



Whitepaper

# Digital Innovation for Tourism Businesses Masterclass

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# Foreword

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Carolyn Boyd, Industry Development Manager at Tourism Northern Ireland (TNI), kicked off the day by highlighting some of the trends that are currently defining experiences in the post-pandemic context, including **increased value for money**, the relevance of the **social and economic aspects of sustainable travel** and the **ease of travel expected by visitors**.

She also explained the importance of adapting to the changing landscape and how this is key in order to become more competitive and establish Northern Ireland as a leading destination. Carolyn provided some statistics: TNI is observing a **53% Return on Investment** and has found that **46% of Northern Ireland tourists will still travel despite rising costs**.

The event was part of Tourism Northern Ireland's Tourism Enterprise

Development (TED) Programme, which aims to support tourism and hospitality businesses and grow revenues in the short and medium term. This year's edition, which started in Autumn 2022, focuses on people, sustainability, operations, digital capability, sales and marketing - with this masterclass focusing on digital innovation.

During the opening of the event, she warmly welcomed the line-up of speakers: Nick Hall, Founder & CEO at the Digital Tourism Think Tank; Claire Bacon, Marketing and Communications Manager at Titanic Belfast; Niall Kerr, Head of Heritage and Community Relations at Nerve Centre; Ronan McConnell, Museums Project Officer at Derry City and Strabane District Council; and James Berzins, Managing Director at Tourism Exchange Great Britain.



# Business Horizons 2023

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Nick Hall, Founder & CEO of the Digital Tourism Think Tank, provided an overview of the opportunities existing for businesses to gain competitiveness by staying on top of trends.

So, what are the keys to achieving this?

First, there is a need to build a **captive audience** that will allow businesses to thrive in a **first-party data** world where we'll no longer be able to rely on cookies. Nick also took us through the importance of **linking and optimising the full digital journey of visitors** to stay top of mind and increase business performance.

Over the last couple of years, we have also observed the increasing power of **ambient revenue** and how it can allow

businesses to convert customers through their different communication channels. This can help organisations to tap into consumer needs and allow them to book services or experiences easily. With all of this in mind, it's important to be aware that businesses can't always do everything on their own, making **partnerships** a key element for success.

Nick also emphasised that using TikTok and targeting Generation Z through this channel is key to achieving competitiveness. Although it is still somewhat undetermined, using this platform to attract younger consumers is imperative as they become the next generation of travellers and their disposable income increases.

**“Online marketplaces will account for 45% to 50% of online spend by 2025.”**

*Think with Google, March 2023*



# #1 Sustainability as Standard

We're seeing the importance of new business models, such as circular ones, but also how the priorities of travellers are shifting towards creating value for communities and the environment and providing more meaningful travel experiences.

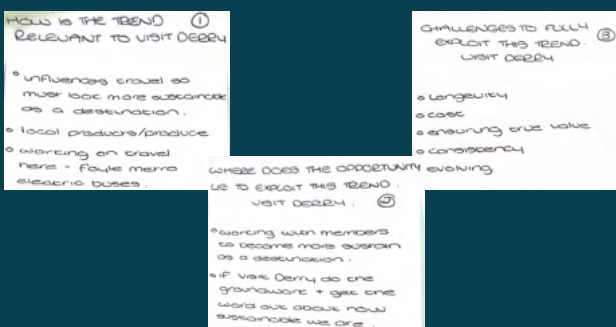
Nick highlighted that travellers want to make sustainable choices despite not being willing to pay higher prices for this. As businesses, this trend calls for embedding sustainability into everything we do, produce and propose to customers, increasing the perceived value for them.

The importance of relying on verified certification schemes and reducing the complexity of implementing sustainability to make it accessible to all - through apps, websites or campaigns, for example - were some of the takeaways provided by Nick. He

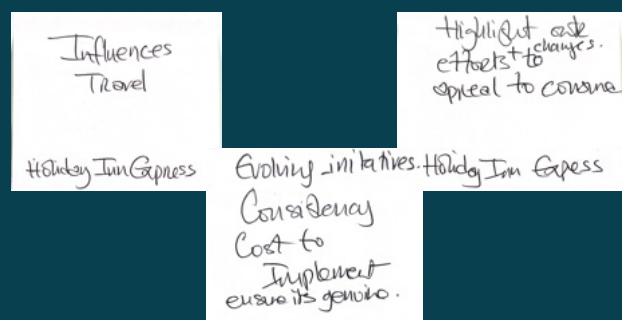
also dived into key concepts such as regenerative travel and asked attendees:

**“Are we able to work together as an industry to ensure tourism generates additional positive impacts?”**

As businesses, we need to ensure that we collaborate with the communities around us to ensure that we can create value and meaningful experiences for visitors, whilst empowering those around us and protecting the natural environment. Being an impact-driven business is becoming a powerful business model.



