A Place on the Web: The Use of Spatial Concepts in Business Websites

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Abstract

The communication revolution enables firms to build new links with customers and suppliers around the world. Presenting business online offers new marketing and product opportunities for trading with both businesses and consumers. However, experiences with actual information and communication technology (ICT) use in general, and the Internet in particular, show that geography still matters. One reason is that the majority of goods and services still rely upon some physical movement. In addition, regulatory barriers and cultural differences between nations still slow down e-commerce. Geography is also significant in other ways -for example, some locations attracts customers. Some firms that may have a rather limited attraction value individually have enhanced their value through clusters, which are developed with the aim of forming a regional brand. In other cases, firms downplay the use of local references and present a global image instead. This paper discusses spatial concepts expressed in firms' websites. A general discussion shows how firms use spatial concepts in various ways to engage trust, to develop a regional brand or to express strength through cluster membership. The type of spatial statements will often vary according to the target group. The discussion is further illustrated by referring to

the web pages of two industries with strong links to location: the food and tourist industries, often small and medium sized firms (SMF) based in a rural setting. Examples are taken from both the UK and Norway, but a comparative analysis has not been attempted.

Key words: food industry, origin marketing, spatial concept, tourist industry, trust, websites

Introduction

Business gurus and policy-makers frequently present ICT as a means by which firms—particularly smaller ones—can overcome the tyranny of distance and compete internationally from peripheral regions (Cairncross 1997; Dodge and Kitchin 2000). The World Wide Web in particular gives an opportunity for firms (or any other individual or organization) to provide information, and potentially to advertise and sell goods and services globally. Nevertheless, various studies have pointed to the continuing importance of locality for aspects of production (e.g. Storper 1997), the geographical distribution of production factors, and the importance of clusters as geographically specific concentrations where place-based assets lend competitive advantage to certain industries (Porter 2000). The importance of locality is also relevant to factors apart from production, such as attractive residential or recreational elements that may attract employees or customers.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relationships between space, place and SMEs' use of ICT by focusing on website presentations. A study of the adoption level for marketing websites in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, the USA, Canada and Japan (Department of Trade and Industry 2000) found that businesses in Sweden are the most advanced on this measure, with 76 per cent adopting marketing websites. Sweden was followed by the USA with 68 per cent and Germany and the UK both with 66 per cent. Such web presences are becoming very common among SMFs, and Nordic figures show that Swedish and Finnish firms have the highest e-commerce

performance, followed by Norway and Denmark (Statistics Norway 2000). Furthermore, data show that web presence is related to size. At the end of 2000, about 56 per cent of firms in Norway with 250 employees or less were expected to have a website, whereas for larger firms the frequency was as much as 88 per cent.

However, studies show that many small firms lack the necessary skills to realise fully the advantages of having a website and some firms operate on the Web just because 'everybody does so.' What might be considered a suitable model for one firm might not be relevant to another. This study will focus on the need for giving website design sufficient priority to develop it into a powerful strategic tool.

The existing literature on website presentations mainly focuses on technical, managerial and marketing issues. One category of the literature consists of analyses of website content, purpose and functionality (Chang et al. 1997; Cooper and Burgess 2000; Quelch and Klein 1996), although within this the spatial dimension is rarely considered. A second strand of literature consists of marketing handbooks covering the benefits of the Internet generally or within a certain sector like the travel and tourism industry (e.g. Briggs 2001; World Tourism Organization Business Council 1999). However, Pritchard (1999) considers the role of spatial concepts in website design, in relation to geographical narratives in the websites of large US food companies. He discusses how these companies use rather stylised concepts of the local and the global in different ways. The smaller firms we consider here have a

much narrower market orientation and often actively try to communicate information about specific sites and communities, something that clearly differs from Pritchard's empirical evidence.

This paper begins with a review of the role of distance, communication and place for business in a globalised e-commerce economy. We then go on to discuss how smaller firms use the web to develop national or international strategies, and how this practice is affected by location. The use of spatial elements and concepts is crucial in this context. One focus is on the challenges related to trust, the Internet and locality, and more specifically the way in which spatial concepts can be linked to building trust. Further, the physical environment might contain valuable resources for such firms. For instance, actors might try to signal distinctive spatial images where the natural environment or the traditions of the location could attract firms, employees and visitors (Lash and Urry 1996). The next topic considers how spatial concepts play a role in place marketing and origin marketing. We discuss the development of regional brands and clustering, including how different type of spatial concepts can be used by firms in different sectors. Finally, some examples of using spatial concepts from the food and tourist industries in Norway and the UK are presented, to illustrate the three areas in focus—trust building, place image/place marketing and presentation of a cluster.

