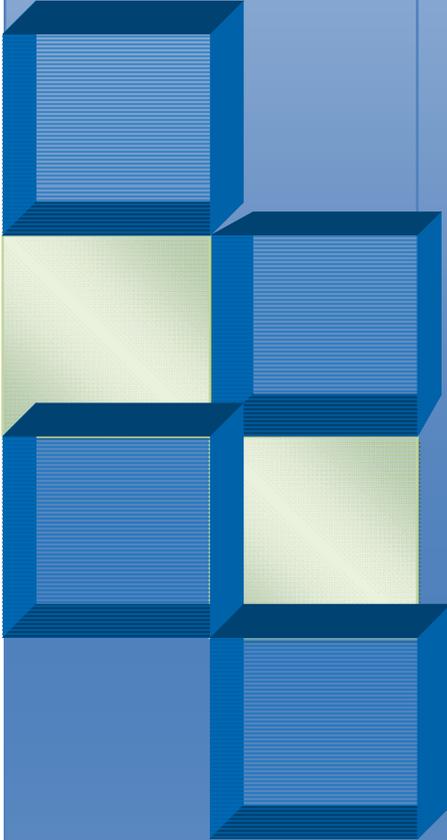
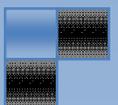


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**Niche Tourism and digital marketing:
*Beginning of the future?***

By Vineet Singh



Abstract

The evolution of tourism industry has been frantic, and to a large scale been dictated by the fluctuations in the socio-economic and political landscape of our planet. Mass-consumerism and mass-tourism has been slowly giving way to the personalized and custom service offerings. Tourism industry has witnessed radical changes in the travel preferences as well as customer expectations. Niche tourism, as it is recognized now has been embraced by both the travel operators and travelers alike, and is gradually being accepted as part of the mainstream tourism.

The challenge for the travel houses has been to 'spread the word out' about their Niche travel packages – consistently and on target. Digital marketing tools and methodologies provide a perfect foil for this emerging and lucrative segment. Space travels, cultural tours, wine tours to Coffee plantation tours, architectural wonder travel to Amazon forest tours – are just some of the flavors of niche tourism. A sustained online marketing campaign is capable of creating unprecedented visibility for these travel treasure troves.

Niche Tourism – An insight

In contrast to the phenomenon of mass consumerism and assembly-line production, personalized services have opened up the markets in a democratic manner and have been embraced by the consumers as well as service providers in equal measure. An offshoot of globalization, the concept of niche tourism has caught the fancy of seasoned travel operators as well as amateur travel enthusiasts. Niche tourism is not marked by the 'economics of scale', but rather by the 'quality of economics' – The new paradigm of tourism industry is being defined and manicured by creative and unorthodox thinking.

Business innovation, increased levels of income, democratic market landscape and increasing support from Federal and State governments have created small pockets of excellence in the travel and tourism segment. The new species of travelers is not only more discerning, but also has a higher expectation level – they are ready to shell out any amount for realizing their dream vacation. Another important facet of this cerebral tourism segment has been the conceptual collaboration between the tour operators and their customers around the globe. Many tour operators involve their customers in the conceptual phases of their tour packages – and that creates a winning situation for everybody, but the ultimate winner is the local economy.

Internet and its tools of collaboration have created an environment of constructive feedback which not only engenders creativity but also a pro-consumer market environment. Travel and hospitality segment is no exception, with global net connectivity and social networking platforms bringing the consumers closer to the corporate strategy exercises. The combined outreach potential of the electronic and digital media channels is being tapped with increasing vigor by even the smallest of tour operators. This enables the niche players to get their foot in the door – by directly reaching travelers who bank on the web for planning their dream trip.