Visit Derry's opinion on how sustainability is relevant to them and the opportunities & challenges it presents for them.



Holiday Inn Express' on how sustainability is relevant to them and the opportunities & challenges it presents for them.

## #2 The Financial Squeeze is Shifting Priorities

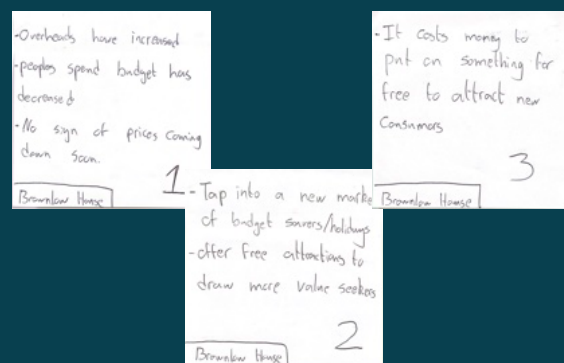
**“36% of travellers are choosing destinations where their money will go further.”**

Skyscanner Horizons Report, December 2022

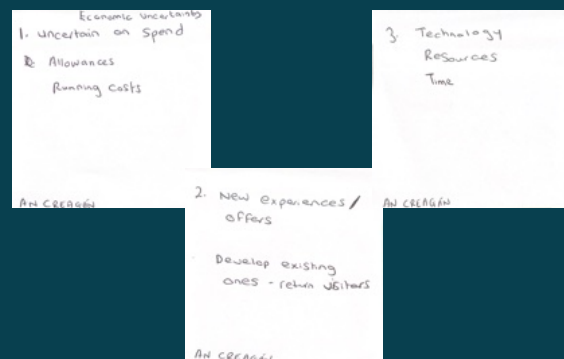
In order to be relevant with the rising cost of living in many countries, ‘freemium’ experiences - a mix between free and premium/upgrade options - are turning out to be unique selling points for attractions and businesses.

Businesses should highlight the free and amazing value that they can provide and how the experiences provided are unique. Helping visitors explore the destination as a local to find hidden gems is also becoming increasingly important for achieving stronger performance.

Additionally, research shows that there’s an increased desire for budgeting tips and tricks as people look to save money. Social media also shows us that this is a form of content that people like - just take a glance at trending videos and you’ll see it for yourself!



Brownlow House's opinion on how the current economic uncertainty is relevant to them and the opportunities & challenges it presents for them.



An Creagán's opinion on how the current economic uncertainty is relevant to them and the opportunities & challenges it presents for them.

# #3 Mobile-First Experiences Take The Lead

Today everyone has a mobile phone, we take them everywhere and we increasingly do more in our day-to-day lives through them.

**“ 50% increase in mobile users of Skyscanner flight searches over 12 months represents a shift to decision and discovery. ”**

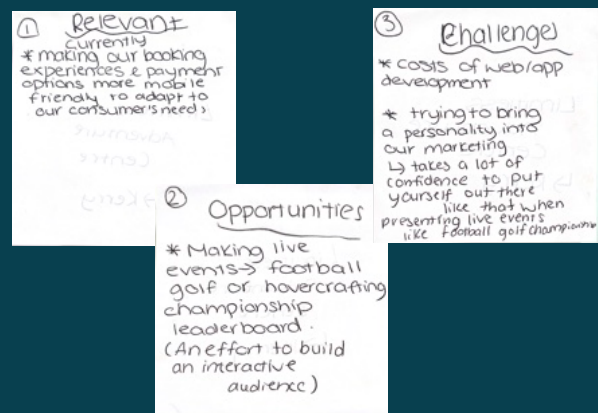
*Skyscanner Horizons Report, December 2022*

So what are ways in which we can leverage this trend and benefit from ambient revenue? Nick took us through a number of examples that demonstrated how different businesses use streaming tools such as Vimeo or social media platforms to make online shopping experiences enjoyable.

A key takeaway is that we don't need to be tech experts to be able to leverage these tools and platforms, which are becoming more user-friendly and require less technical knowledge to be able to maximise their potential.

Simplicity is key when creating mobile-first experiences. When thinking of how to build booking systems or websites, ensuring the integration of different payment methods which reflect this shift from desktop to mobile usage is fundamental. Easing the process by avoiding having to add long card details by using tools such as Apple Pay or Google Pay will increase bookability based on improved user interfaces.