ICTs and globalisation - the death of distance and the importance of place

A dominant discourse in all advanced economies at the turning of the new century is the importance of ICTs, and especially the use of the Internet, to achieve economic competitiveness. The development of corporate ICT networks can be directly attributed to the desire for greater globalisation, and the ability to extract revenues from the exploitation of new opportunities on an international scale. In this respect, the deregulatory pressures from governments that led to the opening up of telecommunications markets and the ability to construct international intra-corporate networks are important. ICTs have enabled the easy flow of critical market information between operations across the world, and have allowed the coordination of a greater range of activities than ever before. The ICT-economy has also made it possible for some sections of industry to decentralise to the suburbs or even more remote areas to take advantage of cheaper rents and skilled workforces, even if the core activities still require a more central location. Different spatially separated units can communicate regularly and instantly via ICT. Awareness of alternative suppliers or customers has increased dramatically in the ICT age. This also means that it is now more important than ever to seek for the lowest cost commodities and production sites and to respond rapidly to market signals.

For remotely located firms, the use of ICT will enable greater access to specialised knowledge, which becomes increasingly important in order to adapt rapidly to changing economic and technological conditions. This also includes easier access to

service support, which is often needed to gain the benefit of the latest technologies without the expense and risk of acquiring new systems and staff (author ref.).

Some studies have proclaimed the 'death of distance' (Cairncross 1997) and allege that on the web no one knows or cares where you are. The argument that underpins this view focuses on a number of dimensions. First, ICTs enable the reduction of transaction costs—some of these transaction costs are related to, or exacerbated by, distance and the difficulty of negotiating over distance. Second, ICTs can reduce the time needed for communication and response, which is referred to as the time-space compression. Whilst it may be claimed that the same effect may be realised through telephone, the advantage of ICTs is that transactions in the form of orders, invoices or payments can be made directly into computer systems, without manual intervention.

However, the benefits and best-practice stories found in the management literature usually derive from a few cases, and are mainly MNCs, dot.coms and, often, American companies. These are special cases, and there are limits to the extent that these arguments can be applied to other firms. There might be differences in firms' use of ICTs depending on their size, nationality and their location within a country.

Our argument is that geography still matters. First, distance still presents barriers, especially for smaller firms that have fewer resources to cover various forms of transaction costs. The majority of goods and services still rely upon some form of

physical movement, which implies both distributional costs and a need to negotiate logistical and distribution support. Efficient transport is a special challenge in rural areas, especially in cases where contracts are small and few. Insufficient bandwidth can also be a hindrance for efficient Internet use if transmission and downloading consumes too much time. In addition, international trade is complicated by the existence of regulatory barriers.

A third form of geographical barrier arises from cultural differences. Distance is not just geography but may also be understood in terms of mental barriers. For instance, Houtum (1999) claims that 'us-them' relationships obviously feed mental distance. This will eventually reduce the estimation of trust between parties and make the conditions less favourable for forming economic relationships. The 'connection' between trust and spatial concepts is discussed in more detail below.

Another strand of argument focuses on the so-called cluster advantages for particular industries in certain locations (Porter 2000). Geographers often pay attention to, and make a distinction between, those factors that lead to the development of geographical clusters, and the consequences of firms with related activities being geographically clustered. For instance, there are relatively few geographical clusters that have developed to reduce transportation and transaction costs (a notable exception is the Dutch cut-flower cluster). Nevertheless, reduced transportation and transaction costs are important advantages that are enjoyed by clustered firms. The greater the need for

speedy and frequent contact, the more profitable geographical clusters seems to be, especially when person-to-person communication is taken into account (author ref.). In addition, the cluster itself may operate as an important learning arena for new technological and business practices. This seems especially relevant to SMFs with limited internal resources. Establishing a website can also be a response to pressure from collaborating parties.

