UNKNOWN LONDON

USING TECHNOLOGY TO EXPLORE THE CAPITAL

TONY ARBOUR
GLA CONSERVATIVES
GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY

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INTRODUCTION

London has an immense tourism market, estimated to be worth £15.9 billion and supporting 304,000 jobs. [1] London has some of the world's top tourist sites. However those sites take a majority of the market, leaving outer London sometimes ignored by visitors, and the money they spend. With £11.8billion of consumer spending at stake to London's local economies,[2] increasing outer London's £4 billion share by only a minor amount should be a priority. A reasonable suggestion would be to increase Outer London visitor spending by 10% (£400m) by 2020. This is achievable and should become a key mayoral priority.

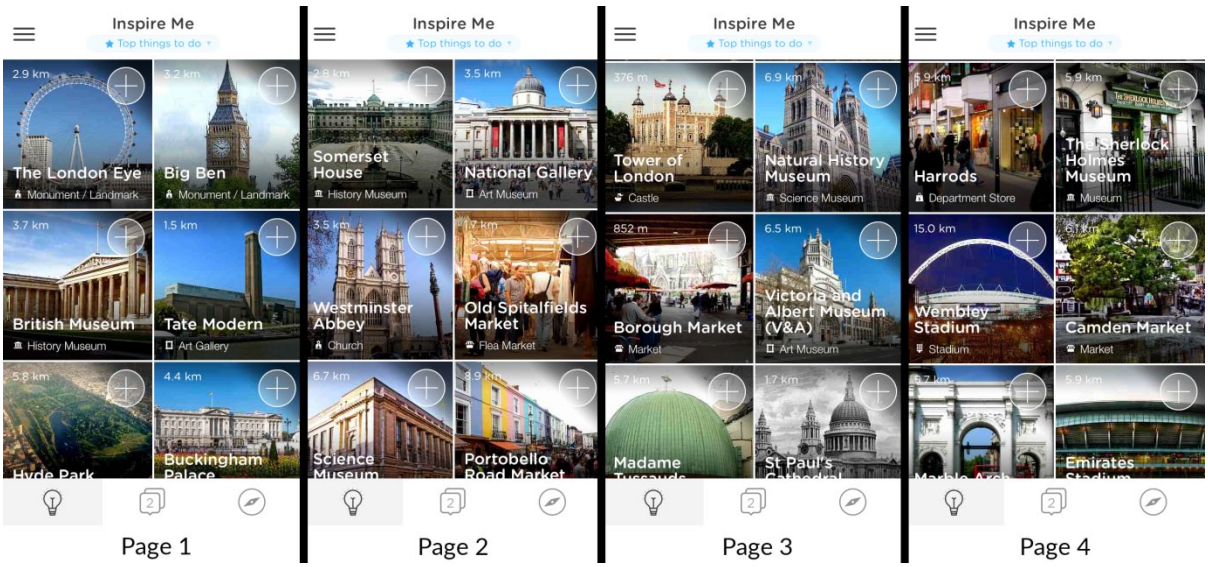
As the Mayor of London explains "The big icons dominate cultural marketing of London. They act as important headliners that grab attention and provide the motivation for a visit. However, London has an incredibly rich, diverse offer for visitors beyond these top 20 attractions." [3]

With the Mayor's role in promoting London's culture there is an opportunity to disrupt the status quo of selling London to visitors only as a place to see attractions such as the Tower of London and the British Museum. Visit London, the Mayor of London's tourism promotion vehicle, should be required to promote outer London and smaller sites along with the sites most visitors already plan to visit. Using current technology and investing in new tools could help bring tourists off the beaten path, and keep London's tourism market expanding.

INNER FOCUS

Visit London provides two great free resources for the prospective tourist to London, a website and mobile phone application. Both of these resources provide a great deal of curated content about the top sites, restaurants, events, along with links to sponsored content which help fund the entire project. They are modern, well designed tools with plenty of helpful information.

