

## From brochures to the Internet

### Tourism, marketing and development in the Cook Islands

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#### **Abstract**

*In this paper we review some of the links that exist between tourism, marketing and development in the South Pacific and then examine the case of the Cook Islands. Following a brief overview of the nation's tourism industry and its growth, we evaluate the impact that changing types of marketing can have on issues as diverse as the representation of culture and the creation of economic linkages. We examine brochure-based and web-based marketing images and content. Our findings reveal that the Internet has the potential to alleviate some traditional problems associated with tourism marketing, such as the power of intermediaries in the marketing chain, and inaccurate or out of date portrayals of destinations and their peoples. Nevertheless, many of the marketing-related problems associated with small size and limited budgets will persist, including issues of control, dependency, and identity.*

**Keywords** Internet marketing, brochures, Cook Islands, South Pacific, Image

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### **Introduction**

Like many small island nations, the Cook Islands has embraced tourism as a means of generating foreign exchange, creating jobs and bolstering the meagre government coffers (Bertram 1999; Fagence 1999). Faced with the obvious economic disadvantages associated with isolation, small population and limited natural resources, the tourism industry is increasingly seen as a major pillar of economic development (Burns & Cleverdon 1995; ADB 1995; AusAID 1999; Cook Islands Research Group 2000).

A key to the development of the local industry is the successful marketing of the nation's tourism product to potential clients around the world (see Crofts & Ryan 1997). With a plethora of possible destinations for a tourist to choose from, the Cook Islands must strive to gain the consumer's attention, as well as develop products and facilities that can fulfil expectations. Marketing materials also shape the impacts of tourism, influencing where tourists go, where they stay, what they do, what they purchase and how they view local cultures and the environment (Britton 1981; Dann 1996; Milne 1997; Sissons 1999).

The primary aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between tourism marketing and the development process in the Cook Islands. Following a brief review of the literature dealing with the tourism marketing and development interface, we examine key features of the country's tourism industry and analyse the images and information presented via two forms of marketing media: the traditional print brochure and the Internet. We discuss how far the evolving structure and nature of marketing tools can assist small nations such as the Cook Islands in breaking away from some of the dependent relationships that have characterised tourism development in the past.

In analysing these 'traditional' and 'modern' forms of information dissemination, we focus on the following core issues.

- Does the Internet, in comparison with brochures, have the potential to enhance direct contact and communication with the consumer ?
- Is the information presented on the Internet more accurate and detailed in its portrayal of the Cook Islands than is the presentation in brochures?
- Does the Internet offer possibilities for enhancing linkages between tourism and the local economy?

- Does the Internet represent a tool to increase local involvement in tourism and related sectors?

### **Tourism, marketing and development in the Pacific**

The main tourist attractions for most small Pacific Island states are the natural beauty of the land- and seascape combined with the culture of the people (Fagence 1999; Milne 1997; Hall 1998). Linnekin notes:

Though their primary interests may be sun, sand, and sea, most tourists to the Pacific are also strongly attracted to the mystique of islands' cultures. Touristic representations of Polynesia emphasise sensuality and a tradition of hospitality, while adding that tourists to Polynesia can still enjoy a world-class level of comfort. (1997: 231)

The core objective of most marketing undertaken by tourism destinations is to convince the potential consumer that the product being marketed is superior to similar products, and to gain consumer confidence and business (Lanfant 1995; Poon 1993). However, as Britton notes throughout his examination of tourism development in Fiji (1981), in the minds of many visitors the island nations of the South Pacific are selling an essentially undifferentiated product of sand, sea and sun. As a result, countries must create images of individual difference in the minds of potential tourists, images that will be based, to varying degrees, on reality and myth.

Much of the responsibility for developing and disseminating this marketing material has traditionally resided with airlines and travel agents in source nations (Buhalis 2001). Agents traditionally obtain their information from 'familiarisation' trips, traditional materials such as brochures and videos, or from information contained on their airline-based computer reservation system (CRS) or the Internet (Ryan & Cliff 1997; Mihalic, Uysal & Pan 1995). Tourists, in turn, will often rely, for planning their trip, on brochures provided by the agent or the destination information office (Ryan & Cliff 1997). Brochures are an important form of promotion for destinations, but to be effective they must have eye-catching presentation, striking content and a large distribution network (Marshment 1997: 17).

People's images of destinations are not formed simply from the presentation in brochures. An entire sense of many places has often already

been established in the minds of the public through films, books, magazines, the Internet, television, photographs and friends (Edwards 1996; Ringer 1998; Harrison 2001). As Urry points out:

Over time, via advertising and the media, the images generated of different tourist gazes come to constitute a closed self-perpetuating system of illusions which provide the tourist with the basis for selecting and evaluating potential places to visit. (1990: 7)

In essence, the 'destination' is socially constructed, with the visual aspect the most important in the construction of meaning (Rojek 1998).

