

Marketing Your Irish Holiday Property

A three-step guide to getting more visitors - and making more money - without breaking the bank



DonegalCottageHolidays.com



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A Simple Guide to Getting More Bookings and Curing Your Marketing Headaches



If we had written this report just a few years ago we would have been talking about the huge growth in the Irish property market and how that was leading to a similar boom in the number of holiday rentals. Tourism was still strong so these new property owners had no problems finding eager holidaymakers. Things were good.

A few years down the road and things have changed. Dramatically. The global economy has hammered tourism and the strong euro has done holiday let owners no favours. Of course, weak economy or not, you still need bookings - and for most property owners that means having some kind of marketing strategy.

And then there's the whole online marketing thing. Something like 90% of accommodation booking is now completed, or at the very least researched, online. Email marketing, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Bebo ... there are plenty of potential online marketing tools available but which ones are right for you and how, exactly, should you go about using them to get more bookings?

But chances are you never intended to become a marketing expert - and wouldn't have the time even if you were. Never mind the budget. So what's needed is a simple approach to marketing your holiday let that doesn't break the bank and that's simple to implement. That's exactly what we hope to give you here.

We've spent the last five years working with property owners to help them get more bookings and spend less doing it - first in Donegal with DonegalCottageHolidays.com and now nationwide with HolidayHomesIreland.com. We also know how it feels to be you - the reason we started this whole thing is that we own a couple of holiday lets ourselves, and wanted to figure out the best way of getting consistent bookings on a limited budget.

«you never intended to become a marketing expert - and wouldn't have the time even if you were.»

This report will give you an overview of some of the things you should be looking and a few simple ideas that you can put to use right away - all wrapped up in a neat little three-step plan: defining your market, creating your marketing message and finally choosing the best marketing methods to take that message to that market.

This simple three-step approach should help ensure your bookings go up and your headaches go down.

I hope you find this guide useful and if you have any questions or think we can be of some help, please feel free to email me directly at: **sales@DonegalCottageHolidays.com** or give me a call on **+44 28 71356080** . We'd love to hear from you.

Happy Marketing,

Brian

Your Three Part Marketing Strategy

Step One: Pick Your Market

Identify Your Target Market - and Who Your Most Likely Customer Is

Step Two: Choose Your Message

Develop a Message to Appeal to that Market – and Make Sure You're Consistent Throughout

Step Three: Select Your Methods

Find Methods to Take Your Message to Your Market - and Do it Cost-Effectively



Step One: Pick Your Market

In this section we'll look at the importance of having a focus for your marketing activities and how to learn more about your potential guests using simple customer sketches. You'll be able to create useful profiles, prioritise them and decide who your most likely customers are.

This information will help make your marketing more effective and help you choose the best marketing methods for your holiday property.

Who is Your Market?

Everything in marketing starts with a clear picture of your prospective market. It might sound obvious but it's still the step that most businesses overlook - and the same is equally true of holiday let property owners.

The problem is that it seems quite simple; your market is made up of the holiday makers coming to your town or city. That may be the case, but it's only part of the story.

There are all kinds of holiday makers: from couples on a romantic getaway to families with kids in tow. They're also coming for all kinds of reasons: to see the sights, visit friends and family or to attend a special occasion like a wedding. And then there's the business travellers, the ramblers, fishermen, golfers, customers who are looking for an inexpensive one night stay, long-term visitors...

You get the idea.

This matters because each of these potential types of guest is different and will expect and want different things. There's little chance that you can appeal to them all - so you need to have a good idea of who you *do want to appeal to* before you start spending your hard-earned money or limited time on marketing.

When you do - you can use what you know to better target your marketing, making it more effective and less wasteful. To get the ball rolling, we're going to do some sketching...



Creating Customer Sketches

In marketing parlance, it's called a 'customer persona' - for our purposes we'll catch it a sketch. A sketch is simply a way of representing the kinds of customers that you will try to attract and what you know about them.

Grab yourself a blank page and start by giving your prospective customer a name, let's call ours Roy Rambler and he enjoys long walks in the countryside. So what kind of person is Roy? Where does he come from? What does he do when he's in town? Is he wealthy? How old is he? How does he choose where to stay? Add any other questions you think might be relevant.

Some of these answers you'll already know - for others you'll need to do some research. Speak to your local tourist office to find out what kinds of visitors your city or town tends to attract. Find out what they're visiting for, how long they stay and what they like to do when they're in town. You should also speak to restaurant owners, shop keepers, tour guides and even other accommodation providers to round out your picture.

