

# Beyond the Wheelers: the future of Lonely Planet

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Travelling man: Matt Goldberg got his first passport at 14 after persuading his parents to let him go to Germany for the summer. Photo: Wayne Taylor

Lonely Planet chief Matt Goldberg has guided the company on a rapid new-media journey during his few months in charge, not that he's writing off the humble printed book.

LAUGHTER is rippling through the void at the centre of Lonely Planet's Footscray headquarters, where a couple of hundred staff members have gathered for the company's first internal Hack Day.

As might be expected with a company that calls its offices the Campus, it's a fairly relaxed scene. Indeed, most staff look like they are fresh out of university. They perch on desks and tables and lean against brimming bookshelves, others sit cross-legged on the stairs and landings over the void. All eyes are on the ground floor, where colleagues are presenting their ideas for new web applications to three judges.

The Hack Day concept originated at Yahoo!. All staff, irrespective of their skill set, are invited to develop new web applications within a tight time frame. The Lonely Planet team was given 24 hours and beer and pizza to deliver ways to enhance the website. There are 19 ideas up for judging and each presenter gets 90 seconds to sell the idea before a squawking iPhone signals time up.

Matt Goldberg, Lonely Planet's chief executive, is boss judge. Beside him sits Kelly Brough, global online director. Looking over their shoulders is Tony Wheeler, the man who along with his wife, Maureen, decided 38 years ago there was a market for guidebooks for adventurous souls and set up a little company called Lonely Planet.

Goldberg sits comfortably among his staff, enjoying the show as much as anyone in the crowd around him. Indeed, he could easily be mistaken for a developer or Lonely Planet author, save for the striped shirt he is wearing. It's more Brooks Brothers than the in-favour Mambo.

Goldberg finds positives in each of the presentations, even one about goldfish feeding. What that has to do with travel remains a mystery to all, but it amuses the troops enormously. Goldberg likes fun. It's good for business. People who have fun are engaged and if people are engaged the chances are they will come back to Lonely Planet, and that is the point of Hack Day and, ultimately, the reason Lonely Planet's majority owner, BBC Worldwide, employed Goldberg. (BBC Worldwide bought into Lonely Planet two years ago, reputedly paying \$250 million. The Wheelers still own 25 per cent of the company and are on the board, and while not involved in the day-to-day business, retain an office in the building.)

Goldberg came to Lonely Planet from Dow Jones, where he was senior vice-president of digital strategy and operations. The press release that announced his appointment says he was in charge of the Wall Street Journal Digital Network, including WSJ.com, MarketWatch, Barrons.com and AllThingsDigital.com and their associated mobile, video and international sites. It also details Goldberg's accomplishments at multimedia publisher Bertelsmann Inc. All of which, according to the verbose release, made Goldberg the perfect fit "culturally and commercially" to lead Lonely Planet into the digital era.

Which was what Goldberg thought when a recruiter rang him last year to see if he knew anyone who would be interested in the top job at Lonely Planet down in Melbourne, Australia. "He wasn't asking me if I wanted it; he thought I might know someone," says Goldberg. "I said: 'You can stop your search. I'm your guy'.

"I had no plans to leave [Dow Jones]. I had seen any number of opportunities over the years in New York. I was happy in my job, happy in New York." But Goldberg wasn't about to let what he believed to be the best job in the world pass him by.

The decision to leave such a plum position and uproot from New York might have surprised those outside Goldberg's circle, but not those who know him well. Goldberg moves to a different drum and it is one of his own making. He cheerfully volunteers that he is not your average American. For one, he got his first passport at 14 after persuading his parents to let him go to Germany for the summer. (Official figures are hard to come by but it is believed that only 30 per cent of American citizens have passports.)

"My eyes were opened up to travel and its possibilities there. I remember being at Checkpoint Charlie. I was the

only American among a group of German people and I had to cross at a different entry point. I remember thinking: why is there a wall here? I couldn't quite process it. But I decided then that whatever I did with my life I wanted to break down walls, which I feel I am doing here [at Lonely Planet].&rdquo;

He explains: &ldquo;When you travel you learn and you make connections, and that helps break down misconceptions about places and people. As I see it, Lonely Planet is about empowering people to go out there and learn about the world.&rdquo;

Goldberg tells this story in his unprepossessing office. No corner office with a spectacular view for this chief executive. The best job in the world doesn't come with that kind of perk, but there are other advantages to working at the Campus, such as the Mad Dog Cafe, which serves up dishes from Lonely Planet's international cook books; a car washing service; and meeting rooms named after Joe Cocker and the TARDIS, from Doctor Who. There's even a fabulous snow-dome collection on permanent exhibition.

On the table between us is a battered copy of the 7th edition of Lonely Planet's guide to Australia. Inside it, an inscription in a youngish hand. It reads: M. Goldberg, University of Melbourne, 1995.

&ldquo;It's not here just for you. It's here all the time,&rdquo; says Goldberg of the much-thumbed tome, going on to explain that he picked it up en route to Melbourne University, where he had enrolled to do a graduate course in international studies.

&ldquo;It was an incredibly important time for me in many ways. Melbourne and Australia became part of me. Something of the attitude that is here, that feeling that we are all equal, entered my psyche then. I took it back with me and it changed how I worked.&rdquo; And at the end of his time in Melbourne he vowed he would return.