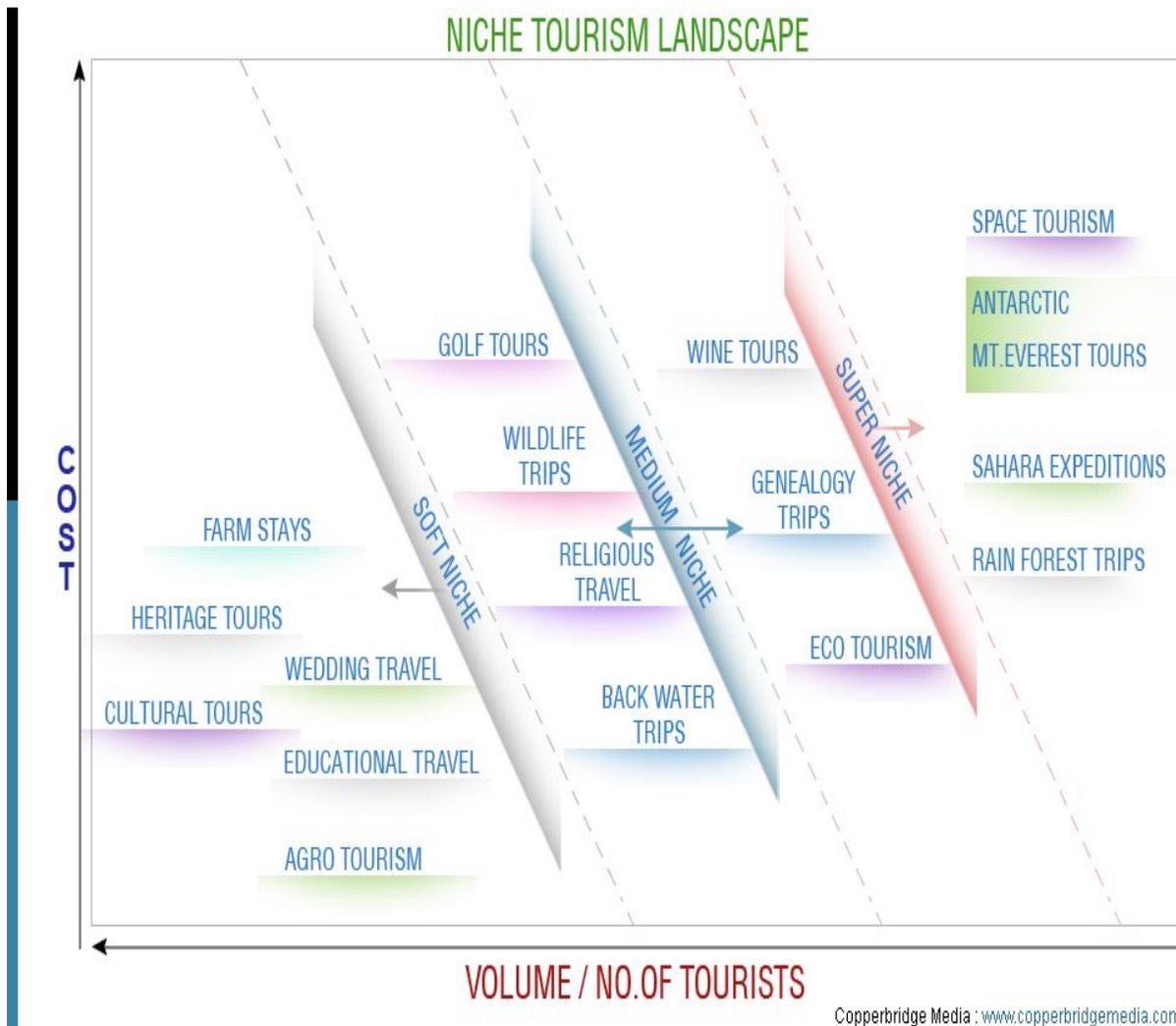
So, what might be termed as niche tourism?

Market is adept at adaptation and intelligent reproduction. So, once a niche tourism concept acquires visibility, it is replicated to death, until it can no longer be bracketed as niche tourism. As the competition heats up, ingenuity and passion gives birth to novel concepts which are then lapped up by the experience-hungry tourist species.