Finally, clusters represent strong symbols that attract much attention, and can act as a tool to get governmental support or to attract private capital, as well as to signal market power. Sometimes it is important for a firm to show the outside world that it is part of a cluster. However, the true evidence of the linkages and clusters true role is not always investigated in detail.

ICT use may involve not only distribution and supply chain management, but also a much wider range of processes in a firm, such as production, logistics, R&D and human resource management. Some places confer competitive advantages relating to these functions through more favourable factor costs/assets or cluster benefits, and hence ICT use will be tied to the reinforcement of these advantages. Limitations and difficulties inherent in the abilities of SMFs to adopt ICTs may be due to lack of infrastructure or to the fact that competent human resources differ from place to place.

Trust, the Internet and locality

The business transaction in the simplest form represents three phases: the information phase, where the demander searches for a suitable business partner; the negotiation phase, when details about an agreement are settled; and finally, the execution phase, where delivery and payment take place. Trust is important in every parts of this process, and includes a belief or expectation that the word or promise will be kept, and that the parties will not take advantage of each other's vulnerability (Geyskens et al. 1996).

Terms related to the type of product, as well as conditions concerning the contract between buyer and seller, will obviously have an effect on the website content. Further, websites can be divided between those that concern mass-market standardised products, which often involve brief and casual customer relations, and those that involve customised products, which tend to target customers or suppliers with more long-term contracts. In addition, the size of the contract may influence the likelihood of a firm's setting up an electronic link through a website to customers or suppliers. Whether information is freely available or requires rights of admission will also vary and depend on the content and the relationship between the parties involved.

When transacting business on the Web, trust may require assurances that information will not be sold to a third party. Furthermore, there might be concerns related to the possibility of hackers stealing sensitive information (Hoffman et al. 1999). Customers

buying a product need to feel sure that they will get what they paid for. They need to know that the product is as specified and that it functions as expected for as long as needed. They need to be sure that the correct product will be supplied in return for payment and that they will not be defrauded financially. They also have to be assured that sensitive information will not be misused. Finally, they have to know that no other parties have claims on the physical or intellectual property embodied in the product.

In business, assurances help to increase trust, particularly when the parties have no interaction history, and hence do not have first-hand knowledge about each other (McKnight et al. 1998). Marketing literature often stresses the importance of reputation and size in contributing to consumers' trust in a seller organisation (Ganesan 1994; Doney and Cannon 1997). The effect of trust symbols depends on distance. When operating globally, a key issue is how to engender trust in a situation where the trade partners are located far apart, without any prior interaction either through traditional communication channels or through the Web. A situation with existing social relations where the parties already trust each other will give far better business conditions. Exchanges can take place without expensive contracts or legal fees since the parties already know and trust each other. This nearness leads to far lower transaction costs than in cases where formal agreements are required (Granovetter 1985). In addition, regulation policies may help to remove some uncertainties—especially if legislation is clear, stable and predictable. Global e-

commerce will further stress the need for removing discrepancies in national policies that impede the free circulation of goods and services.

In a situation where more and more economic activities along the supply chain are based on ICT, firms have to be conscious of, and sensitive to, the role of social relations and trust. Spatial concepts can play a role in this matter as empirically illustrated later in this paper. Social relations and trust provide assurances of the other party's ability, integrity and goodwill. Trust finds expression in different ways. For instance, one way is to give details about the physical address or the location of the firm. Consumers will generally have more confidence in a business operating on the Web if it can be associated not only with a post-box, but also with a real physical building, facilities and personnel (Doney and Cannon 1997). In some cases, the existence of a physical store gives customers the opportunity to inspect the goods prior to ordering. Sometimes this can be done in places other than at the firm finally receiving the electronic order. For instance, this way of seeking information is what many people do when they shop around for good ideas for travel destinations by visiting an exhibition. Other products, like food, are harder to inspect without physical contact.

Details about site might also be important in other ways. For distant customers, the picture of a presentable building will signal a genuine business. In addition, size will signal that significant resources are invested in the business and that it therefore has

much to lose if it acts dishonestly. Size also signals success and engenders an expectation that the business will be around for a long time.

