

Europe for All – a Stakeholder Conference on Accessible Tourism

Session 2: "Information & Marketing on Accessibility"

My name is Gudrun Stock. I work for unit E-6 "eContent & Safer Internet" of DG Information Society and Media. I am the Project Officer for the OSSATE project which developed the Europe for all-service.

The OSSATE project was selected for funding under the **eContent programme, a multiannual Community programme to stimulate the development and use of European digital content on the global networks and to promote the linguistic diversity in the Information Society**, adopted in the framework of the eEurope action plan 2002 and its update in 2005. Both were designed to accelerate the development of the information society in Europe and aimed, amongst other objectives, at giving everyone the opportunity to participate in the information society, including citizens with special needs.

The eContent programme, which ran from January 2001 to January 2005, was a near-to-market programme. It aimed at funding **projects with a commercially sustainable outcome** and contributed to the achievement of the objectives of the eEurope action plans through three main action lines, one of which was **"improving access to and expanding use of public sector information"**. OSSATE was selected under the subline **"Cross-border information services based on public sector information"**.

The specific objective of projects selected under that subline was to **showcase the potential of public sector information for cross-border information services** by building **partnerships between public sector bodies and private entities** with a particular focus on:

- **cross-border nature of the information service**, meaning that both the information service and the target market needed to be of a cross-border nature
- the **added-value nature of the information service** in relation to the original material, but also in relation to possible similar services already existing in the market;
- **the business case.**

As you saw along the presentations made during this session, OSSATE is responding to all these requirements admirably by offering an as yet unique cross-border information service

- **catering to the needs of Europe's citizens with disabilities and Europe's ageing population** by drawing together information on the accessibility of tourist venues from public sector bodies and combining it with information from private entities
- **offering considerable added value** to tourist organisations and individual providers who are able to input accessibility information on their own venues and to travellers by
- foreseeing procedures for verifying such data against the physical and service provisions at regional and national levels, thus **enhancing the reliability of information** which is so essential for the target users of the system.

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In launching the partnership for growth and jobs as a new start for the Lisbon strategy, the 2005 Spring European Council called knowledge and innovation the engines of sustainable growth and stated that it is essential to build a fully inclusive information society, based on the widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in public services, SMEs and households.

Information and communication technologies are a powerful driver of growth and employment. A quarter of EU GDP growth and 40% of productivity growth are due to ICT. Differences in economic performances between industrialised countries are largely explained by the level of ICT investment, research, and use, and by the competitiveness of information society and media industries.

In that context the Commission launched the i2010 communication, A comprehensive strategy for the information society 2005-2010, which seeks to foster – alongside two other pillars - inclusion, better public services and quality of life through the use of ICT.

In that same context, FP7 will promote research under ICT Challenge 7: Independent Living and Inclusion, under which mainstreaming and radically improving accessibility and usability of new ICT solutions are one objective.

In the light of the foregoing, it is clear that the future development of Europe, our jobs, the social model, the standard of living, depend on all of us being able to use new technologies and work with information in new ways.

There are many "e-s" to consider: e-learning, e-government, e-commerce .

e-Accessibility and inclusion are key issues for this conference today – we must ensure that new technologies do not exclude those citizens who have special needs.

To draw together some of the main messages from the previous presentations in this session, it is apparent that in tourism, the other key issue of this conference, industry has not been slow to embrace new ICT, hence media and e-services.

In fact most of the commercial activity on the Internet today is connected with travel and tourism. People are using on-line bookings more and more so that the way people use the Internet is actually driving a large part of the tourism market.

However, people with disabilities are still not getting the information they need. Information about accessibility is generally lacking in the websites of tourism venues. Also the websites themselves are very unlikely to be accessible, according to the widely accepted WAI (web accessibility initiative) guidelines. So disabled people experience a kind of double discrimination.

The example we have heard about – the 'Europe for all' e-service, aims to improve on-line information for the segment of tourists who especially need accessibility information when they are planning their trips in Europe.

The 'Europe for all' approach is promising because it attempts to use objective descriptions of the facilities and services, and because it allows users to make a personal selection of the information they need. It also aims to establish a critical mass of registered venues, so as to give customers more choice. And their website is WAI-compliant.

As pointed out by Rob Franklin, more and more web users want to use the internet to find holiday destinations that will provide them with a truly unique experience. Sites that can satisfy this demand can be hugely popular, and it is important that tourist enterprises – both public and private – bear this in mind

when designing their e-services. Information highlighting the uniqueness of venues and facilities, including their accessibility, are therefore likely to attract attention and travellers.

So how can the public sector make a difference in this respect?

The tourism sector in the European single market – made up of hundreds of thousands of public and private enterprises – can surely do a lot more to meet the demand from tourists who need accessibility.

The National Tourist Boards and other public sector organisations in tourism can play a key role in promoting accessible tourism, and helping the private sector in various ways, as we have heard from Greet Vandenrijt and Andrew Daines.

It is therefore vital that the public sector invests in comprehensive information services which can make the accessibility of tourist venues in countries, cities and regions more visible in the European and world markets. In that context, improving the physical accessibility of tourist venues is an important first step, but if you do not then promote the improved infrastructure and let people know what you have done, and do so accessibly, travellers will not come!

And how can stakeholders get involved?

This conference has brought together a wide range of stakeholders to discuss issues concerning accessible tourism, who can help to make a difference and help solve problems relating to the reliability of the information provided.

Here the Internet is a very useful tool. Stakeholders should be involved in the development of accessibility information services, and this can be partly achieved by sharing information and collaborating on the Web.

As mentioned in my introduction, and by previous speakers, the Commission has a number of ongoing activities where the tourism sector and its stakeholders can be involved in new actions for the spread and improvement of e-accessibility and e-inclusion, and thus also accessible tourism in Europe.

Thank you very much.