Ecotourism – Hot Spring tours – Adventure and heritage site travel – Rainforest and backwater travel – Agro-tourism....Just some of the niche tourism concepts in vogue. Scotland, Ireland, and UK have established niche tourism programs, which have made a significant contribution to their economy and which are sponsored and supported by the government. In UK, as early as 1999, Department of Culture, Media and Sports identified niche tourism as an important market and a big catalyst for the tourism industry. The niche tourism stream common in the three countries are – Golf tours, Genealogy trips, Whisky tours, and Wildlife and field sports.

Targeted online visibility in Tourism sector

It would be imprudent to leave out the following tourism concepts - religious travel, family-friendly travel, wedding travel, volunteer vacations, educational travel, and Special interest tours. The democratic catalogue of niche tourism continues to expand with different flavors, much to the delight of the experimental tourist.



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Niche Tourism concepts – packaging the right way

Packaging is the psychological catalyst for any product or service, and plays a vital role in creating a market momentum. Online or offline branding gets off the blocks with a great packaging program. Since our spotlight is on creating a symbiotic relationship between the online marketing tools and the ground-zero aspects of a niche tourism package, insight of the online branding tools and the USP (unique selling proposition) of the niche tourism package is of vital importance.

Whether it is a ‘Visit to the dude ranch’ or a ‘Kayaking trip’ or a ‘Stay with the Emperor Penguins in Antarctic’ – online visibility analysis is a key activity that goes behind the package promotion strategy. As a tour manager, your intention is to start with a maximum bang – for the right audience at the right time. Most of us are tempted to utilize all the media options for creating the buzz – Electronic, Print, Digital media and ‘Word of mouth’. Budget is always a constraint in the early days of the business unless you are backed by a thriving million dollar business.

Many experts call it sub-niche – Tagging the niche tour packages with a traditional industry segment. A few of them worth a mention here are...

Nature Learning Vacations

- Language learning while living with a family in the country of origin
- Imbibing art and culture while living with an artist – Paying guest accommodation. This concept is getting extremely popular in places like France and Italy
- Archaeological classes with actual experience of digging
- Learning music in West Africa or music in Spain or Mexico
- Acquiring culinary skills in southern India, Thailand or Indonesia

Spiritual Tours

- Faith based tourism
- Religious travel to mythology-based religious shrines
- Trekking through the Holy Land
- Spending time with saints and meditation Gurus in Himalayas

Corporate Tours

- Business meetings and conferences in exotic locations which are also cost-effective
- Great niche tourism opportunity for developing and transition economies
- Corporate tourism is more profitable for both the travel operators as well as local governments

Transit Tourism

- 3 or more hours of golden opportunity to offer niche tour packages to travelers who are bored during their transit

- One hour sightseeing packages planned for in-transit passengers – This might result in an extended or longer planned holiday in future
- Hourly shopping and Spa facilities

After the package structuring, which is the easier phase, the grueling task of package promotion needs to be set in motion. While majority of the travel owners are web savvy, adoption of the best online marketing processes and methodologies is a major challenge for this thriving industry.

Identifying your niche customers...

The only common thread between the various species of travelers is their 'zeal to explore', and this makes them the most diverse and unpredictable market Diaspora. *So, as a niche travel entrepreneur, what are the practical options available to you for pin-pointing your pool of customers?* Unfortunately, Customer targeting is never accomplished by adopting an assembly-line process, rather it is the domain of experimental marketing and customer engagement. As dwelled earlier in this discussion, customer engagement is a part of the marketing strategy and one which is embraced by most of the savvy business owners in the tourism segment.

