

# Online for success

Agencies that don't have a website risk losing out in the future, as the Internet becomes a widely used tool for information around the world. There are new business opportunities available through the web, although having an Internet presence comes with its own problems. AMY BAKER reports.

The advent of the Internet changed the face of language travel and impacted on the way many businesses are run around the world. Yet, aside from email and the much vaunted threat of direct bookings, which failed to be as devastating as some expected, how else has the Internet crept into agencies' lives?

Websites are becoming an increasingly central part of business strategy for many agencies. Some agencies now operate entirely on the web, and many established office-based agencies, such as the Munhwa Corporation in Korea, have an online arm.

"Web registrations now account for about 70 per cent of all new registrations we receive," relates Anne Wittig of the National Registration Center for Study Abroad (NRCSA) in the USA, which has had its programmes online since 1993. Wittig points out that, while there are clear advantages of having a web presence – "about 10 per cent of our total individual student bookings come from students outside of the USA going to destinations outside of the USA, such as from Canada to Japan" – the threat of direct bookings remains.

"The biggest drawback to the web," she says, "is that we spend a lot of time counselling students... and we lose many to direct bookings with schools. It's hard to say if we have more new business being online or lose more business due to the schools we work with being online... but either way, that's the cost of doing business."

Wittig's point is well made. The problem of doing business in the Internet era is that competition is rife, and direct bookings are possible, but nevertheless, agencies with an attractive and informative website stand a better chance of winning bookings than those with no Internet presence at all. Not least because Internet-based customers are not a typical type of client, as Vladimir Yankin, Managing Director of Fakel Tours in Russia, explains.

"As a rule, [some of my web clients] are students who are really interested in the world wide web and they do not have enough time to come to my office," he says. Yankin also agrees with Wittig's point that the geographic range of the potential client base can be extended through the Internet. "We have a lot of queries from the European part of Russia," he says. "Before, we only had clients from St Petersburg and its suburban area."

Of course, the usefulness of a website also depends on how Internet-literate the national

population is. In some countries, such as Russia, not all students have access to the Internet and computers. However, over time, this will change, and as Internet usage becomes more widespread, a website will be crucial.

"We have had a website for a couple of years now and it is an essential marketing tool for us," says Kath Bateman of Caledonia Language Courses in the UK, where the government has pledged to make the Internet available in all schools and libraries by the end of this year. Bateman says that while her agency does not currently accept bookings online, it does receive between 10 and 25 enquiries per day, and "for enquiries, we find the Internet extremely useful". All websites have to be managed of course. "[Dealing with queries] can be very time consuming if it is not managed properly," says Bateman. "We need to address how to use our website [and respond to queries] more effectively and plan to do so when we are upgrading the site."

As Wittig explains, all agencies with, or planning to have, a web presence, need to keep a few basic aims in mind. "We are focused on keeping our website practical, easy to use and functional," she says. Regular reviews and the continual update of content are also important to ensure maximum results.

Agencies that have developed their web tactics already are constantly evolving the services that they offer. Tasha Lewis at International Connections Consulting (ICC) in the USA says, "After some fine tuning and above-average support from our web hosting company, ICC is now going to begin a lengthy process of adding photos to our current and previous articles." Yankin explains that the number of web clients his agency receives has increased since he introduced the opportunity to book air tickets online.

As website development continues apace, a strategy between schools and agents is ever more important, to make sure that the information and recommendation supplied by an agency is recognised, if students do decide to book directly with a school. A booking facility online will certainly become a requisite of all agency websites too, as web surfers may be less inclined to look for a school's website if the content of an agency's site meets their expectations. All of which points to the need for considered cooperation between agencies and schools, as well as technological innovation.

## What does a good website incorporate?

*Speed is of the essence, so a web page should open up quickly. It is estimated that web pages have between 15 and 30 seconds to capture a web viewer's attention.*

*Keep it simple. Information should be clear and the navigation system easy to understand. This is particularly important if you expect non-native viewers to visit your web page.*

*Make sure the content is good and relevant. Try to inform and inspire your visitors.*

*Don't confuse the viewer, by putting information in logos, for example, that might fail to load. Logos should be used sparingly, says Susan Rarick of SRDesign in the USA. "You can load a page with so many graphics that they lose their effectiveness. A graphics-laden page may look great, but it's sort of like a pearl-handled pistol. It looks good, but it will still let you shoot yourself in the foot."*

*Update your page regularly, to make sure that visitors want to come back. "Repeat visitors are a very big key to continual growth," counsels James T Kendall, Chairman of eWeb-Corp in the USA, who recommends weekly, if not daily, updates of web page content.*

*Make sure your site is easy to find by listing it*

*with key search engines and directories. This requires some time and knowledge, but as a guideline, Kendall recommends listing it in Yahoo! and the Inktomi database, which "handles the spill over search results for Yahoo! and also powers HotBot, Direct Hit, Canada, Answers, and others". He also suggests AltaVista, Infoseek, Lycos and Excite.*

