

“The bach, the beach, the billions”

Robyn Kamira – 17 December 2007

Our best thought-leaders say that Maori, and New Zealand, are falling even further behind the new global weightless economy.

That is, we are not doing enough business online and we fail to understand the potential, dynamics and expectations of online customers.

[Long tail](#) economics shows us that there is a massive global customer base that will gladly pay for authentic experiences and products. Just like those that Maori can provide.

Recent reports confirm that Maori are amongst the top entrepreneurs in the world. We are risk-takers. So why are we slow to start and run successful online businesses?

Why would we not only feed the whanau, but have a positive and measurable impact on the economies of our communities and country?

The wero has been delivered. Shift the mindset, start online businesses, and be single-minded about making your mark on the economy.

Last month, the government's [Digital Strategy Summit](#) in Auckland was a chance to hear it from people who have succeeded – and succeeded extraordinarily.

The Summit saw a 500 strong audience of mostly business and government people arrive to hear the grand plan for our “Digital Futures”.

Noting early, that the speakers were mainly middle-aged Pakeha men, I was not surprised that Maori attendance was minimal.

If not for Te Puni Kokiri's generosity at the last minute we may only have had one or two Maori there instead of ten.

However, the organisers put its hard cash where its digital mouth was and used the latest technology platforms to reach beyond the Summit's audience.

The Summit was, and still is, accompanied by numerous blogs, forums and workshops with people who love to talk about technology.

To the annoyance of some around my table, the Summit was dominated by arguments about our floundering broadband. “Enough already! We have a slack broadband service, we like to blame Telecom, and it's not going to get better for few years yet.” There, it's out of the way now so let's move on.

It's difficult to describe the inspiration you get from an event to those who weren't there. So, I've gathered a few highlights from some of the Maori attendees that perhaps have a little something for everyone.

Master of ceremonies and technologically-challenged Rod Oram was more than entertaining and left me suspecting that he has whakapapa links to John Cleese of Fawlty Towers.

He could not shut himself up at times (said with kindness of course) and had the audience in fits of laughter while organisers frantically paced the floors gesturing to him to watch his time.

The presentation early in the Summit of [Tuhoe.com](#) by Riaka Hiakita and 20/20 Communications Trust's Laurence Zwimpfer no doubt broke down a few negative misconceptions about Tuhoe that had been fervently pursued by police and media in recent weeks.

But the power of that presentation was the community's integrity and determination. Despite economics, isolation and a very mountainous terrain, they connected their community by WiFi to the Tuhoe network.

They had been delivering broadband to the people for a couple of years and some had already completed their university degrees online.

Local boy Sam Morgan of Trade Me had, by fluke or design, impressed everyone last year by selling his auction website to Fairfax for 700 million smackers.

Trade Me has become the base for a number of other multi-million dollar companies and has a clear, positive economic impact in this country.

It wasn't all fluke because Sam had a single-minded attitude that he never strayed from. "Know and look after your customers' needs in every possible way." He repeated it, he meant it and he wasn't the only one to say it.

Rod Drury (CEO of Xero), Tom Chignall (Vodafone) and Dr Alan Freeth (TelstraClear) carried a similar message.

So after the fourth time I thought I should write that into my little notebook. Note to self – "look after your customers, know what they want, deliver it – oh and earn their trust or they'll badmouth you to a zillion Internet users".

Rod Drury's phrase rounded that session off unapologetically. He said, success was a "bach on the beach making billions."

A humble abode, the sounds of waves ... an image not at odds with our coastal Iwi who have at least two of those three "Bs".

Notably, these speakers presented with integrity and demolished my previously opinionated view that filthy rich business people are self-centred and snooty. Instead, I was impressed by their quiet clarity.

Chris Anderson, of ['The Long Tail'](#) fame, beamed in from Silicon Valley where the dot.com craze in the nineties was born and died.

The long tail describes the part of the market that is not looking for standardised mass-produced blockbuster products made for 'easily convinced' folk.

It is the huge collection of networked niche markets that the Internet enables us to access.

For example, the parts of the music industry that still insist on selling only top 100 music on bits of round plastic is suffering badly from illegal downloading.

Only those who are responsive to their customers and who understand the power of the long tail are reaping rewards - they sell music online, all sorts of music, one track at a time, cheaply and instantly.

Customers will pay more for an authentic experience, Chris said, if their engagement is at a premium.

New consumers get informed and are discriminating – they want to be impressed and they want authenticity.

And if they are impressed, they will tell each other using online social networking tools as basic as email or as far-reaching as [Facebook](#).

Stephen Tindall of The Warehouse agreed and said customers want to be able to trace the source of the products to the "nth degree". Although, I was not convinced that Stephen had held that view way back when he started his Ware-Whare chain.

However, I was positively glowing by now, because that authenticity at the far end of the long tail is exactly where Maori are.

Although, as our Maori artists and creatives already know, consumers need to be educated so they know what 'authentic' looks like!