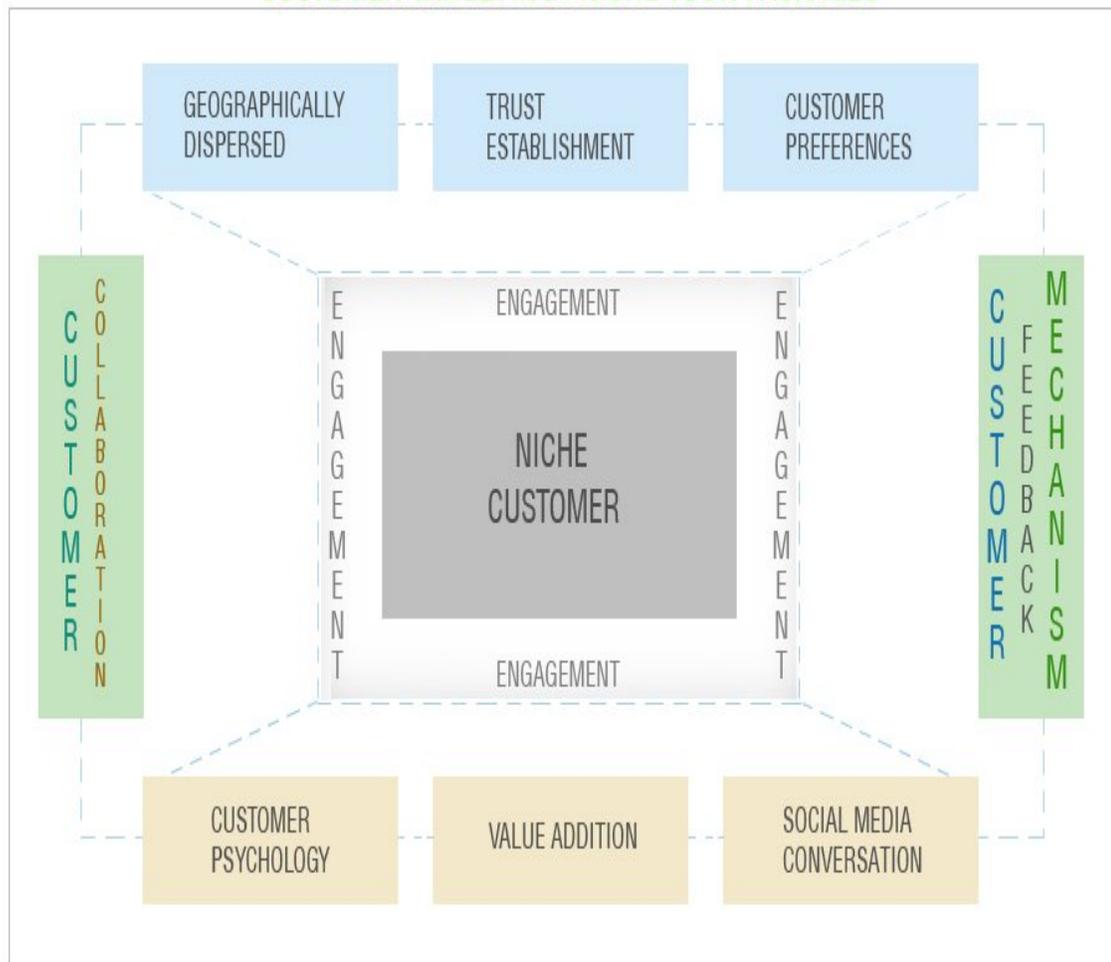
Online environment is tricky to a great extent. While collaboration and handshakes can be a click away, the chances of alienating a pool of customers can also be just round the corner. As a result of a broader survey of tourism industry experts, the following facts played a big role in the customer identification effort...