Add all this information into your sketch of Roy - you might even like to draw picture of him or cut out images from a magazine to help illustrate and create a more detailed mental image.

Once you've built up an outline of Roy, you can then start on your next sketch. You'll want to create customer sketches for a range of potential guests and then put them in order as to how likely they are to book with you, based on what you know about them and what you know about your property and your area.

These customer sketches are now your most important marketing tools - keep them safe.



Your Most Likely Customer

Having done your research and created a number of customer sketches, the final step in this stage of the process is to choose which types of prospective customers you will target. You could choose just about any kind of customer but obviously the idea is to select the kinds of customers who are most likely to help you reach your goals - whatever they may be.

Questions to Find Your Most Likely Customer

- Who is already staying with you? - The most likely kind of guest that you will attract is probably similar to the ones you already attract. If you cater to a lot of families then it's fair to assume that you will attract more families in the future.
- Who do your facilities suit? - If you own a small one bedroom apartment to let in Dublin City Centre you're much less likely to attract a family of five.
- What kinds of guests come to your area? - Your accommodation - and marketing - should match their expectations.
- What kinds of niches are not well catered for in your area?

Finally, there's also the question of whom you would *like* to attract. There's no point in knowing that you can attract an unlimited number of backpackers if that's not a market you want. That said, be realistic, whatever type of customers you decide to target, there needs to be enough of them to make the maths work.

Once you have some basic customer sketches in place, you should regularly revisit them, make change and add new detail. They will also be used regularly as a check for your marketing activities - i.e. will this marketing activity appeal to Roy Rambler?



Part Two: Choose Your Message

In this section we'll use what we know about our likely guests to create marketing messages that speak to them directly and make you stand out from the crowd. We'll see how your marketing message is much more than just the words on your website or directory listing and look at ways of maintaining a consistent message - and still be able to target niche groups.

Once you have created a simple 'elevator pitch' we can use this message to connect with your potential guests and determine the best methods for getting your message out there.

Defining Your Marketing Message

Any time a potential guest comes in contact with you and your 'business' that is an opportunity for you to convey your marketing message. What we'll look at in this section is how you can develop that message, how you can ensure that it is delivered consistently, how delivering a great experience is part of your message and how to create specific versions of your message to target individual niches.

First thing's first though - why do we need a marketing message at all?

Well, a marketing message isn't really about you. A marketing message is the impression that people take away once they've come in contact with your business. For example, if I visit your website, see your property listed in a directory or drive past your property I will come away with an impression – good or bad – and that impression will determine whether or not I'll book with you or with someone else. If it's a good impression, meets my needs and promises to be an enjoyable stay then I'll likely choose you.

Your job is to look at every chance a potential guest will have to come in contact with you - we can call these touch points - and make sure the impression they leave with ticks all the right boxes:

- It should speak directly to me and my needs
- It should be consistent across every touch point
- It should match or exceed my expectations

In other words, if we know that Roy Rambler is looking for a comfortable, quiet place, with full self catering facilities at a reasonable price then our message should tell him that our property is 'comfortable' and 'quiet' (speaking to his needs), we should ensure we use these terms throughout our marketing efforts (consistent) and should then be at pains to ensure that it lives up to those expectations, and then some, at a middle-of-the-road price (exceeding expectations).

Provided we do all these things, we've created a compelling marketing message to attract Roy and all the other Roys out there - through our marketing, word of mouth and repeat trade.

One Core Message



However, with all these lovely customer profiles it is tempting to try to be 'all things to all people' - targeting not just Roy but also Tony Tourist, Betty Businesswoman, Sally Shopper and all the rest.

The problem is, as we know, they may all want something quite different and so by trying to speak to everyone you run the risk of attracting no-one. Roy may love the idea of a tranquil setting but Sally Shopper is probably more interested in the distance to the shops, restaurants and night life. Betty might expect free broadband access, a parking spot and proximity to the business district - again not Roy's cup of tea at all.

If we simply list of all these things then we'll not only lose Roy (who doesn't want to be close to the business district or the shops or the night life) but also confuse everyone else to the point that they have no clear opinion of our property. Is it rural or city centre? Modern or period? Perfect for families or great for young couples and business folk? Cheap and cheerful or worth the money?