A key issue in selling food is the question of quality. How do you establish trust in what you buy to eat? Much of the debate about buying on the Internet focuses on trust in financial transactions, yet in the case of food the more important question is about the perception of the quality and safety of food. Lien and Døving (1996) use three categories of quality. First, the visible quality can be seen by the customer in purchasing the product, and is especially important in the case of fruit and vegetables. Second, experience-based quality is based on previous experience of the use of a product, and is linked heavily with brand loyalty. Finally, trust-based quality means that the customer assesses the risks inherent in the sourcing of raw materials and the processing of food according to their level of trust in the processor and the end retailer. The customer assesses their likely adherence to good practices and the reliability of the product description.

In electronic markets, food cannot be inspected before purchase, and experience-based quality needs an initial purchase before it can be tested. How then is trust established? This issue has been noted in cases of electronic livestock auctions where slow adoption has been linked with a lack of trust felt by farmers and the processing industry in the method of representing the quality and quantity of meat by quantitative indicators (Graham 2000). If one is used to judging the likely fattiness of meat by

prodding a cow, then how does one convert that tacit knowledge into trust of a number, which involves the tacit judgement of an intermediary? For the consumer a similar concern is being addressed by food producers' websites through the association of the firm with images or attributes that promote trust.

Origin marketing and the linkage between tourism and other local industry

Modern economies involve a complex interplay between local and global forces, where some places use and develop their localism, their uniqueness, in order to attract visitors and business (Dodge and Kitchin 2000). Some have managed to create strong brand names associated with their location for the products and services they supply. Other places, perhaps the majority, need to start their origin strategies by developing strategic place marketing, to revitalise towns, cities, regions or nations (Kotler et al. 1993).

Firms can use the natural environment, culture, a positive place image or other resources from their location to emphasise their product quality. As a part of an origin strategy, food firms or other industries might co-operate with the tourism industry in selling or marketing their products with reference to the place. Much of the literature on origin marketing focuses on documenting and analysing the effects of country of origin (Bilkey 1982; Erickson 1984; Han 1989; Harris 1997; Harris et al. 1994; Iversen 1999). National stereotype images simplify consumers' evaluations (Whitelock and Sequeira 1991). Studies have shown that use of country of origin in

product evaluations correlates with the degree of knowledge the consumer has of the products. So-called 'experts' base their evaluations more on attribute strength, whereas novices rely more on country of origin. When attribute information is ambiguous, both experts and novices use country of origin in evaluations (e.g. Maheswaran 1994). In other words, providing information on the country of origin is important in achieving trust when the consumers have little knowledge about a product's concrete attributes.

Origin marketing can also be considered with reference to regions or localities. Recent problems in European agriculture have accentuated the concern about safe and traceable food. Together with increased focus on traditions, heritage, origin and 'food as an experience'—exemplified by movements like 'slow-food', which has 60 000 members working 'for the protection of the right to taste'—this concern may create new niche opportunities for local food industries. We have found several projects linking food and place in Europe. Within the EU it is possible to apply for protected designation of origin (PDOs) and protected designation of geographical indication (PGIs). 'Origin Denominators' are examples of methods used to differentiate food and beverage products in Spain. In this way, there is a growing interest in food that Ilbery and Kneafsey (2000; 1998) refer to as 'authentic', 'traditional', 'wholesome' and 'traceable.' Such changes in the market represent an interesting possibility for product development within the food industries in rural regions in Norway (Nygard and Storstad 1998).

However, to protect a brand name related to origin might be problematic. Places with positive associations are used by producers of foodstuff without any link to the actual place of production or to a local recipe. For instance in Norway, there are several examples where the name of the region is used as name on foodstuff that is neither produced nor based on resources based from that particular area. One example in Norway is Lofoten, well known for its cod fishery and scenery. As a result of EU pressure, the Ministry of Agriculture has proposed regulations on the use of such 'toponyms' in product names in accordance with EU legislation. One category of regulation includes products originating from a specific place, involving a local recipe and use of local raw material. Products produced at a place with local raw materials but not made according to a local recipe belong to another category, while products only produced at a place without any raw materials or a local recipe belong to a third category. A somewhat similar initiative by the Norwegian Industrial and Regional Development Fund is currently supporting projects utilising a local resource base to foster new opportunities. The projects supported include distribution of 'regional food' to a national market, and small-scale food producers co-operating with the tourism industry in offering food, accommodation and attractions.

