Background

Alastair McIntyre has spent over 20 years working in the online industry. Prior to the web he owned and ran Almac BBS the world's 6th largest Bulletin Board Service and the largest in Europe.

Since then he has built from scratch the Electric Scotland web site which is now Scotland's largest historical web site with over 300,000 visitors coming to the site each month and some 10,000 web pages. The site is all about the history of Scotland, Scots and people of Scots descent. In August 2002 Electric Scotland becomes the official home of the Odom Library and it's Family Tree newspaper. The newspaper is the largest genealogy publication in the world and the largest Scottish publication outside Scotland with an estimated readership of 500,000 per issue.

This enquiry

The best way I can deal with this enquiry is to relate my own experience on my own Electric Scotland site as it will show what can be achieved with an annual spend of some £24,000. So if you look at how much VisitScotland spends to reach 14,000 people a day from their own web site you will have some comparison as to value for money and how well it achieves its goals.

Value for Money

It is interesting to note that Electric Scotland receives 10,000 visitors per day to the site. VisitScotland tells us they receive 14,000 visitors per day. Electric Scotland has achieved these results through the work of 1 full time person and one volunteer helper and no spend on advertising and in all it's time in operation has only ever received two mentions in the media.

I only make this point as one has to ask why with all the staff used for the VisitScotland web sites and the TV and media coverage they get why they only get 14,000 visitors per day.

Understanding the Web

It is my impression that VisitScotland web decisions are made by people that profess to understand the web but in practice do not spend any real time on it. I thus question their ability to develop a compelling web site that would attract visitors to Scotland as they do not have the staff capable of understanding what makes a web site work. They tend to relate it to themselves but they themselves do not spend much time on the web.

I am not talking here about web design but compelling content and interactive capabilities which is the job of the marketing department and not the web designer.

For example it was recently announced that VisitScotland would do a survey of visitors to Scotland to find out why they came. I would have thought this was something they should have done years ago. I do an annual survey on my site and in April 2002 this received 1,255 completed forms within a 6 day period. In with the results we found…

Why do/would you come to Scotland?
We asked to tick all that apply.

Visit ancestral homeland 75.1%
For the scenery 72.2%
Visit historic properties 67.6%
Genealogy Research 61.8%

To visit friends or relatives 42.9%
To visit a Highland Games or Festival 42.3%
To come for a clan gathering 34.8%
Education 12.9%

For sporting reasons (golf, fishing, etc) 12.7%
Business 3.2%

If you did come to Scotland would you make it as?

A Scotland only holiday 59.0%
As part of a British holiday 31.0%
As part of a European holiday 10.0%

The point I make from the above is that the most compelling reasons for people to visit Scotland is so they can touch base with their "roots". Many visitors don't just have Scottish roots and hence the interest in making this part of a British or European holiday.

Ancestral Web Site

Last year I attended a 1 day meeting in Inverness at the invitation of the then Scottish Tourist Board to talk about genealogy as a method of attracting visitors to Scotland. This was followed by a 2 day meeting in Edinburgh to brainstorm how to develop a genealogy portal. I was told they had £50,000 to spend on the initial development of this site.

I did question why they felt compelled to develop their own site when others were available that had a significant amount of information. I got no satisfactory answer but I would invite you to compare their ancestral web site http://www.ancestralscotland.com with the Electric Scotland web site http://www.electricscotland.com. I do admit to offering to do all this for them on my site at a rate of £24,000 per year.

My point here is to explore why they should spend considerable money on an inferior site when they could have spent less but encouraged other web sites to do better by providing content and some financial support.

Why is it that everyone seems to have the need to develop their own web sites when others could do a much better job?

I note here that Scottish Enterprise has decided to reduce their web sites from 242 to 24 or something in that order.

I'll also make the point that to get people enthusiastic about visiting Scotland it's not only the genealogy but all the stories about the history of Scotland, Scots and people of Scots descent that makes the difference. It's immersing yourself in the history of your ancestral lands.

Let me tell you one story which I believe illustrates this. A mother emailed me to say she was attending one of the Highland Games in America and wanted to persuade her 10 year old son to wear a kilt to the games. His reaction was "I don't want to wear a skirt.. that's for girls". So she asked me if I could send her any information that might help to persuade him. I sent over an account of the Black Watch where they were wintering in America during the fight for independence. In the account it mentioned that during the Winter only one of the Black Watch regiment fell ill despite wearing the kilt whereas one third of the English regiments went down with illness and they all wore trousers. The account also mentioned some of the battles the Black Watch were involved in and of course they were supreme soldiers. The result was that (1) The Boy did in fact wear a kilt (2) He found three friends at school that were also of Scots descent and they also got kilts. (3) They created their own "clan". (4) They now all enjoy reading stories about Scotland and especially Highland regiments. (5) They are all now planning on a trip to Scotland to see it all for themselves and that's four families!

