

Web talk draws in travellers

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By Owen Hembry

A shift in behaviour among web-surfing tourists is putting more bums on seats, a local bus tour operator says.

Neil Geddes, founder and managing director of Auckland-based Stray, gets up to 90 per cent of his customers from Europe.

Last year, Stray sold more than 14,000 bus passes - a total expected to grow to 25,000 this year and Geddes says a change in how the internet is used during recent months is playing a key role.

"Where before we all only saw our websites as an online brochure, now we see them as something more than that," Geddes says.

Online customer feedback and discussion, censored only for taste, gave the website more credibility as an interactive source of information, he says.

"Even if there's not necessarily a huge shift yet to direct internet bookings, there's certainly a huge shift to internet research," Geddes says.

Taking the "use your customers to sell your business" concept one step further Geddes has even set up a club of so-called Stray Mates - previous customers prepared to answer emailed questions from prospective travellers.

New Zealand couldn't previously compete with destinations such as Australia when it came to marketing but online research was balancing the scales and helping businesses like Stray to differentiate its products, he says.

Geddes has worked in the bus tour sector since 1988 when he founded operator Kiwi Experience, a firm he later sold to Tourism Holdings.

During this time, he has seen a significant shift away from round the world OE tickets to direct flights.

However, this hadn't hampered business as many people flying direct to Australia were, with the help of cheaper transtasman flights, tagging New Zealand onto their holidays.

Despite the growing business, Geddes was concerned to read earlier this year that a price war was on the way.

Some operators had discounted products but such actions were a false economy, he says.

"Our customers have travelled a hell of a long way to come to New Zealand," he said.

"They've spent a lot of money to get here in the first place."



Neil Geddes keeps track of online comments.

Picture / Glenn Jeffrey