- Customers are geographically dispersed and hence their persona and approach to travel can be unexpectedly diverse
- Association begins on the net but the challenge is to transcend it to the physical domain. Establishment of trust is critical to the process of customer identification and acquisition.
- Prospect or customer identification is always preceded by understanding the preferences of a traveler which is gauged only through a sustained engagement of customers
- Market intelligence is a valuable commodity for both the marketer and the business owner, but it needs to be collected at the right time and from the right pool of customers. Customer collaboration ensures cost-free market intelligence. Identification of social communities and adding value to this community by way of industry news, informative white papers, and case studies makes easier market acceptance for the brand or service. In addition, this also helps in creating long lasting brand ambassadors.
- Customer pool is waiting to be tapped within the different social networking pockets. It's not the customer pocket, but the customer psychology that needs to be gauged – before they can be categorized as prospective clients

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- Identification is just the beginning – Prospect conversion results from a sustained process of meaningful interaction with the customer. The nurturing of customer relationship is one of the most abstained and neglected aspects of online marketing, and one which is the major differentiator between a brand and a great brand.

CUSTOMER TARGETING : NICHE TOUR PACKAGES



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So, whether you are organizing kayaking trips, a farm stay or a trekking expedition through Sahara desert, spotting and hooking up with the right customer is key to the viability and success of the niche tour program.

Branding your niche & getting the word out

As is true with other industry segments, internet is gradually taking centre stage in the marketing board rooms. Countries like Bulgaria, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia have adopted a comprehensive internet marketing campaign to highlight the tourism sector in their respective countries. Most of the states and counties in United States have an organized and sustained online campaign in place to showcase the unique and niche travel spots.

While web is like a black hole, which can suck up all your energy and resources without a trace of traffic coming on to your site, on the other hand if it can also be tapped for breathtaking publicity, and with planning and intelligence, it can also establish a robust brand in a short span. There is no denying the fact that Electronic and Print media provide a great supporting act to the tourism industry, but the real marketing momentum is generated by leveraging the various community catalysts on the web. A few of the most effective and pervasive marketing elements in the online arena are...

Press the Press Release button: Online Press releases is an official broadcast of your product or service - in one click. Your new company manifesto and niche package launch reaches the right corners of the web – Newspapers, Online magazines, Newsfeeds, News aggregators, Premium news outlets such as USA Today, NY Times, Washington Post and more through the Associated Press, News subscribers, Journalists and Bloggers. The most trusted names for paid PR on the Web are PRWeb, Business wire and PR News wire.

Capture the Tubes: From Presidential debates to FIFA World Cup, from Multinational CEO's address to start-up corporate presentations, various video distribution networks are being utilized to reach the masses, employees, customers and collaborators – with just a few hours of configuration. The marketing mileage achieved by a visual presentation has an unparalleled impact on the customer persuasion, as compared to a pile of textual marketing content. Video networks like YouTube, Metacafe, BrightCove and Tourism industry specific network, VFM Leonardo have outmatched any other marketing platform in the online world.

Publish your niche blog: Blogs are being consumed and trusted by a majority of the web citizens. Corporate blogs and product specific blogs create a sense of credibility in the market, leading to a greater probability of product or service-centric conversation. Potential customers can directly interact with you regarding the finer points of your new offering. Blog participation (Blog Roll) accelerates the acceptability of your blog (and product, service, niche tour package) in the circle of influencers on web. Major decision makers in any industry are also the followers of some of the most popular bloggers. Some of the most followed travel industry blogs on the web are – Uptake, Elliott.org, Tripso, Travel 2.0 Blog, T4, Phocuswright, Hudson Crossing Blog....