As is often the way with dedicated travellers, even chief executives being interviewed about the direction of the company they are leading, travel dominates the conversation.

I learn that at 16 Goldberg travelled solo through Spain. He fell in love with his wife on the trail to Machu Picchu. He has lived on four continents &ndash; North America, Europe, South America and Australia, but like ardent travellers everywhere it is the next journey that is uppermost in his thoughts. Five days after we talk Goldberg is to return to the US to introduce himself and his vision for the company to the American staff and the US media.

It is fair to say that Lonely Planet was committed to its new-media journey before Goldberg was lured down under. Word has it that the BBC threw \$10 million at the company's website after it took over two years ago. Whether that is true or not can't be confirmed, but today lonelyplanet.com attracts a staggering 5 million-plus unique hits a month and its Thorn Tree Travel Forum, the oldest of its kind, has 659,000 registered users with a new thread posted every 12 seconds (and still Hack Day judge Kelly Brough encouraged developers to link users back to Thorn Tree at every opportunity).

What is remarkable about Goldberg's watch is the pace of change. It is lightning fast and at this early stage appears to be making good his goal of delivering a steady stream of new product across all platforms. Here's just a sample: in six months, Lonely Planet has attracted more than 24,000 followers on Twitter. Facebook Connect, allowing users of the social network site to log on to Lonely Planet with their Facebook log on, was launched at the end of August. The company is the first travel publisher to make augmented reality products for Google Android handsets and it had more than 600 travel guides ready to go for last month's worldwide launch of Amazon's Kindle e-reader. Lonely Planet is one of the market leaders in paid travel content applications for the iPhone with more than 400,000 applications

This weekend, Lonely Planet is opening its doors to developers for a 48-hour Hacking marathon to generate even more ideas. But despite all of that, Goldberg is adamant that the print travel guides will remain the core of the company's business. &ldquo;I'm a big fan of books &mdash; they're portable, light and the battery never runs out.&rdquo; But they will evolve, he shrugs, as they always have.

That's how a company that began with one hand-bound guide called Across Asia on the Cheap grew into the No. 1 guidebook publisher on the planet, producing 500 titles and 6.5 million books annually, by adapting to changing times, consumers and distribution methods.

Lonely Planet might be the world's biggest guidebook publisher, but its research says the brand is embraced by a relatively small 10 per cent of independent travellers.

Goldberg believes a target of 55 per cent of that group is doable and crucial to future success. But here's the conundrum: the company's greatest asset, the strength of the brand, is something of a handicap in some quarters of the world where there is a perception that Lonely Planet is for the very adventurous. A flick through the website or an examination of the familiar blue-spined books debunks that.

These days, the website is just as likely to feature five things to do with children in Martha's Vineyard or which Italian

town boasts two of the world's best gelati shops &mdash; that's Neto, if you are interested &mdash; as where to buy dhurries on the road from Agra to Jaipur. And the Encounter guidebooks &mdash; city guides for travellers with limited time &mdash; are apparently going gangbusters.

But still the perception persists and doesn't sit easily with the world's largest market, the US, which, not incidentally, is the country in which Lonely Planet has the least penetration.

Goldberg thinks television will help out here and is promising more and different programs from Lonely Planet Television to woo his former compatriots. &ldquo;When they learn about us, they really like us,&rdquo; he says. Lonely Planet is also writing and publishing books more in keeping with America's travel style. Short, focused and local information trips organised by theme, interest and duration. Beyond the American remarks, Goldberg is reluctant to categorise potential consumers by age or type.

&ldquo;It's not about that. It's about a mindset, rather than an age or how much money you have. It's people who are open-minded, curious, who want to engage in the world, get to the heart of a place and do it with a little bit of adventure.&rdquo;

Ultimately, Goldberg believes Lonely Planet's reputation built over 36 years will ensure it thrives in the digital age.

&ldquo;Just as The Wall Street Journal is to business people, Lonely Planet is to travel people. The opportunity that is embedded in that relationship and in that trust is really big. We don't have to rely on an algorithm to take advantage of it.

&ldquo;Yes you can search for anything now with that little white box, but how am I going to choose when there are millions of choices out there?&rdquo; says Goldberg.

&ldquo;That's where we come in. Publishers will help you make the choice. And it's publishers like Lonely Planet that you can trust that will do best in this era.

&ldquo;No one else has the library of books or stable of authors that we do, but you can't have all the answers &mdash; we don't have all the answers &mdash; we've recognised this. There are people out there who know more than we do about certain subjects.&rdquo;

Hence, the IT team working furiously to expand the groups' section of the website, and the decision to incorporate bloggers with specialised knowledge on to the Lonely Planet site.

&ldquo;It is our job as a publisher now to connect those groups, to initiate conversations, sometimes using our own content, at other times aggregating third-party content [from groups or bloggers].&rdquo;

But that's what always happened at Lonely Planet right from the start, says Goldberg. &ldquo;The Wheelers asked readers for feedback in that very first book. It's not something I dreamt up.&rdquo; Kay O'Sullivan is Smart Traveller columnist