While airlines, tour operators, wholesalers and travel agents are key external elements in the promotion of tourism to many small Pacific nations, local and regional organisations are also instrumental in marketing the industry. Of these, perhaps the most dominant is the Tourism Council of the South Pacific (TCSP)—now known as the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO)—which was established in 1983 as an informal association of national tourism organisations to coordinate tourism policy among South Pacific island states (Lockhart & Chandra 1997). The SPTO faces a difficult task in balancing the need to promote the region as a whole with the specific needs of the individual states (Fagence 1996). National governments and tourism offices also play an important role, although their limited funding bases inevitably mean they can have little global impact.

The role of the private sector as a marketing force is also vital. Linnekin comments:

While the state promotes and endorses certain types of cultural representations, I suggest that entrepreneurial capitalism disseminates these images and their conceptual premise far more efficiently and effectively than could any governmental body. (1997: 219)

In other words, a destination can use the government umbrella to help market itself, but this needs to be complemented by the drive and financial resources of the private sector.

The ability to reach the market place, and perhaps circumvent some of the intermediaries between the product and the consumer, has been heavily influenced by technology. One tool commonly used by travel professionals to gain and pass on information about destinations is the Computer

Reservation System (CRS) (see Poon 1993). However, such systems can be difficult to access, and during the 1990s smaller firms in the region faced many difficulties.

The high cost of CRS membership, the relatively rigid structure of the information that can be displayed, and potential display bias, may tend to lead to the exclusion of many smaller South Pacific operations from these powerful distribution systems . . . [L]arger, often foreign owned, concerns are likely to reap the competitive rewards associated with access to these networks. (Milne 1996: 14)

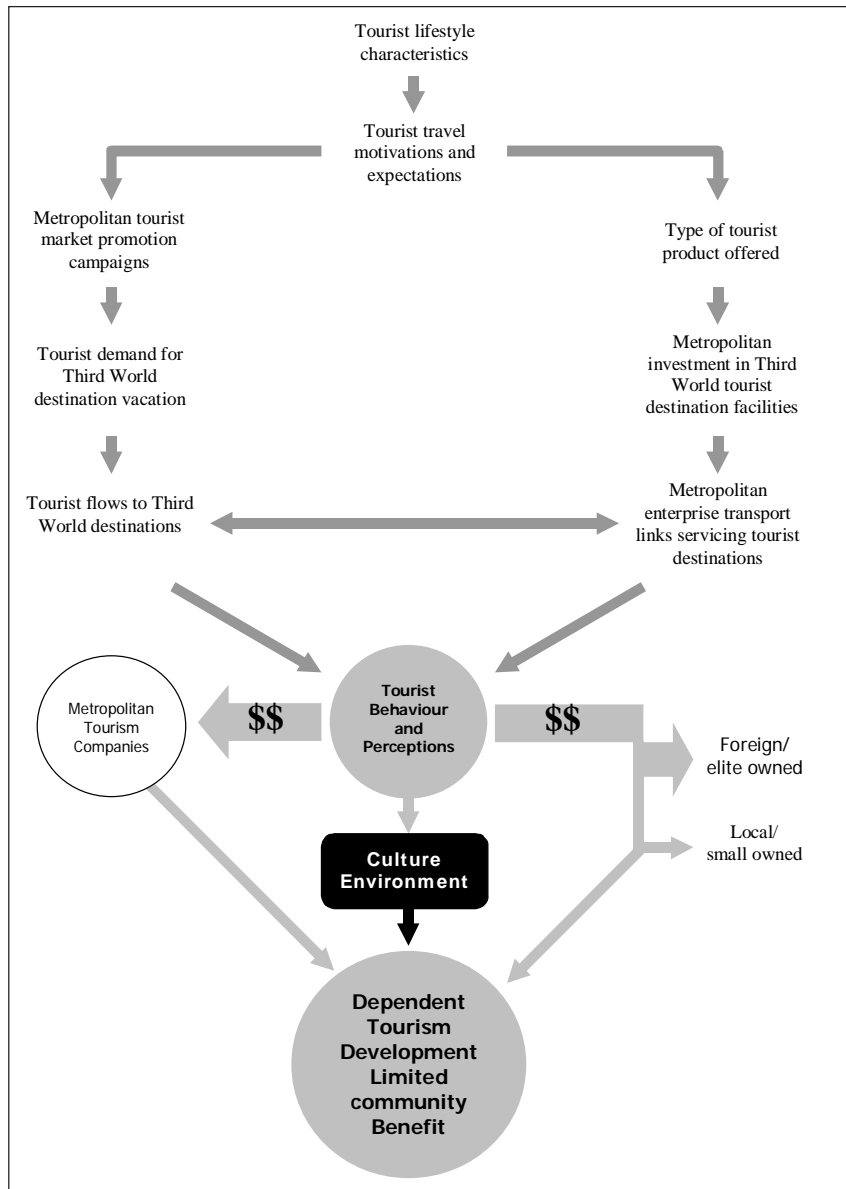
In recent years the Internet has begun to offer small Pacific Island states, and the businesses within them, the potential to disseminate tourism information cheaply, accurately and quickly without incurring the high costs and access problems associated with CRS (Milne & Nowosielski 1997). Operators can also bypass the traditional tourist distribution network and access customers directly (Buhalis 1999, 2000, 2001). The initial cost is in web site design, which requires technical expertise often unavailable in some peripheral developing nations (UNDP 2001). However, with increased educational opportunities and improved ICT infrastructure, such skills are likely to become more prevalent in the developing world and rural settings (see Gurstein 2000; Hull & Milne 2001; Mason & Milne 2002 ).