It is important then to focus your efforts on whom you would consider your 'most likely customer' - and create a clear, consistent message. Once you have a clear picture of whom your likely guests will be, this should actually be quite easy, based on what you now know.

- Who are they?
- Why are they coming to your area?
- What are they doing once they're here?
- What are they looking for in their accommodation?

Creating a strong marketing message simply means addressing these points: speaking directly to your most likely guest, doing it consistently and then living up to expectations. Get this right and you'll be the obvious choice.

Creating an Elevator Pitch

An elevator pitch is more usually associated with starting a business but for our purposes it will be useful to pin down our core marketing message. The idea of an elevator pitch is to convey what your business is about, why it's different and why someone should get involved (i.e. stay with you) - all in a few short lines.

Of course, it's not easy to distil everything that you might want to say about your offer in a few short sentences, so the easiest way is to start with something a little longer and work backwards.

1. Start by writing two paragraphs about your property
 - a. Include its name and location
 - b. Describe it using evocative terms (is it tranquil, period, modern, charming?)
 - c. Include a few concrete points like number of rooms, distance from a major attraction or any ratings you have
 - d. Include the kind of guests you cater for (from your sketches)
 - e. What makes you different than other properties?
 - f. What are the benefits of staying with you?
2. Once you've done a rough draft, take out one of your main customer sketches and see if the points you include match up to what they're looking for - then edit accordingly.
3. Set the edited paragraphs to one side and write another version - 1 paragraph at the most - that focuses only the key points from the first version
4. Keep refining and editing until you have a 2 paragraph version, a one paragraph version, a one sentence version and a series of bullet points

You'll end up with a few descriptions that you can use in different circumstances, but more importantly, a clear picture of what you do and how to explain it. Always make sure to review these descriptions against your customer sketches and in turn, review your marketing materials and everything else about your property to make sure it is all consistently 'on message'.



Sample Elevator Pitch

Here is a sample elevator pitch for a 3-bedroom seaside holiday cottage, which caters for families with young children. We'll call it Seaside Cottage.

Long Version: *Seaside Cottage is a 3 bedroom traditional holiday cottage based in Bundoran, Co Donegal, Ireland. Our charming cottage caters primarily for families, in particular those with young children, and provides a range of facilities and 'little extras' to make your stay both comfortable and enjoyable: 3 double bedrooms one with bunk beds, central heating, full kitchen with microwave, board games, TV, DVD player, a range of family-friendly video games and DVDs, board games. We're located a short 5-minute drive from the beach front and a range of shops, restaurants and activities and in easy reach of the beauty of Donegal. We pride ourselves on the warmth of our welcome, highest quality accommodation and willingness to go the extra mile to make your stay a comfortable one. (127 words)*

Edited Version 1: *Seaside Cottage is a family-friendly 3 bedroom traditional holiday cottage based in Bundoran, Co Donegal, Ireland. Located just 5 minutes from the beachfront, shops, restaurants and activities of this beautiful seaside town, we pride ourselves on the warmth of our welcome and highest quality accommodation, including: 3 double bedrooms one with bunk beds, central heating, full kitchen with microwave, board games, TV, DVD player, a range of family-friendly video games and DVDs, board games. (under 100 words)*

Edited Version 2: *Seaside Cottage is a family-friendly 3 double-bedroom holiday cottage based just 5 minutes from the beach at Bundoran, Co Donegal, Ireland. Catering mainly for families and those with small children, we do whatever we can to make your stay comfortable and enjoyable. (under 50 words)*

Shortest Version: *Seaside Cottage is a family-friendly 3 double-bedroom holiday cottage based just 5 minutes from the beach at Bundoran, Co Donegal, Ireland. (20 words)*

This is really just a rough example of how the process works - don't be afraid to spend a little time fine tuning your messages and create longer or shorter versions as suits your own requirements.

Consistency

There is a market out there for just about every kind of property from budget to luxury and rural to city centre - the trick is to match up what you have to offer with the prospective guests who are looking for it.

But as we know, every prospective guest has their very own wish list - a mental checklist that they will use to judge your offering. There's also a very good chance that they will encounter your offer in a few different ways before making their decision. They may see you listed in a directory, visit your website and check out pictures of your property. If your listing makes you sound like the perfect spot for families but your website mentions a romantic getaway for couples, then the family looking for a holiday let will probably go elsewhere. Your message is confused.