The place and its natural environment, heritage, culture and image may provide a basis for tourism. Local industry can play an important role, indirectly or directly. For instance, stockfish racks and blooming fruit trees form the scenery of some coastal

communities, and long industrial traditions are decisive for cultural heritage. Other sectors can also participate directly, offering tourist attractions such as fishing trips and garden visits. In other words, tourism is often based on the existence of other viable local industries. However, with origin marketing as a starting point, the other local industries might profit from the tourist industry.

A national image as a tourist destination is an especially important contribution to the creation of associations with a national image (Echtner 1993). Experience from some Norwegian communities shows that there might be synergy effects from linking tourism and other industries at a regional level (authors ref.). All industries gain from building a positive image of the place. Farmhouses or fishermen's cabins for rent represent examples of related business opportunities. This may be a way to exploit existing resources, and an opportunity to sell food and other products to visitors. Other examples are fruit farmers who sell their crop along the road to locals and tourists, and hotels and restaurants offering products from the area. Tourists visiting and tasting products might have a positive effect on sales. Hallberg (1999) shows through empirical studies that tourism may also lead to changes in attitudes and purchase behaviour.

In this paper, an important question is how the web can be a part of such origin strategies. The web makes it possible to market a place, and its products at relatively low cost with spatial concepts, using maps, pictures and interactive presentations.

Products can further be distributed across considerable distances to reach interesting niche markets.

Different ways to represent place on firms' websites

The discussion so far concerns the importance of place to firms' image and market presentation. This section presents different forms of spatial elements and concepts used in websites.

Information about the physical address

At its simplest, a website communicates the address and location of the firm for communication purposes.

Accessibility

If the firm is seeking to encourage visitors, then the website may encourage this through a wider range of information or pictures relating to accessibility, such as providing distances or travel times from key locations, or information about directions and ways of transportation to the site.

Maps

In an issue related to accessibility, the firm may communicate its location(s) using maps. Maps may take various forms, from simple directional aids to more conceptual devices that contain clickable links to other websites. The firm may also use maps to

illustrate its spatial reach in terms of markets, for example providing advice on local distributors in different countries.

Site

The firm may provide photos of buildings to symbolise size, cleanliness, modernity or a traditional form etc. Typically these would only show the positive aspects of the site.

Spatial references on web-addresses

Finally there are ways in which the tie to a particular locality can be reflected in the actual web address. Obviously this could be achieved by linking the name of the firm to its locality, but it could also be achieved through aliases, or in the Norwegian case through the use of city-based domain names (e.g. company.bergen.no).

This list has so far focused on different spatial elements. However, our main aim is to investigate the purpose of using these elements in websites, when they are labelled spatial concepts. Elements of importance in this respect are:

Local tradition

The firm may provide written descriptions of the production process as rooted in some local tradition, as a guarantee for quality and long production experience.

Nearness to resources

This is especially relevant for food producers, linking the product quality to the place of production.

Place image and marketing

The firm or a group of firms may provide links to an existing place image, or use spatial elements to present the place in which they are based, to build a regional brand.

Cluster

The firm might suggest that they have links to other local firms within the same or a related industry, particularly where there is a local cluster with a wider reputation. Firms may have links to tourism establishments or festivals, and/or the other way around.

International reach

The firm may emphasise its nature as a global or networked organization by providing information about export volume, international markets, and physical addresses of production or sales offices.

Global image

Another more abstract way of stressing a firm's international and global orientation may involve the suppression of a home identity, perhaps by having pictures of a variety of locations, maps and pictures of the world, language alternatives and so on.

Virtual cluster

Proximity may also be suggested through the linking of firm websites, even if firms are not in the same location. One approach is the idea of the virtual business park where firms occupy 'space' in a virtual place, which has no physical parallel.

Fictitious image

Firms may use spatial concepts that have no real geographical link to the firm, for instance pictures of nature that are meant to communicate the firm's environmental or social responsibility. Other examples are products placed in a natural environment, in order to identify the product with some natural attribute and idealised spatial concepts reflecting the place or seeking to make positive associations with the products.

These can be categorised by combining the two dimensions real vs. abstract and local 1 vs. global, shown in Figure 1.