Web sites can provide detailed information, photographs, connections to complementary services, and links to those who run the business. With direct e-mail links to the site, consumers can contact business owners to obtain more information or make reservations. Compared to the price of a regular international voice phone call, this direct and inexpensive contact is one of the greatest advantages the Internet offers small tourism entities (Hull & Milne 2001). The question remains, however, as to whether this potential can be tapped in developing nations that have traditionally been relatively excluded from ICT infrastructure (UNDP 2001) and travel distribution channels (Milne & Nowosielski 1997).

#### *The development dimension*

In his early work in Fiji, Britton (1981) argued that the marketing and overall distribution structure of tourism works against local involvement in the ownership of the tourism industry (figure 1). Metropolitan corporations control the chain of events that influence the development outcomes of

**Figure 1** Marketing impacts on tourism economic development



Source Britton 19981 and Milne 1999: 287.

tourism. Corporate advertising strategies play an important role in shaping tourist expectations, leading visitors to demand tourist products that are often the preserve of large, overseas-owned operations. As a result, foreign concerns and local elites receive the bulk of visitor revenue flows, while small-scale operators are relegated to the backwaters of the industry. A lack of local ownership and control may, in turn, alienate local people, increase inequalities and reinforce pre-existing colonial economic structures and dependency (Hall 1996). Furthermore, the large scale of the industry may be less appropriate to the fragile nature of island environments.

The impacts of marketing campaigns and the structure of the global tourism distribution system also shape visitor perceptions of the local people and their surrounding environment (Dann 1996; Harrison 1998, 2001). Images of sinuous dusky maidens in grass skirts and lithe young men performing traditional dances conjure up the mysterious allure of the Pacific. Visitor attitudes and behaviour are thus developed and shaped before they set foot on the exotic soil, and in ways that go beyond the simple expenditure of money (Britton 1981; Sissons 1999).

While Britton's model has been criticised for being overly deterministic and 'top down' (Milne 1997; Hall 1998), much of what it describes is still undoubtedly relevant to the Pacific. However, the changing structure of the tourism marketing and distribution system is difficult to incorporate into that model. Rapidly developing information and communication technologies, especially the Internet, represent the potential to overcome some of the inflexibility and dependency inherent in the traditional system, providing direct access to the consumer and a greater ability for business operators and destination residents to shape their own marketing images (Sheldon 1997; Buhalis 2001).

The structure, performance and development outcomes of the tourism industry are influenced in several ways by the adoption and development of Internet technologies (see Smith & Jenner 1998; Buhalis & Schertler 1999: v):

- *Knowledge management.* In addition to reducing communication and transaction costs the Internet is also changing the shape and nature of traditional global distribution and destination marketing systems in the tourism industry (Morrell 1998; French 1998).

- *Changing consumer behaviour.* While it is difficult to quantify the ability of the Internet to influence consumer perceptions and decision-making processes, it is clear that it is already highly influential in moulding visitor behaviour (Beirne & Curry 1999).
- *New product development.* The Internet offers the industry improved possibilities for price differentiation and also enables greater networking between disparate elements of the industry. Quite simply, it has the potential to enable the tourism industry to provide a more flexible array of product choices. Indeed, some argue that the actual process of developing a web site may itself be an effective way to foster cooperation and networking between different players (Mason & Milne 2002).
- *The empowerment of small and medium enterprises through IT.* There is an expanding body of work dealing with the potential for e-commerce to 'level the playing field' for smaller businesses that have difficulty accessing traditional tourist distribution channels (Buhalis 1999; Milne & Mason 2001). In simple terms, the Internet can decentralise and democratise access to the customer (see Frew 2000).
- *Disintermediation.* There is a growing interest in what impact the Internet has on components of the tourism industry that have previously acted as intermediaries between the industry and the consumer (Reinders & Baker 1998; Wardell 1998). Some commentators go so far as to predict the demise of the travel agent unless skills are upgraded effectively (McNeill 1997; Lewis, Semeijin & Talalayevsky 1998; Atkinson 2001). Such processes will inevitably lead to cost savings in distribution, service, marketing and promotion.

