

Northern Gateway

www.norgate.com.au

October 2001

Northern gateway is a full service travel agency based in Darwin. The company has a full-time staff complement of 33 plus four or five part-time staff. The company was an early adopter of digital technologies, with associated businesses in convention organisation and an agency for Royal Brunei Airlines.

We spoke with Pauline Easy, the Group Operations Manager in her Darwin office.

When did you start your business?

We have been in business for 14 years.

What business are you in?

Travel, tourism and conferences

Who are your customers?

Travel Agents, direct customers, conference organisers and associations. We do some government and corporate business as well. In bound and business is 25% domestic, conferences are 50/50, and corporate business is 100% domestic.

The problems with Ansett have created some opportunities. We have also seen the United States travel dwindle, but the Asian short haul business has increased, including Japan.

Do you have an established customer base?

Our regular customers are the travel agents.

Are you trying to attract new customers?

We are using the Internet to attract inbound business. Our online marketing and advertising in magazines worldwide is targeting European countries and the United States.

How does your product/service differ from others?

We are a one-stop shop. We specialise in conferences here in the Northern Territory.

Who are your competitors?

Northern territory Tourist Commission, and Flight Centre would be our major competitors

How have you been successful?

We've been successful because of business ethics. Accidents happen and sometimes misquoting occurs. We honour misquotes and provide the best service possible to our customers.

How do you use digital technology to help your business?

Mobile phones are just a convenience. We use PCs on a Windows NT network. We have a permanent 128 K ISDN connection to the Internet. Everybody in the office is on the Net at least for e-mail. Our web address is www.norgate.com.au.

Who is your online audience?

Our suppliers don't actually require us to be on the Internet, about 80 per cent of them are still in fax mode. So it is really our customers who are on-line, you have to be these days if you want to compete. We operate flights to Irian Jaya where everything is done by e-mail and e-ticketing.

We use electronic banking on-line. Most of the software we use is off the shelf software, but we do use some industry specific packages like "Events", "Galileo" and "TourPlan".

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Is this a development of your existing business or a new venture?

We are developing our Web site now. It has been a static site... however we now need a dynamic database driven site which we have put out to tender. We have had our site on-line for a couple of years and updating has been very frustrating. This has led us to the need to revamp the site.

When this occurs we will have an Intranet as part of the new system.

How long did it take you to get up and running?

It was a lengthy process at the start, particularly the tender process. Initially it was an information site only which looked pretty. Phase two is adding interactivity to the site.

Where did you go for advice?

Referrals and word of mouth. Our contractor has provided us with advice, too.

How did you know who to trust?

You don't know who to trust. You have to rely on their track record - we have been lucky so far.

Did you do the work yourself or use outside contractors?

The work was done by contractors. We just developed the look and feel brief.

Were you happy with the work and help given?

Yes, we have been happy with the work however there is a defensive attitude with this type of worker - they are very protective of the work.

They don't want you to be too well educated - and that has something to do with how they are charging you. They want to baffle you.

How much did it cost you?

It was less than \$50,000, but maintenance has been additional. We have been hesitant to update frequently because of the cost.

What mistakes did you make that you wish you hadn't?

In hindsight we should have had a database site back in May 99.

What were the main risks you took?

You have to ask whether it is damaging your business when you have the information on your Web site which is out of date.

What advice would you give someone else?

Do as much homework as you can on your industry. Don't just rely on the "techo"s.

How do you promote your site?

It's on all accounts, cards, letterheads, everything. We have an online marketing plan - the search engines are seeded every two weeks. In addition we have over two hundred domain names registered.

Do you ask customers how to improve your site?

That is not actively sought. But we do get feedback from the comments area on our Web site.

Do you host internally or externally?

It is hosted in the United States at WebCom.

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Do you make/allow transactions on your site?

At the moment we only allow bookings - we are in the process of adding security and a banking Gateway. We always request authorisation before transactions are finalised so there is a time delay.

How do you process transactions?

Delayed on-line with a 48-hour turnaround.

What were the barriers within your business to your digital project?

Everyone was very keen at having a go. There were a few headaches. Part of the problem was in the area of online Marketing, being bombarded with inquiries and not having enough capacity to deal with that. You can't always control it. One day we might have just a few inquiries, the next day, two hundred! Flexibility is needed in moving staff around.

Did everyone in your business support the enterprise?

Yes.

Do you know what technology/software is used in your company?

Yes.

Do you understand what it does?

Yes.

Where can people find useful advice about the subject?

There is local training but ours is mostly in-house on-site training. Some staff have done courses at TAFE but these have not really been appropriate. QANTM also provided some training.

How did you decide which technology to use?

That was a decision for the web designers.

Are the key managers in your business up to speed with digital technology?

Yes, heavily involved in the Internet. The boss jumps in head-first .

What are the business benefits you are hoping for?

Increased inbound traffic. And we are hoping to get rid of printing costs.

Are the business benefits quantifiable?

Yes.

Are customers happy with what you have done for them?

Yes.

Are visitors concerned about privacy?

They are. That's why we use a Verisign certificate.

Given what you know... would you do it again?

Yes, I would!

What are you planning to do next?

The database site.

case study

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What is the most important thing you've learned in the last year?

That it is ever changing. You need to look longer all the time and you need to get value out of the budget you set aside. You have to realise that a site has a lifecycle.

What is the most effective way to get people to come to your site?

We have found having many different domain names works very well. Your marketing needs to be both online and offline.

What is the most effective way to get people to return to your site?

By having the best service possible and by meeting your promises.

What is the most effective way to get people to buy products and services?

By having things on the site to buy! Some people don't realise this - you have to make it easy!

I think there is a danger in automated responses. You need to keep it personal. Everyone in the company is asked to help with new ideas. And your follow-up needs to be consistent and friendly.