Proof of concept

In the year 2000 the Highlands of Scotland Tourist Board offered to email their CD to up to 250 American addresses free of charge of I could provide the addresses. I posted up the offer in my then monthly newsletter and within 5 hours I got over 600 applications for it and of course had to take down the page at that point.

In the year 2000 I estimated that the Electric Scotland web site was directly responsible for brining in some £1.25m in new tourist business for Scotland. This was based purely on emails received which specifically said that "Electric Scotland had been the main criteria for persuading them to come to Scotland".

Despite all this Electric Scotland receives not one penny from VisitScotland in support of the work that the site does and nor does it receive any content to publish on the site despite asking for it. Sour grapes? Of course. Wouldn't you be fed up when you do such a good job for Scotland but get no recognition or support for the work you do from within Scotland? The fact remains that Electric Scotland is the No.1 web site for Scots overseas and we receive thousands of emails telling us that we're the best.

What needs to be done

In my view some of the money that VisitScotland receives should go to other Scottish web sites. There are many excellent web sites on areas of Scotland that are superb and yet most are run by enthusiasts that make not one penny from their efforts. Top sites like Electric Scotland should be supported both financially and with content. VisitScotland need to employ people to feed stories about Scotland to other web sites.

Think about it. If VisitScotland gets 14,000 visitors per day then any stories they put up will only be seen by those 14,000 visitors. If they sent me a story to put on my site then another 10,000 people could view it. Send that same story to other big and/or targeted web sites and you might well get to 100,000 people a day reading it.

Why does VisitScotland feel they can do everything? Quite simply they can't. Should VisitScotland wish to promote a holiday to Skye then Electric Scotland has a whole book on "A Summer in Skye". So why don't they link to that? Electric Scotland has a 2 volume book on "The History of Stirlingshire" on the site so why don't they link to that?

In August we will be starting to post up on the site a 3 volume book "Tales of the Scottish Borders and Scotland" which contains some 500 stories to read. This will take some 18 months of work to put this up on the site. Just think what a marvellous resource this could be for someone considering taking a holiday to the Scottish Borders. In the event I got some financial support this whole book could be up in just one month and we'd be onto other interesting topics.

We need to take a broader look at the whole web process. It is the most marvellous resource for telling a story yet we in Scotland only seem capable of posting up brochures. We need to build a sense of community, enthusiasm, desire, all those good things that make people want to come here. Visitors to my site tell me that I get them all enthusiastic about Scotland to the point that they want to come here… but then I leave them dead as I don't help them with the process of actually coming here.

Let's look at some more facts from my questionnaire

In which country do you live?

USA 63.7%
Canada 16.5%
Australia 6.4%
England 4.2%
Scotland 3.4%
New Zealand 2.9%
Other 2.9%

Do you plan to come to Scotland for a holiday?

Yes 67.6%
Perhaps 25.4%
No 7%

Would you like us to provide the means of booking a holiday to Scotland on the site?

Yes 29.5%
Perhaps 44.0%
No 26.5%

Do you purchase goods online?
Yes 75.2%
No 24.8%

What do you buy online?
We asked people to tick all boxes that applied.

Books 58.9%
Music 40.6%
Clothing 34.7%
Computer/Electrical 33.5%
Travel 30.0%
Clan products 30.0%
Genealogical Information 28.7%
Tartan products 23.3%

So we find that 30% purchase travel online and 67% plan to come to Scotland for a holiday.

So with 10,000 visitors a day I find that 3,000 of them actually purchase travel holidays on line and 6,700 of them plan to come to Scotland on holiday. And that's just one days worth of visitors. Yet VisitScotland spends not one penny in support of my site and nor does it provide any content for the site. To me that is ludicrous.

What is the average spend per visitor?

Well I can answer that one as well…

What budget would you work on (per person) for your holiday "excluding" airfare but including spending money.

Less than £500 ($US 700) 13.3%
£501 - £749 ($US 700-$1050) 26.2%
£750 - £999 ($US1,050 - 1,400) 20.4%
£1000 - £1,499 ($US 1,400 - 2,100) 20.5%
£1,500 - £1,999 ($US 2,100 - $3,500) 13.0%
Over £2,000 (Over $US 3,500) 6.6%

So as this excludes airfare I would take it that £1,000 spend per person would be a reasonable average to work with so that makes a potential income to Scotland of £6,700,000 from just one days visitors to Electric Scotland. OK you can argue figures here but which ever way you look at it Electric Scotland has the ability to generate millions in income for Scotland. Yet again VisitScotland doesn't put one penny into the site nor does it provide any content.