GEOGRAPHICAL REFERENCE GEOGRAPHICAL LEVEL	REAL	ABSTRACT
LOCAL	Local tradition Nearness to resources Place image and place marketing Geographical cluster	Virtual cluster Fictitious image
GLOBAL	International reach	Global image

Figure 1   Different categories of strategic use of spatial concepts

In the case of SMFs in the tourism and food sectors in Norway, the spatial narratives found mainly belong to the category 'real and local'. A main argument is that SMFs

uses altogether different spatial concepts than those which, according to Pritchard (1999), seem to be more common among large companies, like international reach and global image. We have chosen not to discuss any further the role of virtual clusters and fictitious images, as we consider real geographical references to be our main focus.

Spatial narratives such as local traditions, nearness to resources, place marketing and geographical clusters, and the way in which they are considered crucial to trust building, marketing and product development are discussed and illustrated in further detail below.

Food on the web – spatial concepts and trust

A strategy quite common amongst food producers is the presentation of the firm as a traditional business rooted in a particular rural community. Pictures are often provided of the firm's premises in traditional buildings, of the local landscape and villages, emphasised by references to traditional production processes, the history of the firm, and quality. Common denominators for presentations of this kind are food-making tradition, family firms and long history, as shown by the following examples relating to the UK:

"… a fourth generation family business specialising in the traditional method of oak smoking kippers and salmon…. in the original smokehouses which are over 130 years old."

"Since 1840 my family has been supplying high quality meat to customers throughout the Borders.…. The firm was founded by my great-great-grandfather.… at the same premises from which the business operates today."

This can be a way to increase trust when selling food experiences to tourists. For instance, a farmer and restaurant owner in a small community in Hardanger presented his product this way:

"This is the attraction for those who long for the good old days without ready-made pizza and conserves, or those who only want to experience something authentic. The food served in 'the Old House' is either grown on the farm or locally, and we only use high quality raw materials. …. In the smoking house you find tubs with salted meat. The shelves are full of home-made jam, preserved fruit and berries. The sheep grass peacefully at the hills in the spring – without knowing that they will end up on the table next autumn."

Place image and place marketing

Links to an already well-established and positive place image can be used in the marketing of tourism, but also when marketing the quality of food and other products. Furthermore, one can use the web for place marketing, attracting businesses, employees and tourists. This might strengthen the infrastructure of all industries, as well as increasing the customer base for tourism and some food products.

Lofoten and Hardanger in Norway are examples of regions that could exploit an already existing image to build some sort of brand value for other products (authors ref.). Both are quite well known tourist destinations. Lofoten is famous for its mountainous islands, the rough ocean and the storied catch of spawning cod in the Lofoten fisheries, which have exerted a pull on fishermen and fish buyers along the Norwegian coast for hundreds of years. The long tradition of exporting stockfish has put Lofoten on the world map, especially in the current most important market, Italy. British aristocracy have visited Hardanger on holiday since around 1900. Hardanger is now, as it was then, associated with the fjord, snow-capped mountains and fruit farming. The nature and culture in both Lofoten and Hardanger have inspired different artists for centuries.

A cutlery producer in Hardanger uses the name and image of the region actively in marketing. The firm even tries to establish a link between the regional cultural heritage and their own products:

"Shaped by glaciers 10 000 years ago, the fjords in Hardanger provide the creative inspiration for a wide array of products. X is located in the heart of Hardanger. From Hardanger we have collected inspiration from old traditions and carvings."

All the gift packages of cutlery are decorated with paintings of fruit blossom in Hardanger. In the Norwegian market, 'Hardanger' has been a big success as both a

regional and a national symbol. In Sweden, the image of Hardanger as a fruit garden is less well known, so when the firm markets there it focuses on the country of origin.

Similarly, firms in Lofoten use the famous image of this region to sell their products, as shown by the example of this fish farmer, who presents a picture of the characteristic landscape of Lofoten with the following text:

"X is a firm located in Norway, north of the Arctic Circle. The head office is located on a small island located between the Lofoten islands and the main land. This is where all operations are coordinated from. The fish farming firm includes several sites beautifully situated among deep fjords and steep ragged mountains in a chain of islands known to the world as the Lofoten islands. Quality is unsurpassed—maybe as a result of the surroundings."

The beautiful and clean natural environment of the location is used to build trust in the quality of the product, and the international place image is used to strengthen these associations.