Unfortunately, while there is plenty of 'hype' about what ICT can do for various elements of the tourism industry and its associated development outcomes, comprehensive accounts and reasoned analyses of the key issues associated with the adoption of technology are rare (Sheldon 1997). Some argue that localised firms and communities may use the Internet to disseminate information via global networks and to form localised alliances more effectively (see Gurstein 2000; Rheingold 2000; Milne & Mason 2001). Other commentators argue that the technologies heralded as providing the basis for a resurgence of small firms and peripheral regions may, instead,



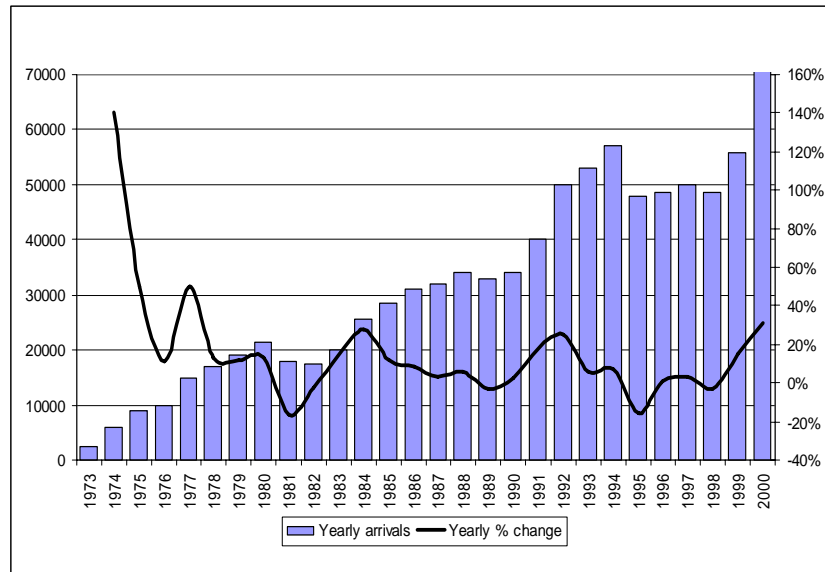
simply reinforce existing power structures and inequalities, and lead to social discord, individual isolation and limited economic benefit (see Haywood 1998; Castells 2000).

### **Cook Islands tourism**

The Cook Islands have experienced a tremendous growth in visitor arrivals over the past 25 years (see figure 2). The early development of tourism stemmed from the opening of the new jet airport in Rarotonga in 1974, followed by the opening of the country's first international class hotel, the Rarotongan Hotel, in 1976 (Tuara 1990; ESCAP 1996). For much of the 1990s, tourism arrivals hovered in the 40–55,000 range. However, as indicated in figure 2, in 2000 there was a considerable growth in visitor numbers (to 72,994)—a 31% increase over 1999, partly prompted by the coup attempt in Fiji in May 2000 that led many visitors to look elsewhere for their island vacation. Tourism is a vital component of the Cook Islands' economy, contributing about 37 per cent of national GDP, and in the early 1990s, the industry and related activities accounted for about 1,600 full-time workers, out of a work force of about 6,600 (ADB 1995; Fagence 1999; Cook Islands Research Group 2000).

The composition of tourist arrivals has changed over the years. Initially, visitors from New Zealand made up the largest group: in 1983, they accounted for 45 per cent of the visitor arrivals, while Europe, the United States and Australia each made up 9–11 per cent of the market (Buck & Hall 1996). In 1998, though, (Continental) Europeans accounted for 40 per cent of the market, followed by New Zealanders at 29 per cent, Americans at 11 per cent and Australians at 8 per cent (figure 2).

Most tourists to the Cook Islands arrive by plane. As the nation is unable to afford to operate its own international airline, it must rely on others to bring people to the destination (Britton & Kissling 1984). Air New Zealand has always been the primary carrier and currently operates six direct flights weekly to the Cook Islands from Auckland, one flight via Nadi, and three flights a week to the Cook Islands from Los Angeles via Honolulu or Papeete. Air Rarotonga is the only domestic carrier operating within the country, and serves eight of the 15 Islands: Rarotonga, Aitutaki, Mauke, Atiu, Mitiaro, Mangaia (all in the Southern group) and Manahiki and Penrhyn (in the Northern group) (see [www.cook-islands.com](http://www.cook-islands.com)).