Let's look at the web again

The web can be much more than most people realise. For example I send out a weekly newsletter to around 8,000 people currently. The newsletter is of course filled with all the content I add to the site each week. In many respects I would claim that Electric Scotland is much more than a web site as it's also like a newspaper or magazine. Folk enjoy the newsletter as I put wee stories and

other snippets into it so that even without clicking on the links it makes a good read and one that is looked forward to each Friday.

People like to feel part of a community and it's very much a personal experience even if it is used for business as well. The key to any successful newsletter and web site is to give good content that people will enjoy reading. Certainly you can market special offers but if that's all you do then many fewer people will read it. It's thus important to get people to come to your site regularly to read the stories but if all you do is sell stuff then they'll only come to your site if they want to purchase and remember that your site is one they can purchase from.

Where are the stories on VisitScotland? All they really do is sell and not everyone wants to buy right then and there.

In my questionnaire I asked…

What top 3 Scottish web sites do you find useful for BUSINESS interest?

Only 52 responded to this question and only 3 sites were mentioned more than once:
The Scotsman
Electronic Herald
Scots Parliament

What top 3 Scottish web sites do you find useful for PERSONAL interest?

We had 166 respond to this question but many just entered Electric Scotland or Clans. The only sites with more than 5 entries were:
Rampant Scotland 9
Scots Origins 8
ForeverScotland 7
and Visit Scotland with 4 entries.

I think this shows that people will hunt around the web for something or other but on a regular basis they only visit just a very few sites and VisitScotland is obviously not a site they visit on a regular basis otherwise it would show better on these stats.

What I did get from many visitors was the comment that Electric Scotland was the only Scottish site they visited on a regular basis and even then they wished they had more time to read everything I put up. I think this reinforces my view that if VisitScotland want to ensure people read about tourism offers to Scotland that they can't just rely on their own site to do that and especially outside the times of premium travel purchases.

Lack of promotion to North America

When Tartan Day was being promoted we ended up with a shambles of a web site and no web marketing at all. It seems people would rather go visit, spend money on airfares, hotels, entertaining than do web promotion. I lost count of the number of people that emailed me to ask if there was a way they could promote Tartan Day on their web sites. It obviously didn't occur to anyone that this was a way of promoting the event. I say yet again that VisitScotland just don't employ anyone that really understands the web.

Further I have had loads of emails in from Canadians to say that Scotland seems to totally ignore the fact the Canada also has a Tartan Day and had it before the USA. Further they tell me that they see special events like the Scottish Parliament putting up a web site for US Tartan Day but ignored Canada. As some 25% of Canadians are of Scots descent this is potentially a more valuable market than the US. On Electric Scotland you will find a 4 volume book on "The Scot in North British America" so we don't ignore out friends over there.

There is a newsletter on Capital Hill and the editor takes my own weekly newsletter. When I posted up in my newsletter the fact that despite that massive downturn in flying after 11th September all of Scotland's airports showed a very significant increase in traffic. I was emailed to

ask if she could post that up in her newsletter. Those are the kinds of things we should be talking about.

Further on the 11th September I posted a special tribute page on the 14th of that month. In one day it have over 14,000 people visit and I received over 1,000 emails as a result. They all talked about how their Scottish heritage was so important to them. This was in fact an excellent opportunity to get people to come to Scotland but we in fact immediately reduced our spend. There is just a total lack of imagination at VisitScotland and especially when it comes to understanding how to promote Scotland on the web to the North American market.

So in Summary

I believe when it comes to VisitScotland making the best of the web they need to..

1. Understand that they can't do it all themselves.
2. They need to employ marketing people with a track record of successful web marketing.
3. They need to radically change their site to enthuse visitors and persuade them to come back often.
4. They must do more to talk about history and heritage.
5. They should divert some funds to help other major Scottish web sites to promote Scotland as a tourist destination.
6. They should employ people to do nothing but find interesting tourist related stories to feed to other web sites.
7. They should promote other travel web sites on their site free of charge.
8. They should award ratings for other web sites to encourage them to display that rating and link to their web site from the award.
9. Should focus more effort on Canada and the USA.

At the end of the day I've never found anyone in the travel industry that rates the VisitScotland web site anything but POOR.

Am quite happy for this submission to be used in a public context.

Alastair McIntyre
Electric Scotland Ltd

Notes.
1. See Electric Scotland site at http://www.electricscotland.com
2. See the 2002 Electric Scotland questionnaire at http://www.electricscotland.com/questionnairer_2002.htm
3. See the Electric Scotland Weekly Newsletter at http://www.electricscotland.com/newsletter/index.htm
4. See "The Scot in British North America" at http://www.electricscotland.com/history/canada/scot/index.htm
5. See the 11th September Tribute at http://www.electricscotland.com/usa/terror_america.htm