

JTB sells Jamaica seductively, virtually

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From an internet-ready computer in the back street of even the most remote place on the globe, the wonders of Jamaican tourism -- lush greenery, majestic hills, sun-kissed beaches, the warm blue waters of the Caribbean, friendly faces and five-star hotels -- beckon seductively...virtually.

The Jamaica Tourist Board (JTB) is not shy about boasting of its 'dynamic web application'. After all, it is located in an affluent online neighbourhood at www.visitjamaica.com. and uses only the most modern, glitzy website technology to market the island on the Internet.

Jamaica's precarious economic climate and the dark clouds of terrorism, war and disease hanging ominously over world tourism formed the backdrop against which the Board commissioned the website, as a sustainable and efficient means of selling Jamaica.

The web site was launched at the Jamaica Product Exchange (JAPEX) exposition last month, and JTB officials are confident that, in time, the commercial traffic and exposure the site will bring to the country will more than justify its US\$500,000 (\$28 million) price tag.

"The investment is almost completely justified by the back end and the sophistication of the tool we're working with. It certainly is a far more efficient way of managing our marketing dollar," says JTB Internet communications officer, Tanya-Sue Morgan.

Explained Morgan: "It's an investment -- we're not running a (fleeting) 10-second ad on a television station; with the web we have a 24 hours-a-day, 365 days-a-year ad running and accessible to anyone with a computer, in five languages plus English."

The website project was announced in October 2001 but had a stormy birth. Almost immediately, tourism interests, and a few disgruntled local web-site builders who contended they could do it for less here --began hurling criticism at the Board for giving the project to a foreign firm, the Cincinnati-based Motivo.

In any event, the tourist trade was already in a grouchy mood, having to grapple with unwanted problems such as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in the United States, the source of more than half Jamaica's visitors. It did not help that, around the same time, an anonymous e-mail began circulating around JTB offices, making claims of abuses of power and waste, particularly in the Noel Mignott-run New York office.

That forced authorities to order an audit of the agency's operations and to set in train a process of reshaping itself into a more efficient, more responsive and leaner marketing agency. At first, that distraction pushed the website off the front-burner, but later gave it added impetus, when planners agreed it had to be a key element of the new JTB strategy. Director of tourism, Paul Pennicook is thrilled with the product. "It's the best brochure that Jamaica has had in years," he tells the Sunday Observer in an interview.

Pennicook says the site would refocus its resources away from heavy administrative costs and more towards marketing and promoting the island in its entirety, "as being multi-dimensional, as opposed to just sun, sea and sand".

In computerese, the site at present occupies about 3 1/2 gigabytes of pages, easily the largest tourist website in the Caribbean. It is expected to grow by 50 to 100 megabytes per month, offering visitors the opportunity to experience Jamaica virtually, with awesome high-tech manoeuvres, including an interactive map of Jamaica and four animated movies that tell the history of the sunken city of Port Royal. Each of the fancy features is tailored to seduce visitors. The Interactive map, for example, uses the latest Flash MX technology, so visitors get a sense of the island, of where things and places are in relation to each other and so can build their own vacation package around a sport, an event, a tourist attraction, a hotel - or anything that interests them.

That's just one example of how the site's design complements its content package, explained web site project consultant, Garth King. Such tools, say King, allow the JTB to brand and market an aspect of Jamaica's tourism offerings, whether they are places on the island, Jamaican products, or Jamaican history and culture,

"What interactive Jamaica does is to give one a notion of where things are in relation to each other, and that notion is important in defining a vacation. Right now, people will come to Montego Bay, and go home saying 'I have been to Jamaica'. We want them to come to Montego Bay and go home saying, 'I've been to Montego Bay', realising that there's Negril and Ocho Rios and other places, so they will think of coming back to those places," said King.