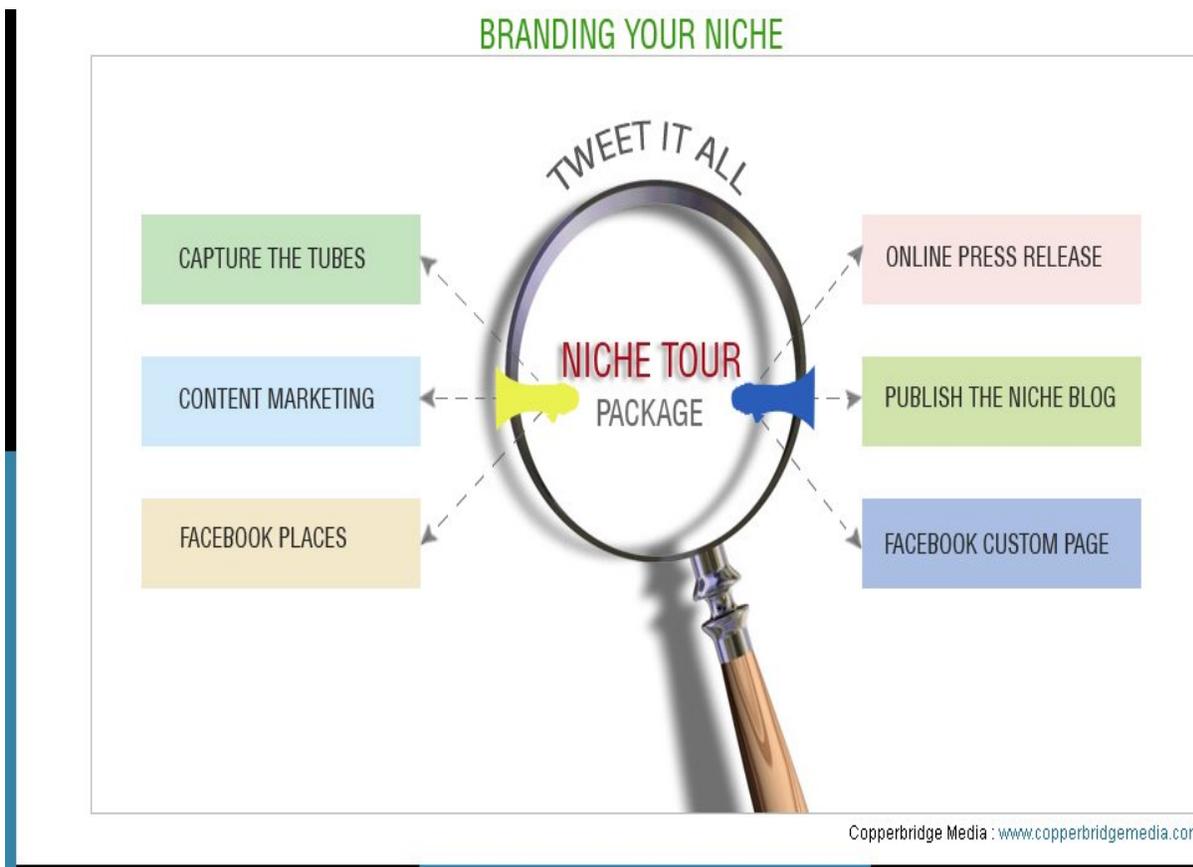
Targeted online visibility in Tourism sector

Spread the good word: Content marketing has always been the mainstay of internet marketing strategy irrespective of the industry. Google, Yahoo, Bing and other search engines index any new content as soon as they are published, thus making every word in your content a searchable entity. Content travels faster and is consumed even faster rate as compared any other format on the web. A planned distribution of articles, white papers, and case studies will result in a great foundation for future promotional campaigns.

Put a face on the Facebook: The hot-spot of online marketing, Facebook thrives on customer interaction and feedback. With the addition of paid advertising option in Facebook, advertisers have the option of shifting some of the eggs form from the Google Adwords basket, and it seems that the business owners are more than happy with the results.

Facebook places is a recent addition to the marketing arsenal of this giant online billboard – It utilizes the Geo-social networking capabilities of social community platforms like Facebook. Geo-tagging coupled with customer driven data forms the basis of uniting people, events and preferences.

Don't forget to Tweet: Do whatever you may, don't forget to tweet before you go to sleep. Better, connect your twitter account with your Blog and Facebook.



Targeted online visibility in Tourism sector

Once you have managed to tap all the above avenues, it's time to go for niche marketing – establishing your presence in the Travel related directories and search engines, travel blogs and tourism related forums.

