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Brief: TAKEABREAK
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Breaking in to the travel market

Dissatisfied with the lack of marketing options for their own holiday rental properties, two couples joined forces to develop TakeABreak.com.au that has since become one of the ten most popular travel website in Australia.

LOADED WITH IMAGES on travel destinations, TakeABreak.com.au is one of those websites that makes for a delightful visit!

The website contains details of 11,000 properties grouped under 40 categories (mostly in Australia) including B&Bs, cabins, campervans, motels, inns, houseboats, lighthouses, yachts, chalets, cottages, health retreats, charter boats, backpackers, camp sites, serviced apartments and more.

TakeABreak co-founder and joint CEO, Penny Young, explained the objective has been "to list as many types of accommodation possible and provide the sort of ancillary details tourists need. We don't just list properties under star ratings like some other online accommodation providers; our strength is about the choices of experience we offer."

Visitors can check availability and book their preferred accommodation then consult relevant links: flights, car hire, maps; local weather patterns, currency converters, local attractions and restaurants. Or narrow their search according to such needs as pet friendly, family, seniors and geography.

"It's really just one big data base to facilitate travel itineraries," Young commented. "Which for us is a constant

work in progress; we are continually researching different aspects to add useful information, for example we recently added mapping to the website.

"From the outset the one thing we posted alongside properties was the availability calendar, updated by operators via an online password protected administration system. This is very important. It saves visitors having to phone five or six real estate agents and it's good for [property] operators as there are no wasted phone calls.

"This calendar is the one thing that sets us apart from competitors," Young said. "And we think the way we present the experience is what distinguishes us."

Providing their property meets council regulations and has working smoke detectors, anyone can list on the site for free, simply by following the property listing template. Once text and images are pasted onto the website, TakeABreak staff request hard copy material to verify editorial comment. Operators can opt to pay a flat \$11 fee for each night booked or 10 per cent of the nightly cost, which is more popular with camping sites and budget accommodation providers. ►



Penny Young (centre) and Sofie Field of TakeABreak receiving the NSW Tourism Award from Mike Whitney



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The TakeABreak website itself has attracted some welcome overseas visitors.

International listings have grown organically and now represent a quarter of TakeABreak's listed properties, which has caught Young by surprise because they've "never really pushed this side of the business".

"Several of our local operators had properties in Bali and Fiji they wanted to rent out, so things took off from there. We now have some international affiliate content such as hotel stock which pays us to list on our site."

Launched in 2003 the popularity of the website has grown in leaps and bounds. Last financial year the website generated \$15 million in bookings, with statistics indicating TakeABreak has secured a healthy 1.7 per cent share of the Australian online holiday accommodation market which comprises 300,000 rental properties.

Much of the drive stems from the costly but effective website optimisation and marketing campaigns: Google ("for greatest exposure"), MSN and Yahoo ("for better conversions"). "Website promotion amounts to tens of thousands of dollars monthly and comprises a hefty 80 per cent of business costs," Young revealed. "But it is a necessary expense."

Forming the backbone of the business are two couples: Penny and her husband Paul, her sister Michelle and husband Craig Davis, who pooled their respective skills in small business marketing, IT, law and physics early in 2003 to develop TakeABreak.

"Actually we told Michelle – the lawyer-come-web developer – she had to have the web up and running by September! That she did. The website was fully developed in-house using proprietary technology, however we used a variety of systems Michelle had developed in previous projects to get off to a flying start."

"Choosing the most popular holiday locations to start with including NSW Central Coast, the Gold Coast and Great Ocean Road, we free-listed 300 properties on the site to get it up and going. As it costs

nothing to list there were very few properties not willing to participate.

"Growth since then has been organic at the rate of about 200 properties monthly...

even though we are doing nothing to boost that by way of direct advertising for rental properties.

"We agreed we wanted our business to breakeven in two years and we managed to do so in the first 12 months." Today the business is run by a staff of 10 in Canberra and three in Sydney.

Business services

"My background in small business marketing has enabled me to put a stamp on TakeABreak and our all-round business development support for property managers via our website is also a large factor in our success," Young commented.

Assuming the role of mentor, TakeABreak staff circulates a monthly newsletter *Business Breaks* which contains ideas for boosting bookings; provides statistics for performance comparisons; facilitates participation in media promotional opportunities, and encourages operators to submit articles for *Holiday Inspirations*, covering Delightful Destinations, Hot Deals, Hot Properties and Property Reviews, and circulated to 135,000 subscribers on a monthly basis.

Supplementing these are updates on the tourism industry and business support, provided via the phone hotline and emails

"We try and make things simple but work well for operators, who are mostly all small businesses. They like the work we do with and for them," Young commented.

The industrious TakeABreak team also "gives the site a major refresher" every few months to keep the branding alive, adding more photos, details on sleeping configurations and AAA ratings. "We are always evolving," Young said. "Our travel writers are filling the gaps on more destinations and a wheelchair bound writer with MS is compiling articles on accessibility which is a priority for ageing visitors. We're also working in more with Tourism Australia as events listings are a big tourism driver,



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and we're looking toward more mobile [phone] content."

Monitoring visitors' movements online, TakeABreak notes the rising popularity of the pet-friendly category. "This trend which is currently at 35 per cent is the one that is definitely increasing," Young said. "More baby boomers in particular want to take their pets on holidays with them. The use of the experience drop-down tool throws up other indicators which are useful information for us and operators and makes us review our services."

Current travel hotspots are in the Mornington Peninsula, with booking enquiries for Rosebud and Rye up 635 per cent and 158 per cent respectively. Marion Bay in SA is up 66 per cent and Kiama, south of Wollongong, up 47 per cent are two other big winners.

Award

We don't just list properties under star ratings like some other online accommodation providers; our strength is about the choices of experience we offer.

Last year TakeABreak introduced an in-house Best Places to Stay Award, with guests being the ultimate judges for the 16 category winners, which 'consistently do an outstanding job in meeting and exceeding their guest expectations'.

"We felt there was a huge gap in the market for recognition in these specialist categories of accommodation by the travelling public," Young explained. "Our TakeABreak Awards has really received fantastic feedback from operators and because it's based primarily on guest comments the operators see this as a 'real reward'. Our aim is to encourage continued and improved professionalism with regard to guest/customer service."

TakeABreak was awarded the 2007 NSW Tourism Award for Tourism Marketing, and has picked up numerous other travel and business awards. ●