**Figure 2** Visitor arrivals to the Cook Islands, 1973–2000

Source Cook Islands Stats Bulletin, Quarterly, various

At the time of the research, there were 43 hotels, motels, self-catering facilities and other low-priced accommodation units available on Rarotonga, 13 on Aitutaki and a few scattered through the outlying islands (table 1). The total number of rooms available in the Cook Islands was 929, of which 53 per cent were in hotels and resorts. Over 85 per cent were on Rarotonga, with a further 11 per cent on Aitutaki. From 1994 to 1997, annual occupancy rates on Rarotonga ranged from 57 per cent to 68 per cent (Cook Islands Statistics Office 1998a, c), but rates were much higher in some of the 'high-end' properties (Buck & Hall 1996). In August 1998 there were an estimated 300 full-time and 130 part-time employees in the accommodation sector (Cook Islands Statistics Office 1998b).

The Cook Islands' economy closely resembles the classic Pacific MIRAB structure (Bertram & Watters 1985). The country relies heavily on migration-related remittances, international aid and public sector employment. While migration to other countries may lead to remittance flows (Loomis 1990: 62), the ones who leave are often the 'young, bright and best', whose

**Table 1** Cook Islands tourist accommodation, 2000

<b>Island</b>	<b>Number of Rooms</b>	<b>Price Range (\$NZ)</b>
<b>Rarotonga</b>		
Hotels and Resorts	474	80–608/room
Motels/Self-catering	214	54–370/room
Backpackers	103	15–60/room
<b>Aitutaki</b>		
Hotels and Resorts	31	145–215/room
Motels/Self-catering	18	50–110/room
Backpackers	51	20–32/room
<b>Outer Islands</b>		
Atiu	5	56/room
Mangaia	15	14–45/room
Manihiki	2	31–52/room
Mauke	8	20–31/room
Mitiaro	5	31/room
Penrhyn	3	38–77/room

*Source* Research findings

departure deprives the country of skilled citizens vital to the development of the islands. Aid remains a major contributor to the Cook Islands economy but New Zealand, the major donor nation, has expressed a desire to end assistance to the Cook Islands by the year 2005–06. While the bloated bureaucracy does provide jobs for many islanders, it does so at the cost of inefficiency and the use of limited government funds (ADB 1995; Cook Islands Research Group 2000).

It is clear that the pillars of the MIRAB economy are less stable than once thought, and tourism has a vital role to play in the future development of the Cook Islands' economy and throughout the Pacific region (Guthunz & Krosigk 1996; Bertram 1999). Nevertheless, tourism does not provide all the answers and can generate problems of its own. While the industry plays an important role in providing jobs that will keep younger people in the country, it is also partly responsible for internal migration from the outer islands to Rarotonga.

Tourism brings much needed income and employment, but many of the goods needed to cater to tourists' needs are imported (Bertram 1999). Such

leakages erode the potential benefits that Cook Islanders gain from visitors. For example, in the mid-1980s Milne (1987) found that for each dollar spent by the average tourist, 43 cents remained in the local economy from wages, profits and rent payments. By 1990 Burns & Cleverdon (1995: 220) indicated that the retention rate had improved to between 46 and 54 cents per dollar of spend, owing largely to the growth of small-scale entrepreneurs. Of the NZ\$72.3 million worth of goods and services imported into the Cook Islands in 1997, 75 per cent came from New Zealand (Cook Islands Statistics Office, November 1998).

### **Marketing Cook Islands tourism**

Air New Zealand is one of the most powerful marketers of Cook Islands' tourism (Burns & Cleverdon 1995; Buck & Hall 1996). With its virtual monopoly over air travel to the nation, the airline is in a prime position to shape travel demand. The other major marketing effort comes from the Cook Islands Tourist Authority (CITA). In the fiscal year 1996–97, CITA had a budget of NZ\$2.34 m, of which 74 per cent was spent on marketing the Cook Islands (Cook Islands Government Report n.d.). Other, less significant, contributions to marketing are also made by package tour companies and individual enterprises.

#### *Brochures*

Brochures can be an important way of conveying images to potential customers. Dann (1996), for example, argues that images in advertising play a vital role in defining what should be experienced and with whom. Morgan and Pritchard add that a tourism image 'reveals as much about the power relationship underpinning its construction, as it does about the specific tourism product or country that promotes it' (1998: 6). That said, in analysing brochures it is essential to remember that meaning communicated by an image can be multi-layered, and systematic 'unpacking' is needed to reveal and interpret inner meanings (Ateljevic & Doorne 2002).

Brochures have been a mainstay of marketing and image-creation for the Cook Islands for many decades now. Owing to the limited marketing budget available, television coverage of the destination, except for the occasional travel show, is virtually non-existent in New Zealand. Coverage on billboards and in newspapers is also (at best) spasmodic. From November 1999 until

January 2000, we collected 26 different brochures on the Cook Islands, from a random selection of 7 leisure-oriented travel agents in Wellington and from the Cook Islands High Commission in the same city. While travel agents generally stocked brochures produced by wholesalers to market their products, the High Commission tended to include more information for FIT (free and independent travellers) and package visitors wanting more comprehensive information on accommodation, activities and culture.