Case Study

TAT (Tourism Authority of Thailand)

For Thailand tourism is a way of life and also the biggest contributor to their GDP. TAT recognizes the global shift towards eco-friendly tourism. By adopting green initiatives, Thai tourism industry has opened its doors to the new wave of customers who believe in minimizing their carbon footprint. In addition to this unequivocal national stand on eco-tourism, TAT is the architect of innovative programs which cultivate and nurture the growth of niche tourism. A few of these initiatives deserve a thought here...

Thailand Travel Planner: TAT has introduced the Thailand Travel Planner to provide packaged knowledge and insider information on Thailand for travel agents/tour operators who are betting on promoting Thai tourism in the American market. Apart from the printed materials, the complete travel planner is also available in the digital format which can be downloaded from the TAT educational web site. The Thailand Travel Planner presents a golden opportunity for Thai Niche tourism operators to showcase their unique travel offering to the potential customers and agents in the American market (United States, Canada and Latin America).

Thailand eCademy: Thailand eCademy is one of the best examples of innovative marketing in the Travel and Tourism segment. Brainchild of TAT, Thailand eCademy is an online distance-learning facility that educates the foreign travel agents about the new travel packages in Thailand. eCademy also enables TAT to nurture relationships with its global counterparts and social traveling networks.

Seven Greens Program: TAT's Seven Greens program is an eco-balancing framework that strives to promote tourism in a healthy and sustainable environment. Strategic partnerships are forged in an environmentally conscious atmosphere and which provides a framework for the seven green areas - Green Heart, Green Logistics, Green Destinations, Green Communities, Green Activities, Green Service and Green Plus.

TAT's Green initiative:

- i. **Implementation of Seven Greens concept**
- ii. **Identifying and developing Green Tourism Role models**
- iii. **Organizing conferences and seminars on Green and sustainable tourism**
- iv. **Creating a national database of Green Tourism operators and service providers**

TAT's ePlanning:

- i. **Creation of interactive web entities like Web sites, Blogs, discussion forums, mobile web sites**
- ii. **Utilize online marketing avenues like banners Ads, e-Marketing channels and top travel portal like Travelocity.com, Expedia.com, Asianow.com**

Conclusion

Innovation and ingenuity had always had a great impact on the Travel and Tourism industry. The dwindling appeal for mass tourism packages was evident at the beginning of this decade itself and the forward thinking Tourism managers were already experimenting with unexplored concepts in the travel segment. As word spread out about the different flavors of niche tour packages, the excitement in the traveler community was palpable and the market seemed to be waiting for such an experimental approach towards travel. As with every other novel concept, replications were natural and came thick and fast – Leading to a higher level of ingenuity and uniqueness. The challenge was to create an awareness and visibility campaign around these niche packages. But, the new breed of online marketing tools provide a perfect foil to new demands of niche tourism industry.

About the Author

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Vineet is a seasoned marketer and experimental entrepreneur. He is the founder and CEO of CopperBridge Media (www.copperbridgemedia.com). He is a passionate teacher and environmentalist and is also the founder and Managing director of Green Arth (economy) (www.greenarth.com) and PaperTip (www.papertip.com).



Targeted online visibility in Tourism sector

About Copper Bridge Media

CopperBridge Media (www.copperbridgemedia.com) is a global marketing strategy firm and business enabler. It relies on its high intelligence data capture and analysis to cater to the conversion and ROI centric demands of its clients. It offers Corporate Branding, Multi-Channel Marketing, Research and Analysis and pervasive Search marketing solutions to its clients.

PaperTip (www.papertip.com) is the content marketing arm of CopperBridge and is vital to the success of its client's online business strategy. CopperBridge Media takes its social responsibility very seriously and has recently launched GreenArth (www.greenarth.com) – as a platform to conserve the natural resources and safeguard the environment.

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