Don't forget about playfulness and gamification by incorporating interactive elements when creating an interface for your business! People increasingly want to have fun when discovering destinations and the businesses in them, whether it is through a website or an app.



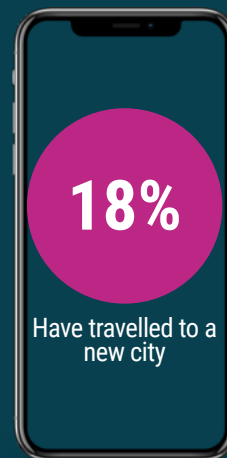
*Limitless Adventure Centre's opinion on how the growth of mobile-first experiences is relevant to them and the opportunities & challenges this presents for them.*

# #4 Social-First Strategies for the TikTok Generation

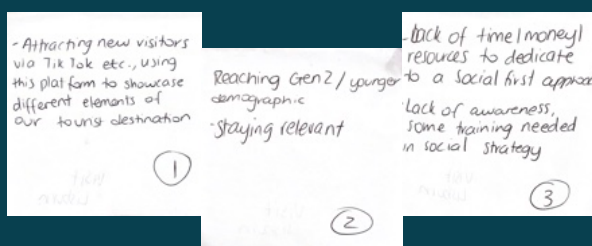
Linking back to the beginning of his presentation, Nick explained the importance of focusing on TikTok as a key growing channel which is defining traveller choices in terms of destinations, attractions, etc.

Creating 'Instagramable' spots in businesses and attractions can help increase the appeal of younger generations to visit, which will in turn spread awareness on social media and help lower marketing costs. Businesses can also partner with influencers - at a local or larger scale - which will help tap into their audiences and achieve a wider reach.

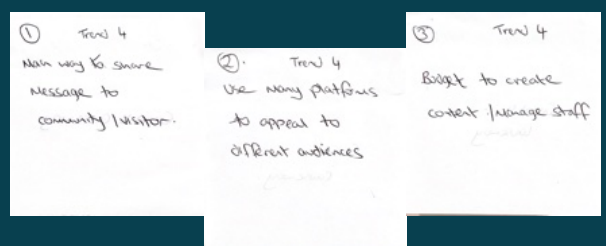
Jumping onto trends, creating memorable jingles and using trending songs, as well as appealing to younger generations through memes are some of the keys that we are seeing to succeed in the social media landscape. Remember Binley Mega Chippy?



\* MGH - TikTok's Undeniable Impact on Travel and Tourism



Visit Lisburn's opinion on how social-first strategies are relevant to them and the opportunities & challenges these present for them.



Giant's Causeway's opinion on how social-first strategies are relevant to them and the opportunities & challenges these present for them.



## #5 Streaming & On-Demand Media as a Social Experience

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People are increasingly driven by the things they watch and the places and locations that appear in movies, TV and on-demand streaming services, an increase that has become more notable after the pandemic.

**“64% say they have been inspired to travel to a destination after seeing it featured on a TV show, news source or movie.”**

*American Express 2023 Global Travel Trends Report*

For tourism businesses, this represents a **key opportunity**, because not only is the way in which we **consume content** changing but so are the **social experiences** we seek as individuals when travelling.

In Northern Ireland, the tourism industry has the opportunity to exploit the success of shows such as Game of Thrones or Derry Girls, for example.



## #6 Generative AI

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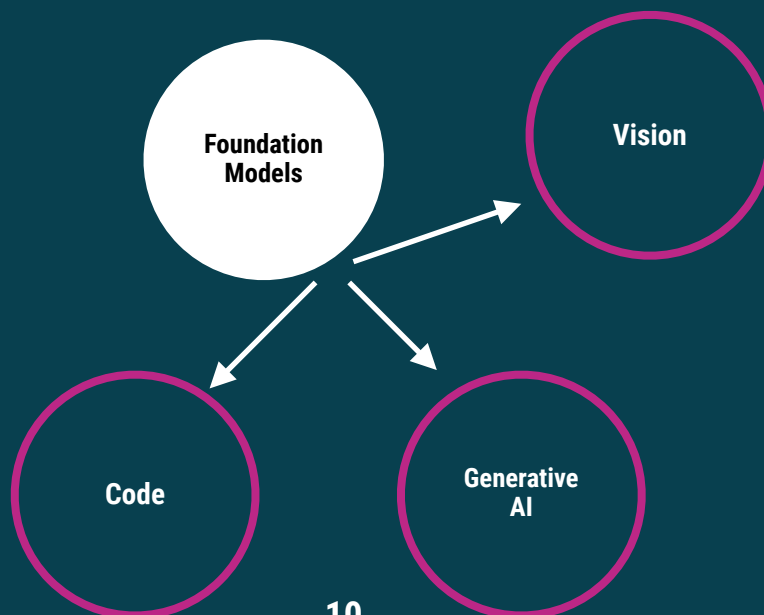
“Generative AI such as ChatGPT has been making waves around the world, but what does it mean for the tourism and hospitality industry?” *PhocusWire April 2023*

Nick wrapped up the keynote by making reference to the different stages of the visitor cycle, which as a result of the different trends explored, is changing and has shrunk from six to two stages: **unawareness** and **experiencing**.