The one standout issue when you access these Visit London resources is the fact that they have a heavy focus on London's most visited and central sites. This is most prominent when opening the mobile phone applications the landing page ti tled "inspire me" is a list of sites starting with The London Eye, Big Ben, The British Museum, Tate Modern, Hyde Park, Buckingham Palace, Tower of London and the Natural History Museum. This continues for 21 entries until the first site in outer London is mentioned, and that site is Wembley Stadium.



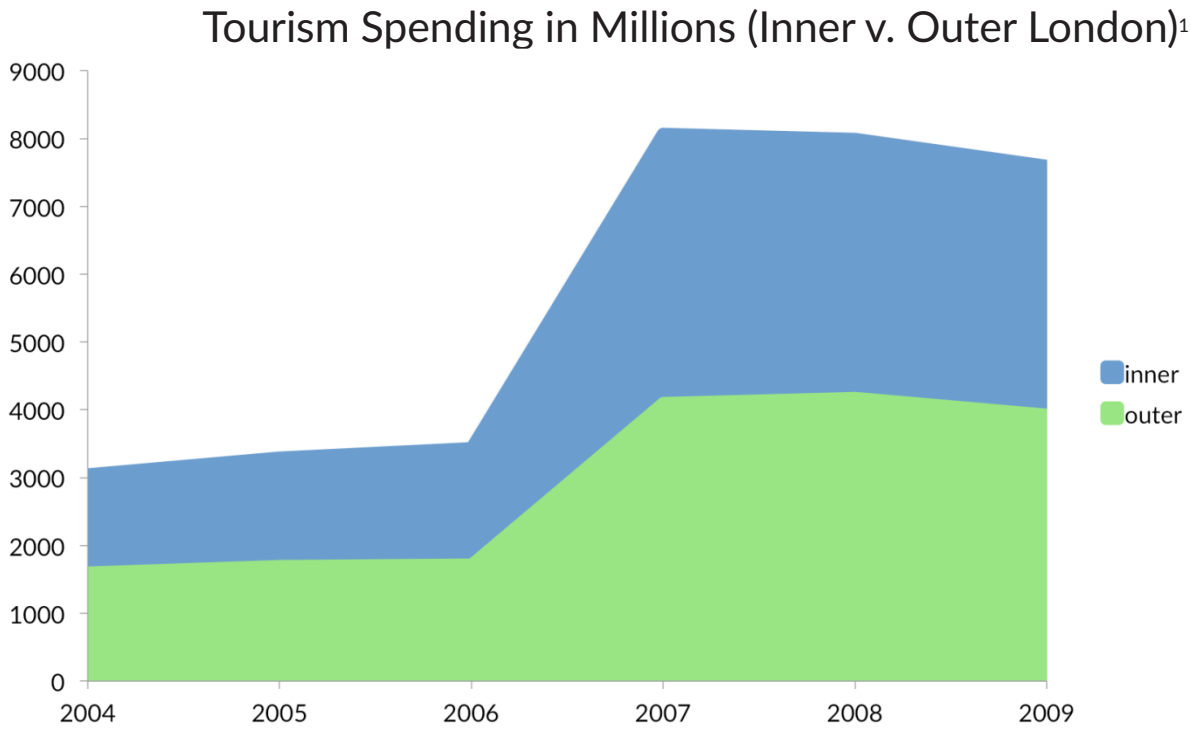
1. http://cdn.londonandpartners.com/l-and-p/assets/London%20Tourism%20Report%202012-13.pdf.pdf
2. http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/ott/travel-trends/2014/rpt-travel-trends--2014.html
3. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Cultural%20tourism%20vision%20for%20London_low_res_version.pdf – p46

It is logical to provide information on the top sites as these are most likely what the average user is looking for, but another role the app should be playing is providing is introducing people to lesser known content. Places that could be promoted more strongly such as –

Museum of Childhood, Tower Hamlets
Eltham Palace, Greenwich
Horniman Museum, Lewisham
Hall Place, Bexley,
Enfield Lock, Enfield
Hainault Forest Country Park, Redbridge
Barnes Wetland Centre, Richmond
Bentley Priory Museum, Harrow

SPENDING IN THE CENTRE

This is reflected when looking at the economics of this issue. In the last Local Area Tourism Impact (LATI)[4] study figures displayed a consistent disparity between inner and outer London tourist spending, ie where tourists spend their money when visiting London. This disparity was steadily 65% of spending in inner London compared to a much lower 35% in outer London.