Firms in regions with a less well-known image might co-operate in place marketing, to attract both tourists and new residents. One example is a small island with only 100 inhabitants on the west coast of Norway that have developed their own web page with map and pictures. Both the island and its industries, including the fish farming and processing industry, recreation, tourism and consultancy, are presented, with links to

the firms' own web pages. The entrepreneurial and creative spirit on the island is highlighted to promote the island both as a nice place to visit and as a good place to live. The island is called 'the pearl of Sunnfjord', and they claim they have a more promising development than most other rural communities. According to the text in their website, their population is growing and their inhabitants are optimistic and willing to take the initiative regarding further development of businesses based on both the food industry and tourism.

Geographical cluster

There is a range of activities involved in the cluster concept. In relation to building regional brands, firms need some common identities that single out 'us' from 'them', draw some kind of boundaries, and visualise or form a sort of network. (Jönsson et al. 2000, p. 4). A cluster might represent a shared identity and future vision (Asheim 2001). Proximity is a way of reducing transaction cost between 'the members', but it is also an advantage to customers, who might find a bundle of offers at the same place.

The purpose of marketing a place or a region may be a need to operate together in order to broaden the customer base. Some rural businesses, for example those offering niche products of food or craft, recognise that their primary business is to sell to tourists, and therefore they concentrate on getting onto the visiting agenda of the discerning tourist. For these firms, guidance for tourists is a major element of the

website. Groups of firms may link themselves virtually in order to stress their proximity, and hence the value of a tourist's visiting that specific place.

One example is Lindisfarne Island on the north east coast of England. It has a virtual map website, with a physical representation of the island and its one small village, with local businesses marked and accessible with clickable links. The site also provides basic tourist information on the island. In this case the island is already a significant tourist attraction, but the site encourages a higher level of expenditure by tourists by providing information on accommodation, craft shops, and places to eat.

Another example is Voss, a region with rich food production traditions, craft industries and a strong focus on local heritage. Several firms and farmers are delivering traditional and/or ecological food, and are marketing themselves as a sort of food, craft and tourist cluster. A local branch of Bergen University, is part of this and offers courses on issues like food culture, Western Norwegian culture and heritage including traditional costumes.

These are all examples that have given some references to how important geography is to these firms.

Concluding remarks

This paper has showed that geography is not dead, but is 'lived out' in many different ways on the web. Geography continues to matter as an organising principle and as a constituent of social relations (Dodge and Kitchin 2000). Locations are reproduced in cyberspace where various businesses, culture institutions, public institutions and private persons provide an extensive flow of information. Global flows of information on the Internet have a considerable impact as this gives the consumers an extensive opportunity to compare firms and places.

Human attention is a scarce resource in the new economy. Spatial labels might be of help to navigate and discriminate information on the Internet. Firms' websites need to reflect an appropriate image that cannot be left to chance, but has to be carefully designed.

In this paper, spatial elements of firms' websites have been identified, like physical address, accessibility, map, site and spatial references on web-addresses. These are used in web presentations to create spatial narratives. We have shown how these can be categorised combining the two dimensions real vs. abstract and local vs. global.

Local tradition, nearness to resources, place image and marketing, and geographical clusters are spatial narratives with links to the local resource base. These can be used

to achieve trust and to attract customers. Furthermore, these presentations might be used to attract new employees.

Social interaction with others in a bounded territory provides feelings of familiarity, identity and security (Paasi 1999). Parties need to have a shared framework in order to understand and trust each other. Spatial concepts might be a way of building trust, although exactly how much of this trust-building has been based on other ways of communication rather than by exchanging information on the net might vary. For instance, Bagchisen and Kuechler (2000) have claimed that social networking is crucial for the development of trust between customer and auditing firms. Here tourism might represent an interesting opportunity for other industries, especially food industries, enabling them to introduce their products directly to a broader customer base. Furthermore, tourism is an important part of the creation of place images, from which all industries might profit in order to attract both workers and customers.

A firm might also profit by presenting an international or global orientation, a virtual cluster or a fictitious image. We presume that the locational requirements are somewhat dependent on sector. In many ways, the food and tourism industries presented in this paper are the exact opposite of the 'footloose' industries (Johnston et al. 1995), which can locate anywhere because there is no orientation towards local resources or markets. There is scope for continuing research in examining firms'

awareness and their use of spatial symbols across different industries in the manufacturing and service sectors.

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