Such a shift requires tourism businesses to understand the trends that are defining the landscape and build on the engagement **when and where it happens**.

To stay on top of things and further competitiveness, there are many tools out there today that can help businesses achieve this. **Generative AI** is the most disruptive development we have seen in recent years.

This technology can help improve productivity by building on Large Language Models, to understand human language and prompts to produce social content, code, images and even ensure accessibility and adaptability.



# **Northern Ireland** **Tourism Business** **Perspectives**

# Titanic Belfast's Digital Journey

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Claire Bacon started her presentation by explaining how the pandemic provided an opportunity for the Titanic Belfast to advance its digital transformation, although they still provide their customers with enough freedom to buy tickets in person.

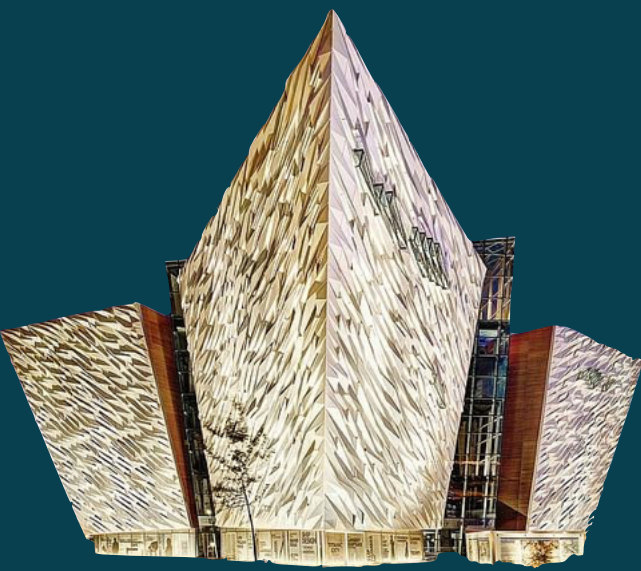
They have strongly focused on reimagining the customer experience and developing multimedia guides that allow visitors to be fully immersed in the experience.

Claire highlighted that improving the overall customer experience at the attraction requires enhancing the technological development of the venue, from the car park to the museum's layout and interpretative elements. Providing a seamless in-destination and in-attraction experience is key for them. This is why they collaborate and establish local partnerships to achieve their objectives whilst ensuring an enhanced experience through digital innovation.

'The Titanic Experience Reimagined' is a 5-year, 4.5 million GBP project that aimed to make the experience in the attraction more innovative whilst providing a WOW factor for both first-time and returning visitors. Titanic Belfast wanted to make the experience less overwhelming, reducing the level of reading by bringing in filmmakers, animators and musical elements to create a more rounded experience.

Claire highlighted that some of the elements they use aren't the most high-end tech or innovative; their aim with the experience is to allow people to connect with the experience and the personal stories that are part of it, hence they decided to implement technology that would support these ambitions.

**“Simplicity goes hand-in-hand with innovation for us.”**



# Nerve Centre: Our Place in Space

Through Niall Kerr's presentation, we understood more about the 'overview effect' - a feeling of awe experienced by astronauts from outer space when seeing Earth - and what they aimed to achieve through their "Our Place in Space" project.

**"We are going to have to start acting as one species with one destiny. We're not going to survive if we don't do that."**

*Frank White*

The project is centred around an epic scale model of the solar system designed by the artist Oliver Jeffers, combining a three-dimensional sculpture trail, interactive AR app and exciting learning and events programme.

They have implemented the project in Cambridge, Liverpool, Belfast, Derry and North Down. Niall explained that the beauty of the project is that it's always been free of charge to ensure everyone can enjoy it and benefit from it - for which partnerships have been key!

The app is still downloadable and one of the advantages of having collaborated with a world-renowned artist is that he is getting recognition for his work whilst users enjoy an educational and immersive experience from any corner of the world.

Having a strong focus on social content and an 'always-on' attitude was key to the success of the project, as well as following trends and doing targeted advertising.

