is the biggest challenge in running the roadshows?

A major challenge is getting people along to the workshop in the first place. In our industry there are always workshops, forums and conferences being run. People receive so many invitations to attend seminars, and they probably disregard most of them because it's just too hard to find time away from running the business. But I think people find once they do attend the roadshow, they get a lot out of it.

We are also meeting this challenge by recording the roadshows and making some of the presentations available on DVD.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION **TOURISM VICTORIA**

Online support desk during office hours 1300 306 366
tourism.vic.gov.au
onlinecomments@tourism.vic.gov.au