If the borough by borough distributions in this study are modelled to modern spending the disparity is quite clear.

Modelled figures give inner London £7.7 billion compared to outer London's £4 billion. These figures also show the disparity in inner London boroughs, with the top five boroughs representing £5.3billion of this tourist spending, or almost 68% of inner London's take. Obviously there is a great deal of local investment at stake, but at the moment it is centralised in several concentrated areas.

4. http://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/tourism-spend-estimates

BRINGING TECHNOLOGY TO THE TOURIST

Visitors to London are not necessarily aware of everything London has to offer. As with any large city the tourist will visit the most popular destinations. We need to encourage them to look further afield. The capital hosts thousands of events across all boroughs. However, research by Maggie's Culture Crawl shows that 38 per cent of UK visitors say they feel they miss buildings and areas of interest because they're not aware of them and only 31 per cent of Londoners feel they really make the most of the culture on offer on their doorstep.[5]

The Visit London Official tourist app does allows the visitor to build offline itineraries as well as downloading maps, weather and various pieces of useful information. However with so many mobile technologies available there could be other ways for Visit London to enhance the tourist experience and more importantly open up all areas of London. By engaging with their stakeholders and adopting technologies such as Near Field Communication (NFC), QR codes and beacons an app could add new levels of interaction for the tourist. If these can be incorporated into an app it could go a long way to encouraging tourists to travel off the beaten track and to see more of outer London.

The app could have any number of themed tourist experiences that would accompany the tourist throughout their journey. Using scanners or beacons, information could be pushed to each phone informing them about the area. For example a tour of London food markets could guide the tourist, via a series of codes or beacons, from one market to another, giving the history of each market, providing up to date vouchers and local dining and of course providing advice transport advice to the next stop on the route. Also there could also be ways to incorporate TfL's Walk London and use their branded signage within the app. This scheme encourages people to see more of outer London by foot. Using mobile technology the app could point out areas of interest and link into further information, again offering ways to encourage tourists to stay and explore the area.

THE MAIN TECHNOLOGIES

NFC (Near Field Communication) involves two devices interacting wirelessly at a very short range, usually 4 to 10 centimetres. It is used in the context of mobile payments, including Oyster Cards. NFC on a mobile phone does have a great deal of potential and is very user-friendly.

QR codes are however available to more smartphone users. The QR code is like a barcode. The user scans the code, the smartphone interprets the barcode, and a related website or application opens.

Beacons use Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) and its advantage is that you do not need a reader or have to tap any pairing devices. The beacons are small wireless, bluetooth enabled sensors that allow mobile apps to recognise when a smartphone is nearby. These beacons can allow companies to send special promotions, coupons, recommendations to people as they pass through a given area.

A number of companies have been using the iBeacon technology, such as Waitrose and House of Fraser as well as Regent Street. [1]

The attraction for the retailer is obvious. If a person has the app and walks past the store a message could be beamed to their phone. It offers discounts or other rewards to encourage customer loyalty. Regent Street has become one of the first shopping streets in Europe to develop a Beacon app that brings together the stores on the street offering targeted content for the shopper.

5. Maggies Culture Crawl. Research of 2146 UK adults by Opinion Matters. 2014

TECHNOLOGY IN TOURISM: BEST PRACTICE

"Talking Statues"

There have been examples of technology used in tourism focused on NFC devices. In 2014 the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester conducted research into the growing use of mobile technology in the cultural sector. They did this by adding NFC and QR codes to statues around London and Manchester.[2] Users would tap or scan in the code and then they would receive a "phone call" from the statue. They would then hear an audio recording from the statute in question. Once this was finished there would be the opportunity to explore further websites. They then asked for feedback from the users.