So how can you be consistent? Start by making a list of all the places where someone might encounter your property - then compare this list with the elevator pitch that you have crafted and the customer sketches you created. Do they all match up?

Here are a few touch points worth considering:

- Your property itself (facilities, decor, name)
- Any pictures that you use
- Your website
- Your listings in directories
- Payment options (a business traveller will likely expect payment by credit card)
- How you handle enquiries (email, phone)
- Pricing
- Business cards, flyers and any other printed materials
- Your personal appearance
- How you interact with guests (if at all)
- Any added extras you provide (welcome pack, free wifi, fuel for fire)

For example, if you're trying to attract young travellers and backpackers your marketing message might be 'clean, comfortable and inexpensive' - spotless yet simple might be the right idea for the decor, your website should also be simple and any photos you use should reflect this too. If families are your target market then this won't cut it - clean and comfortable are good but you'll probably also want to throw in some extras (like kids toys, cot and highchair or a DVD library) and stress the local 'kid friendly' facilities to back up your marketing message.

In short, everything should present the same, consistent and strong message.



Tweaking Your Message

Your Location

It's an unavoidable fact that the majority of guests are not coming for the brilliance of your decor or the facilities you provide but rather where you are based. It's location first and you second. They may be travelling for the sights, the shopping, the business or to see friends and family - so it's important that you consider this in your marketing strategy and when developing your marketing message.

Based on what you learned about your prospective guests when creating your sketches, you should have a pretty good idea about why people are coming to your area - whatever that may be. Find ways to reflect this in your marketing message but as always, make sure that whatever you say matches up to the kind of guest that you are trying to attract.

Chances are business customers won't care too much about visiting the Giant's Causeway in between meetings in Coleraine. Likewise, tourists looking for a distinctly 'Irish' experience in Galway might be interested in visiting the Aran Islands, but your proximity to the cinema is less important. Families might not like the pubs and nightlife of Temple Bar but backpackers certainly do. You get the idea.

And you can take this a step further by aligning your message with events, functions, sights and activities in your area - making this a core element of how you promote your property. For example, if you're fortunate enough to have something like the Galway Races, Derry's Halloween Carnival or Kilkenny's Comedy Festival in your town (or smaller versions thereof) then you can tweak your message in the run up to these events to better target the kind of guest that will be visiting. Maybe add an extra page to your website or put together a special package for that week or weekend.

Again, by speaking directly to the kind of guest you want to attract, you stand a better chance of being heard over all the other accommodation providers with washed out generic messages.

Targeting Niches

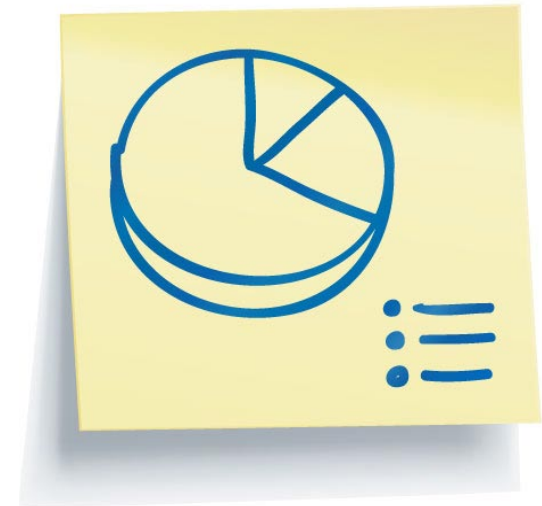
And if you can tweak your message for a particular event, why not tweak it for specific niches within your overall target market? Bundoran attracts a lot of holiday makers - but it also attracts a lot of holiday makers who are there for the surfing.

How could you tweak your message for that audience in particular?

This doesn't mean changing your core message but rather creating niche versions to promote directly to niche audiences - perhaps through an advertisement in a surf magazine or a separate page on your website.

Ultimately what you'll end up with is one core message, consistently applied throughout your marketing (and property) as well as specific niches within that overall market that you create slightly different versions of your message for.

A good example of this is toothpaste! The core message of toothpaste is that it will get your teeth clean, give you fresh breath and prevent decay. But they also have versions of toothpaste for people wanting whiter teeth, for kids and for people with sensitive teeth amongst others - but all still clean, fresh and free of decay.