In analysing the brochures, we focused on discrete quantifiable units, and included words, themes, images and topics. We adopted an 'objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of the communication' (Malhotra et al. 1996: 176), based on models used elsewhere in the services marketing arena (Cutler & Javalgi 1993; Turley & Kelley 1997). Using the same template independently of each other, we both evaluated images and text. We then compared, contrasted and discussed our interpretations of key themes and issues. Finally, the findings were recorded on a spreadsheet, allowing the research team to quantify results and also to 'eyeball' the collective range of findings and explore general themes and issues.

Most (24) of the brochures collected were in full colour, mixing photographs of the islands and accommodation with practical information and details of packages offered. The more comprehensive contained basic information that a tourist might need to know to plan a trip—from the visa requirements to flights, accommodation, restaurants and activities. These brochures tended to list the larger hotels and resorts, giving less coverage to budget accommodation. By contrast, brochures collected from the High Commission often represented single companies, such as a small hotel or tour operator. The listing for businesses in these brochures usually included addresses, and telephone and fax numbers, but rarely featured URL or references to e-mail.

Colour photographs of the islands were published in most (22) of the brochures, and focused especially on beach scenes, water activities and aerial photos of the small islands and lagoons. In addition, popular slogans used to market the nation, including— '*An Unforgettable South Pacific Experience!*' and '*A Special Place. A Special People. A Special Magic*'— were often displayed. A word analysis revealed considerable commonality

in the language used to describe the islands and vacation products, the most commonly used descriptors being 'special', 'magical', 'paradise', 'relaxing', 'unique', 'romantic' and 'friendly'.

A content analysis of the photographs revealed a dominant theme of water (23 brochures), with either lagoons or the ocean being featured. Some images also included water-based activities such as snorkelling, sailing or fishing. Other photographs emphasised the relaxing and idyllic nature of the Cook Islands, showing people lounging on the beach, sunbathing, or sipping drinks by the pool.

All but six of the brochures that we examined included people in the photographs. Eleven brochures contained photographs of couples visiting the islands, but only four contained pictures of children. Women tourists appeared on their own in six brochures, while men were shown alone in only two. In general, the analysed brochures focused less on the family vacation than on couples or groups of individuals travelling to escape stress, relax and enjoy the weather and holiday activities.

The last major category of photographic depiction is of Cook Islanders in native dress. These images appeared in almost as many brochures (18) as those of beaches, lagoons and the ocean did. While the average visitor is quite likely to encounter a Cook Islander in traditional dress when visiting a hotel or restaurant, such 'authenticity' is extremely unlikely to be experienced elsewhere during their stay. Instead, visitors may be surprised that the dominant mode of dress is not far removed from that of their home country and, if anything, is far more conservative for beachwear.

It is also important to note that images of Cook Islanders in the brochures we analysed appeared to vary according to the tourist market. Research by Schellhorn (1998) on the content of European tourism brochures for the South Pacific (including the Cook Islands) indicates that many European brochures differ markedly from those for the New Zealand market. In particular, brochures advertising the Cook Islands in Europe were found to include photographs of semi-nude Polynesian women. Such images were not found in the New Zealand brochures that we examined.

The representation of local people in brochures raises important issues of identity and control. Discussing the commodification of communities and indigenous culture, Lanfant notes ironically the existence of:

... a paradox! At the very moment that tourism makes communities emerge from their isolation and set out on the road to modernity, they have to reinvent their past and keep alive their traditions in order to maintain the image that tourists have of them. (1995: 10)

Other questions that arise include those of *whose* past or culture is being represented in the advertising campaigns or brochures, and *who* actually decides what is presented and how it will be presented (Hall 1998).

#### *The Internet and the World Wide Web*

During the course of this research, we accessed and examined twenty-three web sites related to the Cook Islands' tourism industry, which were found through the search engines of Altavista, Yahoo, Google and Xtra New Zealand. In addition, some individual sites were accessed through regional portals such as Jasons and the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO). These ranged from being specific sites for hotels and businesses to more comprehensive sites (or portals) that covered all aspects of a trip to the Cook Islands, from airlines to accommodation to practical and cultural information.

The first comprehensive site analysed was that of the SPTO ([www.tcsp.com](http://www.tcsp.com)). This official site is owned and operated by Jason Publishing, of New Zealand ([www.tcsp.com/about\\_us](http://www.tcsp.com/about_us)). It provides information across a range of categories including practical travel details, accommodation, travel services, diving and fishing, scenic attractions, shopping and dining, maps, and relatively comprehensive information on climate, business opening hours and internal travel. Most of the accommodation listed is on Rarotonga and Aitutaki, with the more expensive resorts highlighted, and there are also links to such tourism-related sites as diving companies and black pearl sellers.