Think outside of the box! Nerve Centre worked together with a local YouTuber and influencer to beat the world record of the most people dressed up as astronauts to raise awareness of the project. Nerve Centre has also developed initiatives in Minecraft to appeal to younger generations and activate their educational purpose.



# Tower Museum: VR Experiences & Digital Engagement

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Ronan McConnell took us through the different digital innovation projects that the Tower Museum has been working on, highlighting their aim to get visitors to visualise historic environments which no longer exist in the city.

They achieve this through immersive experiences which mainly rely on using VR headsets but also incorporate AR elements for social media promotion. They also use a variety of hardware and software to represent themes that cover 19th-century immigration, the first Neolithic settlers and the First World War, for example.

He then gave us an overview of how the Tower Museum has worked with digital innovation through four different projects: 'Afloat and Ashore', 'Beware! Enemy Below!', 'The Island City' and 'The Derry Girls Experience'.

*'Afloat and Ashore'* is an 80-minute free experience that allows visitors to immerse themselves in 1892, when



over 1 million people left Derry Quay. The museum used its archives to recreate that period and bring stories to life through the use of green screens and the digitisation and photogrammetry of collections. *'Beware! Enemy Below!'* followed a similar production but based on WWI.

**“ For many people, this is a hugely emotional experience when they imagine what their ancestors might have experienced when they left these shores. ”**

*'The Derry Girls Experience'* will be opening at the Tower Museum in July. The project has involved working with different partners to recreate the set from the show to bring it to life for fans through AR. The idea is to share the history of Northern Ireland in the 1990s through digital innovation - the technology used enables the set to be brought to life in a small space.



# Tourism Exchange Great Britain

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James Berzins helped us understand more about Tourism Exchange Great Britain (TXGB), its mission and how its partnership with Tourism NI is allowing the region to unlock the full potential of the visitor economy.

TXGB is a digital platform that brings together tourism businesses to drive sales and boost productivity by connecting the market in new ways through digital, data and technology. James explained that this innovative approach led them to work with over 100 destinations and 1,000s of tourism businesses.

James pointed out some of the achievements of TXGB, starting with the ease of boosting trade and reducing costs, allowing businesses to power campaigns that aim to increase bookings and inspire audiences and also providing unique insights to tourism authorities through the data collected by the platform.

Since its launch in 2019, TXGB has been working with tourism businesses,

business systems, booking channels and destinations to respond to what visitors want - bookable products and experiences online. They are able to achieve this by means of providing **simplicity** for businesses, **connectivity** of systems and an **inventory** of booking channels.

In addition to this, TXGB helps to create smarter destinations and has generated millions of pounds of bookings through the platform for the businesses using it.

Key benefits for tourism businesses that join the platform include reaching more customers and increasing direct bookings.

**“Not only is the system user-friendly for the customer but also user-friendly for the owner.”**

*Ryan Donnelly,  
Letteran Lodges*




**TXGB**

## Essential Tips


Nick highlighted the importance of **shifting mindsets and practice, not being afraid to take risks, using AI tools as your ally and creating an always-on calendar** to maximise marketing efforts

### Agile Teams & Transparency

We first looked at  **asana**, a collaborative project tool that is free for up to 15 users. It is very beneficial for small businesses as it allows them to set out clear plans to achieve an agile working dynamic through transparency and a conversational structure within projects and individual tasks. A key takeaway from the session was that it is of the utmost importance to keep communication constant and to create a flatter team structure to respond to the speed of change we are seeing in the current digital landscape.

### Increasing Efficiency & Productivity With AI Tools

We dived into the possibilities for maximising marketing productivity with tools such as **copy.ai**, which allows businesses to leverage AI to write content in minutes - whether it's creating social posts, blog content, compelling e-mails or ads. Companies only need to prompt the tool with what they want to create, the main points to cover and the tone, giving a month's worth of content in just a few minutes!

We then explored use cases for the tools developed by  **OpenAI** - ChatGPT and DALL·E. We explored how a simple prompt, which must be well-stated, can help brainstorm new ideas and test them to decide how to take businesses to the next level. Remember how quickly it created a business idea and a website for it?

All marketing content requires visual images and graphics to accompany social posts and blog content, which can also be produced with AI tools.

To support these actions, we looked at Midjourney, an AI image generator that offers a dream-like arty style to requests. The main thing to note is that it requires using Discord, a chat forum-style app. Different to other tools, Midjourney requires more specific prompts to produce detailed, high-quality results, so keep this in mind!

### Keeping an Eye on Marketing Opportunities

Have you heard about always-on calendars before? These are great resources that enable businesses to reach more customers and improve their positioning. Identify key dates, opportunities and relevant upcoming moments and mark them on the calendar to plan a schedule for creating marketing assets.







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