Part Three: Select Your Marketing Methods

In this section we will start to connect the dots and use the customer profiles we created in Step One alongside the marketing message from Step Two to determine the best marketing methods to use. We'll also take a look at a number of useful marketing ideas - both online and off that you can use. After that, it's up to you to put your plan into action.

Marketing Methods (Your Toolbox)



Now that you have determined who you will focus your marketing efforts on, and what you want to say to them, the next step is to connect the dots - *taking that message to that market in the most effective (and cost-effective) way possible*. Again, if you have done your homework up to this point, picking the right marketing methods is surprisingly simple.

For example, our customer sketches tell us what Roy Rambler wants to hear - so how do we get that message to Roy? Well, through a little research we find out that Roy uses guide books to plan his journeys and choose where to stay. Based on that, if we want to target Roy then we should consider advertising in the guidebooks he reads. Simple enough.

The next step is to look at what's available in terms of advertising in the guidebooks and see if they will (a) allow us to put our message across and (b) offer value for money. If the guidebook offers full page glossy ads then we can certainly get our message across there - but if all they offer is a single line entry and a phone number then we'll struggle to differentiate ourselves and tell Roy why he should stay with us.

Likewise, we can estimate how expensive it will be to get our message out. If the guidebook covers all of Ireland then there's a good chance that a lot of our advertising spend will be wasted talking to people who are staying at the other end of the country - we need to factor this in.

In short, picking the right marketing methods boils down to three basic questions:

1. How well does this method target my chosen market (precisely)?
2. How well will it let me convey my message?
3. How cost-effective will it be - both in terms of cash and time?

Armed with your customer sketches, marketing message and a list of potential methods, it's simply a matter of judging each option against those criteria - feel free to give them a score out of ten on each point. The top scoring options will then be top of your list. (This is also a great way to judge new marketing opportunities as they are presented to you).

To help you get the ball rolling, we'll take a look at some of the marketing methods that you might consider for your toolbox.

Offline Marketing Activities

Despite the massive growth in online marketing and the huge number of people who now research accommodation and book, online, there is still potential in offline marketing. It can certainly help you target those people who are not yet using the Internet in their accommodation searches or catch people when they are away from the Internet or considering other aspects of their trip (say, for example at a tourist office). Effective offline marketing can also be way to drive prospective guests to your online marketing (i.e. your website or directory listing) - especially if you are up against stiff competition online.

Print Media

Print media is mostly made up of newspapers, magazines and tourist guides. Our biggest consideration here is how well they might target the people we are looking to attract. If you are targeting guests from abroad then Irish newspapers and magazines are probably of little use to you. If you are targeting guests from other parts of the country then they might be a little more useful but again we would need to consider what percentage of their total readership our target market makes up - everything else is wasted. Advertising in travel supplements would be an obvious way to reach out to your potential market but this can be expensive. A better option might be to target the print media through press releases or reviews of your property.

Local and regional tourist guides can be a highly effective way of reaching your target market as the readers are actively considering travelling to your area. Another benefit is that guides created by local and national tourism agencies (like Bord Failte or Visit Dublin) are often distributed internationally at trade fairs and the like. Often advertising will be limited to members of these organisations (which we'll look at a little later) - although your first priority might be to simply get listed in them and look at advertising options later.



Referrals

Referrals come in all shapes and sizes - and of course you should do everything you can to encourage people to refer you by ensuring that your property over-delivers and builds a good word-of-mouth reputation. That said, you can also take more deliberate actions to help increase the number of referrals you get - whether they be from past customers, other local businesses or your local tourist office.

Referrals from Past Customers

The simplest method for getting lots of referrals is to provide an exceptional product and service. Well, 'simplest' is probably not the right word, we all have perfectly satisfactory product and service experiences every day but we rarely go out of our way to refer people to the service. To get referrals, you need to be better than OK - you need to be 'remarkable' in the truest sense. That means going the extra mile and over-delivering against the promise of your marketing message.

In more practical terms, keeping in contact with your past guests and actively seeking out referrals are both good ideas. You can keep in touch with past guests (and encourage them to come back) with a simple email newsletter or even an occasional postcard - both will help to keep you front of mind and encourage word of mouth. It's also a good idea to ask for feedback (in a guestbook in your holiday home) and use any positive testimonials (with permission) in your marketing - these are the next best things to real life referrals.