Another key portal is the official site of the Cook Islands Tourism Association ([www.cook-islands.com](http://www.cook-islands.com)). The slogan '*Special Place, Special People, Special Magic*' appears on the opening page, alongside a photograph of Cook Islanders in native dress. The site offers several categories, including accommodation, calendar of events, dining out, diving and snorkelling, history and culture, honeymoons and weddings, shopping, sightseeing and trekking. A total of thirty-four accommodation providers, mostly on Rarotonga, is listed on this site, and the array of small and medium operations, while by no means comprehensive, is somewhat greater than

that found in wholesaler brochures. This site, too, was set up outside the Cook Islands by an external web developer.

A further portal to the Cook Islands, developed by Jarvy Web Enterprises, can be found at [www.ck](http://www.ck). This site contains detail on history, art and culture, religion and the people, in addition to fairly comprehensive tourism information (accommodation, events, diving and fishing, black pearls). Details are also provided on investing in the Cook Islands, houses for sale and recent news stories, and there is a bulletin board of messages and death notices. Much of this information is geared towards helping expatriate Cook Islanders stay in touch with events at home. The list of accommodation providers numbers fifty-six establishments, although the focus remains on Rarotonga and Aitutaki. The site also provides details of flight schedules to the outer islands and a link to Air New Zealand's web site. In early 2000, the site was receiving about 3,800 user sessions per week, with about 66 per cent from the United States, 9 per cent from Australia, 8 per cent from New Zealand and the remainder mostly from Europe ([www.ck](http://www.ck) – webmaster, personal correspondence, February 2000).

[Mauke.co.ck](http://Mauke.co.ck), which is maintained by the local Internet service provider (Oyster.net.ck), is one of the few sites not centred on Rarotonga or Aitutaki. This site has many links to the outer islands, including accommodation, local businesses, black pearl producers, and sporting events. In effect the site helps to promote some of the lesser-known and least-publicised destinations within the Cooks group.

We also reviewed individual business sites for accommodation around the islands. Virtually all were relatively up-market hotels and resorts, and only one advertised itself as a 'hostel . . . catering for budget travellers' ([www.varas.co.ck](http://www.varas.co.ck)). All of these sites contained photographs of the particular establishment, along with images of such nearby attractions as the beach or lagoon, and 80 per cent provided some supplementary information, including details of the Cook Islands and what one might expect from a vacation in them. Most listed their rates and provided a link to their reservation services by mail, phone or fax, and one site, capitalising on the trend to e-commerce, even offered 'special web rates' for their hotel ([www.edgewater.co.ck](http://www.edgewater.co.ck)). Almost half of them listed wedding packages. Two of the largest hotels offered the option of viewing information in other languages, specifically German, Italian and French ([www.edgewater.co.ck](http://www.edgewater.co.ck) and [www.rarotongan.co.ck](http://www.rarotongan.co.ck)), and these sites also contained pages for guests to



make comments, thus projecting a personal touch, perhaps implying that the management took an interest in guests' personal needs.

Much of the data contained in these sites is found in printed brochures, including photographs and lists of facilities and activities, addresses, telephone numbers and rates. In addition, the language used and the images portrayed are much the same as those in the brochures. Words such as 'paradise', 'special' and 'magic' are prevalent, as also are 'unspoiled' and 'relaxed', and there are also marked similarities in the photographs, showing the islands from the air, the scenery, beaches and islanders in native dress.

To test the efficiency with which e-mail was being used, we contacted thirty Cook Islands accommodation establishments with e-mail addresses. In a simple 'shadow shopping' exercise we expressed an interest in a trip to the Cook Islands in February 2000 and asked for rates and availability. One e-mail proved not deliverable, but the majority of the others produced quick responses, with twenty-one replying within one day and two within two days. The remainder responded more slowly—one within four days, and one in eighteen days.

**Table 2** E-mail responses

Accommodation Type	With e-mail	Without e-mail	Days to respond			Refer to Web	Extra Info
			1	2 +	nil		
Hotels, Resorts	9	0	6	0	3	3	0
Motels, Self-catering	16	10	12	2	2	6	6
Hostels	5	26	3	2	0	3	1

All the larger establishments on the Cook Islands were found to use e-mail, as did more than 60 per cent of the medium sized operations. Only 16 per cent of the smaller operations had direct access to e-mail. While this last figure is far higher than the equivalent representation of such firms on CRS (Milne 1996), it still indicates that, rather than 'levelling the playing field', the new technology may, in some ways, be enhancing the competitive edge of larger operations vis-à-vis their smaller counterparts. Several factors add to this potentially widening 'digital divide'. Larger companies are more likely to have access to staff with ICT acumen or external expertise, and the cost of phone line access and relevant hardware may also deter smaller operators.

In addition, businesses situated on the outer islands suffer from the fact that phone lines are limited in number and generator power is often limited as well.