According to the JTB, about 91 per cent of the pages on the site are dynamic, supplied with information on tourism-related products and services from over a dozen databases. Each 'vendor' is given a page to publish information about his/her own product, and vendors are expected to load their own data into the site, allowing them to advertise specials, packages and rates as they change. Significantly, the JTB has taken an industry-supported policy decision to allow those who operate a legitimate tourist-related business to list themselves, and according to the JTB, the amount of space available is adequate for the moment, but almost infinitely scaleable.

This, according to Morgan, is the principal feature that makes the site unique and far-reaching, since it is capable of "representing everybody in tourism in Jamaica".

"It's probably the only site in Jamaica that you can come to and find all the lodgings, car rentals, shops, attractions and so on," she said.

That is important, says Josef Forstmeyer, president of the Jamaica Hotel and Tourist Association (JHTA), because only when everyone is represented can the island truly market itself. "I am very gratified that the JTB decided to allow the entire product that is available out there - everybody from the little rum bar and jerk stand to the most exclusive properties that have all their licences in place, a place on the site, because I think the diversity of Jamaica thrives on the differences and the excitement that the destination provides," Forstmeyer told the Sunday Observer in a telephone

interview.

The JTB, however, believes that it is doing much more than just providing information, rather, it is offering to visitors the experience of Jamaica, to tourism industry vendors a marketplace, and for the board itself a means of tracking information about visitors, vendors and Jamaica in general.

This, says Morgan, is exactly what the site is intended to do, through the combination of its layout and design, which customises the site to a visitor's taste in a few simple clicks, but which actually is always selling Jamaica as a tourist destination.

"You constantly get glimpses of Jamaica through the images, and you can find interesting tidbits and trivia on Jamaica - so it's more like you're building a relationship with the consumer. It gives consumers the power to see Jamaica their way, and it changes our marketing strategy because now we have the ability to get to know the person who is 'buying' Jamaica, sometimes long before he or she even decides they want to come to the island."

The JTB's targeted marketing at the moment includes offers of 'themed vacations' for golfers, newlyweds, heritage buffs or families with children, among many others. But the true value for Jamaican vendors, says Morgan, comes from being a part of the virtual market place, which the majority of today's travellers consult before starting their trips or trip planning. Donahue Jarrett, general manager of the Kingston-based Altamont Court Hotel and chairman of the JHTA Small Hotels Group, also had high praises for the venture.

"I think it's a brilliant move. As far as marketing goes, it's probably the best thing that has happened to small hotels in a while," said Jarrett.

Morgan adds: "The Internet allows the JTB to offer some sort of equity in marketing, and it empowers small hotels especially, because now they can access their niche market. Not everyone wants to stay at an all-inclusive, but not everyone wants to stay at a beach cottage in Negril either."

But even with the impressive features, the site does have its failings, even if superficial - the site's content is supposed to be translated into five languages, but translation is a tedious and costly process that will take the agency, given its limited resources, a while to finish. Also, since the JTB is depending on vendors to load in their content, it may take some time before the site is populated with information from all the entities registered with the JTB.

The biggest problem to date, however, is the fact that while the site is enticing, it does not allow for bookings or purchases to be made online, thus risking a lost sale opportunity because of the intrinsic delay.

"It's something we're working on. As regards being able to make purchases on the web, our policy hasn't brought us there yet, but the important thing to note is that the site is scaleable, and that element can be added in almost no time," Morgan says confidently.

Those minor shortcomings aside, the site is still hard to beat, when compared with its nearest competitors in the region. In any event, Morgan boasts, the comparison is not even with the region. Try sites of countries such as Japan, Denmark, Australia and Ireland.

"In fact, we don't even really use regional sites as a benchmark for comparison. Remember, Jamaica was the first country in the region to launch a web site, jamaicatravel.com in 1994, so we have always held ourselves to the standards of first world countries."

http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/html/20030531T210000-0500_44515_OBS_JTB_SELLS_JAMAICA_SEDUCTIVELY__VIRTUALLY.asp