

Chapter 4.11

ICT and the Tourism Information Marketplace in Australia

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2003, the Australian Government released the Tourism White Paper, a medium- to long-term strategy for the Australian tourism industry. The Paper provides for funding to improve the availability of high-quality information for the development of tourism in regional areas of Australia. More than \$21 million, a historically large amount, has been identified for "...extending the provision of quality research and statistics" (Prime Minister John Howard, Media Release, November 20, 2003).

A growing body of literature about systems of innovation (SOI) supports the notion that secondary information is a vital input to the evolutionary processes of innovation (see, for example, Edquist & McKelvey, 2000, p. 4). The efficient production and distribution of knowledge, of which information is a precursor, is widely discussed as a prerequisite for innovation in economic systems.

There is a long history of relatively poor access to and application of strategic business intelligence in the Australian tourism industry, particularly by those in regional areas. Examples of coordinated

and sustained efforts to engender a research-based ethic among tourism enterprises, organizations, and other institutions have been, at best, sporadic (Hunt & Prosser, 1998).

ICT systems are increasingly seen as primary enablers in the dissemination of information to regional economic systems. Online technologies can reduce dissemination costs for suppliers and consumers of strategic business intelligence. ICT systems assist by encouraging the formation and growth of regional- and sector-based networks and cooperatives, facilitating interactions in the global economy, encouraging wider use and application of information, and bridging the information divide between cities and regional areas.

Several tourism information systems have been developed worldwide to help address technological and capacity issues in the industry. Examples exist in Australia, Spain, Austria, Canada, and New Zealand.

The availability of quality research and data for the tourism industry is one side of the information equation and has been the focus of most discussions on the topic (Scott, 1999). However, supply-side issues are not the sole impediments

to more widespread procurement and application of tourism research in Australia.

This paper introduces the concept of the Tourism Information Marketplace (TICM) to demonstrate that the historically poor dissemination and application of strategic tourism information in RTS is, in part, the result of barriers to its efficient procurement on the demand side. Previous analyses of this issue have identified weaknesses that exist in the current delivery systems for regional tourism information. These relate to administration of data collections, the knowledge management capacity of small firms and local tourism associations, quality and availability of data, and the technologies that are used in its distribution. This research augments these findings by identifying the barriers to the efficient exchange and procurement of tourism information commodities.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRATEGIC INFORMATION COMMODITIES TO REGIONAL TOURISM SYSTEMS

There is voluminous representation in the literature of the growth in the size and importance of the global information, or knowledge-based, economy (see, for example, Levine & Lippman, 1995; Nelson, 2000; Shipario & Varian, 1999). Most acknowledge the emergent role of knowledge as an enabler of wealth creation and economic growth. Indeed, some argue that the modern economy is tending toward the application of knowledge for the sake of knowledge itself (Johnston, 1999).

The concept of Systems of Innovation (SOI) is being increasingly described in the literature. SOI are networks of firms, organizations, and other parties who apply knowledge and innovations through interactive learning processes to generate favourable economic outcomes (for a review, see Edquist & McKelvey, 2000). An SOI may exist at any geographic level and may be sector-specific, as in the case of tourism.

Regional tourism in Australia is also characterised by networks and interactions between tourism product suppliers, public-sector organisations, community organisations, other intermediaries, and the legislative and political regimes that influence the region. The systemic nature of these interactions points to the existence of RTSs, which are focused largely around regional destinations (Carson et al., 2003).

There has been some past research on the information needs of key agents in Australia's RTS. The Centre for Regional Tourism Research (Prosser, 2000) conducted a national research roadshow in 1999 that included participation from over 500 regional tourism operators and association managers. In 2001, the Australian Regional Tourism Convention in Port Macquarie (Kelly, 2001) included a national forum that identified the broad information needs of regional and local tourism associations. The results of these two initiatives were supplemented by a series of focus groups in 2002 and 2003 to determine the current data or information needs in regional tourism, and the perceived barriers to obtaining and using this information.

All three investigations highlighted the difficulty organisations (particularly small businesses and local tourism associations) have in articulating their data and information needs and in procuring information to address these.

THE ROLE OF THE TOURISM INFORMATION MARKETPLACE

Externally sourced, or secondary, knowledge and information is important to innovation at the enterprise level and, consequently, to the RTS. For entities engaged in the Australian tourism industry, the potential for secondary information to contribute to innovation is growing in line with global trends (Scott, 1999, p. 14). Secondary information can help to establish a competitive advantage in a globalised, competitive, and de-

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