Finally, done considerately, it's perfectly OK to ask your guests for referrals - simply explain that you get most of your business that way and so, if they had a good time, recommendations are appreciated. You might even go so far as to reward them in some way. How far you go down this road is up to you, and, as always, how you feel your market will react. It is worth considering however as one of the major benefits of targeting specific markets is that they are more likely to be able to refer customers like themselves to you. There's a good chance that Roy knows other Ramblers and may even belong to a 'Ramblers Society' - these kinds of referrals can do wonders for your business.



Referrals from Tourist Offices

Most tourist offices will tell you that they (a) only refer listed member accommodation providers and (b) treat all of them equally. That, no doubt, is the official line and for the cost of membership / listing with them, it's probably well worth it. Then again, there's also the 'people' factor. If staff within tourist offices are being inundated with enquiries and asked for recommendations, it'll certainly do you no harm to be front of mind. Make sure you personally introduce yourself to as many key staff as you can and attend as many industry specific networking events as possible. Dropping a few leaflets and business cards into their offices probably wouldn't hurt either.

Referrals from Other Businesses

Developing relationships with other local businesses should be core to your marketing strategy - whatever your target market. Local businesses can be a great source of direct referrals and positive word-of-mouth so, at the very least, make sure you introduce yourself to all the business owners in your area. Go to networking events and see if you can find anyone else involved in the tourism industry or even companies that have frequent business travellers (if that's part of your market). Other accommodation providers can be great for filling bookings - especially when they are busy themselves, as many small hotels and popular bed and breakfasts often are. Develop a good working relationship with them and they can send you their overflow - but do remember, relationships take time to build so don't expect them to start throwing people your way overnight.

And co-operation with other businesses can go much further than the odd referral. Here are a few ideas you might consider:

- Make sure to give anyone who could potentially refer business to you plenty of high-quality marketing materials
- Consider rewarding them for sending business your way - you can do this with a financial reward agreed in advance or simply send them a bottle of wine or voucher for a nice dinner when they do refer business your way. Rewarding referrals makes it much more likely that they'll do it again - and it's also just a nice thing to do.
- Agree a cross-promotional exercise with a related but non-competing business - ex. partner up with a gym to offer your guests 1/2 price access (perfect for the business market)
- Do a simple deal with local pubs, restaurants and takeaways to place your brochure in their businesses while you do the same for them (this can also be a great way to simply add value for your customers)

Creating Packages

The next step along those lines is to partner up with other local businesses to create packages. Here are a few examples to get your creative juices flowing:

1. Partner with a restaurant to offer a discount, gift certificate or fixed price meal for your guests. You can bundle the costs together or get a discount from the restaurant - either way it should be simple enough to build a small margin into the price, increasing your profit and delivering a value added extra for your guests.
2. Do the same with an outdoor activities centre in your area (if that's your market) - this could work both ways, their customers could stay with you and you could create packages for your guests with them
3. Team up with an events co-ordinator to package your accommodation in with their small scale events for people travelling from out of town.
4. Hook up with some local tour guides to offer their tours to your guests
5. You could arrange airport transfers with a private hire coach or taxi firm

In any of these examples, you could set up your package in any number of ways depending on what you want to achieve. Your packages could simply be a way of setting yourself apart from the crowd (airport transfers for business travellers) or a way of generating added revenues (a small margin on outdoor activity packages). The first step however, is always to get in touch with potential partners and arrange a chat over a coffee.

Whatever packages you do create though, make sure that they're in line with your target customer sketches and what they would want. If in doubt, why not ask them?



Tourism Agencies and Other Organisations

There is a lot that you can do with tourism agencies apart from getting the odd referral. Most tourism agencies, whether they are local or have a national remit, are membership based organisations, i.e. you pay an annual fee to become a member and benefit from their marketing activities and 'members-only' opportunities. Every organisation is a little different but in general you might expect.

- Listings on their website and in their printed marketing materials
- Referrals and/or direct bookings from their offices
- The chance to display your own brochures or marketing materials in their offices
- Networking opportunities
- Training opportunities
- Discounted rate display advertising in tourist guides
- The chance to run special offers through them
- The chance to participate in larger marketing initiatives

While these benefits vary from one organisation to the next, in general, membership is often worthwhile. The first step is to approach your own local agency (or national one in the form of Failte Ireland or the Northern Ireland Tourist Board) and find out what they offer and at what price. If you do decide to join, make a point of visiting them in person to introduce yourself and your property. After that it's up to you to make the most of the benefits on offer by being actively involved.