Overall the results were positive 80% of users felt that using this technology made the experience more enjoyable with 62% keen to find out more about their subject. The experience helped "breathe life into an otherwise silent sculpture."[3] (p29) It does seem striking that this technology seems to have made people stop and take in what is around them which is not something we automatically associate with mobile phones.

Other experiments on the use of NFC came from the Museum of London who had around 15-20 NFC tags installed across both the Museum of London and Museum of London Docklands. This was a short term initiative principally to reinforce the museum's reputation for innovation in the cultural sector.

There are other places that have tried to use either QR codes or NFC from graveyards to walking tours and art galleries. The idea is interesting, trying to engage the public in bringing their surrounds to life.

THE COST AND PAYING FOR THIS TECHNOLOGY

Overall the costs are quite slim as most costs involve adapting existing technology. However, as with any new technology, there is a degree of unpredictability and it will have to be upgraded every couple years, but this could be taken into consideration to help manage future costs.

Costs of developing apps vary greatly. Much depends on how advanced the technology is. Apps built by agencies can cost anywhere between £100,000 to £300,000 [6] However given London & Partners works with over 1,000 Partners [7] there is definitely scope to establish sponsorship of a new app. Moreover our figures on the economic boost to the local area could mitigate the cost argument.

INTEGRATING NEW TECHNOLOGY

These new technologies have the potential to give people more targeted information, both geographically and based on personal interests. Targeting information could have the potential to help people truly get off the beaten path. Be it NFC, QR, or any future technology Visit London should look into working with geographically coded technology to extend the tourist experience across London. This technology should link people to offline information within their current app, and help people find things they might well have not found otherwise. This for example could be scanning a statue of a historical London figure and the app providing you with other information, specifically other tourist sites, related to that figures, such as their birthplace.

6. http://savvyapps.com/blog/how-much-does-app-cost-massive-review-pricing-budget-considerations
7. http://www.londonandpartners.com/partners/partner-benefits/faq

This technology could be part of a new way Visit London interacts with tourist sites. For this interlinking of sites to truly flourish we need to include all stakeholders. Museum, councils, cultural event organisers and galleries could help build this database of related sites if they were provided with the technology. Providing the physical technology and training on web tools could form the basis of a new open tourism platform organised by Visit London and be freely available to stakeholders. In the same way people build wiki's online, approved stakeholders could help build the content to promote their own and others tourism content bolstering the London's tourism economy.

This is obviously only one indefinite interpretation of how technology could intertwine tourist sites around London, but there are many other approaches that could help include outer London and smaller sites into a bigger tourism market. Any approach with new technology should look to pull people off the beaten path, but also find sponsors like past technology to cover costs.

CONCLUSION

Tourism is vital for the London economy but we need to ensure that all areas share in the economic benefits that it brings. There are various museums, parks and buildings in Outer London that should be attracting more tourists and mobile technology is one way we can exploit this. If a platform can be provided for stakeholders to build content and we are able to offer ideas and suggestions to visitors then not only are we helping the tourist but we are going someway to increase tourism economy of outer London.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION #1 - Adjust the focus of Visit London's app and website to provide a better geographic mix of content, and promote smaller and larger sites equally

RECOMMENDATION #2 - Visit London to build a new open platform to encourage travel off the beaten path. The platform could be based on technologies used in recent trials around the world such as Near Field Communication, QR codes or beacons. These technologies target the tourist with information relevant to their interests, and the cost of this would be covered through sponsorship.

RECOMMENDATION #3 - We would then ask the Mayor to explore setting up a test area for this kit. Ideally using a popular central location such as Trafalgar Square where the mobile technology could be used to encourage travel to outer London tourist spots.

RECOMMENDATION #4 - Aim to increase outer London's share for tourism by 10% by 2020.

FEEDBACK

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