And, as one person recently put it, our own people need to be educated to stop digitally stealing our stuff so that our artists can get a fair go at developing their talents and competing in the global markets.

In summary, authenticity attracts long tail niche markets. Word of mouth marketing by your customers is far more powerful than standard advertising. It is earned by having authentic quality products and services. Social networking is how your customers spread the word. Getting the picture yet?

Marketing vice president for global company Dell and New Zealander Andy Lark, said half a million people join the Internet each day. By 2010 there will be two billion *new* Internet users.

Internet businesses are being built on the backs of virtual communities the size of countries. If you look at it like that, [MySpace](#) would be the eleventh biggest country in the world. Note to self – “run a census on my online ‘population’ and see if its larger than the [Hen and Chickens](#).”

The Internet means that our geography is no excuse for limiting our markets to the coastal boundaries of our small South Pacific Island nation.

Andy also tossed in an environmental issue saying that while we begin to digitise our histories and knowledge in perpetuity, we cannot expect limitless data storage. Our future demand for power will become unsustainable.

What did he mean? Digital is weightless isn't it? Aue, just when you think it's all good, the same old power problem crops up again. Note to self – “store my data offshore so that the lights in Auckland don't go out.”

Sean McDougall of Stakeholder Design video-conferenced in with an array of backdrops. He got my vote for the best video-conference background scenery starting with a pub (he's Irish) and a mix of 'Dr Who' style virtual scenery to show us what happens when you dislocate the colonial classroom model and replace it with a technology learning model.

The only drawback to his video-conference was that we could not play with his robots – immensely annoying to those seated at my table. Note to organisers – “include robot in conference loot bag next time.”

Sean's message was to build new technologies and innovations one step at a time, and be transformational and responsive.

He illustrated this with about 100 simple mini-robots that were built by children. The robots could only go in circles at first, then in straight lines, and then they started crashing into each other – what fun! See why we wanted to play with them now?

Again the idea of innovation with a people-focus emerged. Sean said get insight from your customers and people who work for you, have irreverence and no fear for technology, and have the tenacity to stick with it.

It was late afternoon. The weary audience was ready to head for the hotel bar. But the entertainment was not over.

Greg Carlyon of Horizons Regional Council (to the Aucklanders that's down past the Bombays, to everyone else that's in the Manawatu and surrounds) took to the stage with his Flight of the Conchords dry wit – something you don't find often in a bureaucrat.

He had driven his very large fuel-guzzling articulated truck up from Palmy and parked it outside the Hyatt Regency blocking traffic and taxis.

The big green rig was without a doubt the darling of the Summit (sorry Rod, you were pipped at the finish line).

Its trailer was filled with hands-on technology and an environmental message for farmers who still think they have the right to let effluent from their prolific tiko producing cattle enter our waterways.

It was that council's way of taking technology to people who live in a land far away where bedtime stories include a beast called RMA who eats broadband cables and cell phone masts.

By the way Telcos, Greg promises to remove any Resource Management Act barriers if you'll just turn up with your cables and masts.

The Maori attendees at my table agreed that the most inspiring speakers had proven some important things that we can learn from.

First, determination, authenticity and integrity are healthy attributes in the new online business model. Customers expect it, will tell an audience of billions if we get it wrong and likewise tell that same audience if we get it right.

Second, the technology playing field is more level than we may know. The point at which we enter into technology has more to do with determination and brain power than physical barriers. Our naivety may even be our strength as we experiment with technologies without preconceived views.

Third, a successful business model can now include the long tail market and needs us to be informed and know the trends. We get that knowledge directly from our customers in 'real time'. Then we respond at lightening speed.

Fourth, the traditional business model of academic research, finding evidence, analysing it, and developing strategies and plans may see many projects fail purely because that process is too slow when pitted against the exponential speed of today's technology.

As the Summit drew to a close, the 'friendly with gritted teeth' banter between the Gen-Y and Gen-X speakers really revealed it all.

Despite the disparities in age, culture, gender, experience and skill, no-one wanted to be told to put down the technology and play nicely.

There is obviously room for everyone in our digital future. There's room for Maori too. Plenty of room.

Like the handful of true gems amongst the speakers who strive to meet every detail of their online customers' needs, Maori can just as easily lead with no more than ideas, determination and a fearless attitude. No excuses, no barriers, no limits.

A new leadership must, and inevitably will, emerge.

The slow-moving measured style of leadership we have always treasured will be joined by a dynamic, fast and fearless leadership.

That leadership will be pushed to the front without the anxiety of being accused of riding roughshod over traditional tikanga, or being criticised as brown elitists.

Those leaders will have no choice but to dramatically evolve tikanga so we can be full participants in the future.

They will grab our attention, force us to keep up, and sometimes push us off our lofty mountains to make us climb them all over again.

Leadership will come from the long tail, from people like you and me, from our sons and daughters, and it will arrive whenever we choose.

Finally, you can guarantee that as long as those leaders proudly identify themselves by their Iwi, Hapu, Whanau or just plain Maori – they will be.