### **Conclusions**

It is not easy for small island nations like the Cook Islands to reach the elusive tourist. Limited marketing budgets, a wide array of competitors and an increasingly experienced and 'picky' consumer make it difficult to create and sustain a profitable industry. Even if the nation is successful in catching the attention of the consumer, the challenge that remains for the provider is that of increasing the economic spend and yield associated with the industry. Tourist behaviour and attitudes are shaped by marketing campaigns, branding and the almost osmotic process of receiving information from the media and broader world around us. Traditionally, visitors have been steered toward operations with large marketing budgets and the ability to link into global package structures. As a consequence, many small, local businesses are excluded from core areas of the tourism industry.

Our comparison between brochure- and Internet-based marketing tools shows that the latter can offer a potential tool for breaking out of the 'vicious cycle' of tourism, marketing and development as outlined in dependency-based perspectives on tourism growth. The web can clearly offer consumers more detail and depth than most simple brochures, and it is infinitely expandable and updatable. Even small, unknown firms can gain an equal footing in marketing their product abroad, provided they have the money to develop their own site or join a portal. The Internet can also provide a useful back-up to existing brochure resources, which frequently feature web site details.

Use of the Internet enables businesses to promote their enterprises and puts consumers in direct contact with those who provide the tourism product, thus facilitating the supply of further information or a direct reservation or purchase. This rapid access to information favours small businesses, which hitherto have had to rely on letters, phone calls and the fax. Buyers of packages put together by Air New Zealand, for example, may stipulate their choice of accommodation to their travel agent after seeing a web page, even though they may not place a direct order with the supplier. Equally, though, if e-mail is available, it must be used effectively; the technology provides a sense of immediate contact, and consumers may quickly become disgruntled if this is not forthcoming (see Milne & Ateljevic, 2001).

There are, of course, broader developmental implications. By enabling clients to circumvent traditional components of travel distribution channels, the Internet cuts costs. Web sites also offer more comprehensive information, through both internal content and external links. The latter can be particularly important in improving the match between tourism and the surrounding economy. For example, a local hotel web site may act as a portal to nearby suppliers and surrounding community interests. A menu can be linked to the local farmers and fishermen that supply food, while local handicraft or community events can also be presented. In the likely event that such individuals and enterprises have no web presence of their own, it is a relatively simple matter to add a basic page to the hotel site. This type of information and depth of knowledge increases the likelihood that visitors are aware of 'spending opportunities' before they arrive in the destination. It also builds goodwill between a core tourism operation and its surrounding community (Mason & Milne 2002).

Our research also highlights some less positive issues. Most of the comprehensive sites featuring the Cook Islands were developed and maintained overseas. Our web-based research and enquiries with web developers in the islands indicated that local web development expertise was very 'thin on the ground' and is non-existent on many of the outer islands. This lack of a local input reinforces dependency on external sources and removes the developer's ability to interact on a face-to-face-basis with the local businesses with whom they are working (Milne & Mason, 2001).

Relatively few sites really make good use of the vast potential of the Internet. Most remain as 'virtual brochures', with limited interactivity and e-commerce and few links to other aspects of the nation and its tourism product. Nevertheless, at the time of writing some larger operators were giving discounts for electronically booked holidays and trying to enhance the role of their sites as portals to the local tourism industry. A few companies were also adding 'real-world' elements to their sites, such as business opportunities, real estate and local news. While these sites are aimed primarily at Cook Islanders living overseas, they also represent a rich resource for those seeking to leave the 'beaten track' in both their search for information and their travels.

To date, the introduction of the Internet seems to have had little effect on the marketing images and texts presented to potential visitors to the Cook Islands. Brochures and the web continue to focus on the core element of the

tourism natural resource base (sea and sand), portraying an idealised and traditional view of Cook Islanders (grass skirts, voluptuous dancing). Clearly, though, the level of content and detail provided on the web surpasses that which is currently available in brochure form.

Perhaps the main conclusion to be drawn from this research is that only so much can be done to minimise the difficulties associated with the small size, isolation and limited budgets characteristic of South Pacific nations. While the Internet can and will enhance the ability of small destinations and operators to catch the attention of the browsing tourist, they still have to rely on a mixed array of marketing tools, both established and new. It is also important to ask how far consumers will embrace the Internet as a travel shopping and information gathering tool and move away entirely from traditional booking systems. It seems likely that they may continue to make the best of both worlds (Frew 2000).

It is not yet apparent whether the Internet will 'level the playing field' and improve the access of peripheral destinations and/or small firms to the potential visitor, or simply enhance the marketing and development divide between large, overseas-owned and small, locally controlled firms. However, the fundamental technological shifts that are occurring in the way information is transferred from business to consumer and between businesses (UNDP 2001) will profoundly influence the perception, consumption and construction of tourism spaces, and their local development outcomes. While the exact impact of these processes on the small island states of the South Pacific is still unclear, tourism researchers and others working in the Pacific ignore them at their peril.

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