One additional consideration is ratings. Being able to promote a 4* rating from Failte Ireland (or other recognised awarding body) can be a big plus in marketing your self-catering accommodation. You can find a detailed breakdown of the classification requirements here (http://bit.ly/failte_requirements).

Other membership organisations can offer similar benefits – some are based on area, some are based on a particular publication or guidebook and some are open to anyone. Again, weigh up the benefits and costs like you would any other marketing expenditure and make sure that what's on offer is appropriate for your target market and marketing message.

Online Marketing Activities

It should go without saying that online marketing has enormous potential - it's how most people will start their accommodation search - so ignore it at your peril. However, that's not to say that online marketing is as straightforward as many would have you believe - there's no silver bullet. Like any kind of marketing it takes time, effort and attention to detail to be successful.

Sometimes it's just about making sure that people can find you and find out about you - in more competitive markets it might be about selling your property effectively and taking on the big players at their own game. Either way, there are certain basics that every accommodation provider should have covered - and that's what we're going to take a look at.

Your Own Website



Many self-catering accommodation providers often feel that they can get away without having a website. And they're right - you can get away with it. But, and it is a big but, getting away with it might not be your best long-term strategy. Developing your own web presence puts you in control of your marketing and, over time, can even be enough to replace your other marketing activities. Even in the short-term however, your own website can act as a central hub for your marketing activities. Many of the best properties listed on our sites (donegalcottageholidays.com and holidayhomeireland.com) also maintain their own websites. They use us as a front-line marketing tool to send them prospects and their own website to reinforce that marketing and (most importantly) do the same for all the other online marketing activities they undertake, from email marketing to social media.

The simplest way to picture this is as a hub and spoke model - your website is the hub and your online (and offline) marketing activities are the spokes sending prospective guests back to you. So assuming you are going to develop your own website (or have one at the moment that could be doing more for you) what do you need to consider?

- Domain and hosting - Buying a domain name is pretty cheap but try to pick one that is descriptive and that includes your property name if you can. For example, rosecottagedublin.com would be better than rosecottage.com on its own (not that you could get that name anyway). A dot com name is useful if it's available but you might also try .ie (or .co.uk) or .net if your preferred .com is unavailable. It's usually worth getting all of the above if you can - this stops anyone else using it and confusing your potential guests. You'll also need a hosting account (this is the space where your website will sit), in most cases a basic hosting plan will do unless you expect huge amounts of traffic or want to include lots of audio, video and pictures in your website. Even then you'll not likely spend much more than €10-20 a month. Blacknight.ie is a good hosting and domain name option for businesses in Ireland.

- Usability - This should be first on your list. Your website needs to be easy to use and easy to navigate. Get rid of anything that might get in the way of your prospective guest finding the information they want - like animated loading screens or complicated navigation menus.
- Sales Focus - Make sure you have a clear idea of what you want visitors to your site to do. Make those actions simple and prominent throughout the website. If for example, you want people to phone to enquire, don't hide your phone number on the contact page - put it front and centre in the header of every page. You should also give some consideration to the copy on your page. If you can afford it, have a professional copywriter edit your text, or at the very least, get a few people (not friends or family) to read through it.
- Professional - Professional doesn't have to mean expensive. Simple designs and well-written text can do wonders for your website. Unless you're an experienced designer, don't try to do it yourself. There are plenty of ways to get a professional looking website built without spending a fortune. A few hundred euro is usually plenty for a simple website (we'll be happy to put you in touch with a few designers in this price range if you need) and it's worthwhile looking at a content management system like Wordpress.org (it's free) for a simple, professional layout and plenty of customisable themes to choose from.
- Tons of information - People come to your website in search of information, make sure you give it to them. Prices, pictures and location maps are probably the three biggest points.
- Content Management - And if you're going to have lots of content, make sure you have a good content management system to back it up and allow you to make changes yourself - without having to go back to the designer every time. Again, wordpress is a great solution for this as anyone with basic word-processing skills can update and add pages.
- Online Booking - Online booking isn't a must have for small self-catering properties but it is nice to have. The only problem usually is the expense and time involved in maintaining it. There are free and pay-per-booking options available so have a look around to find one that suits you. Again, it's not a must have but if you don't go with an online booking form make sure you do have a simple email enquiry form that people can use - and respond to it quickly!

Search Engine Marketing

If you do have your own website then the next step is getting it found - and for the most part that means search engine optimisation (SEO) and pay per click advertising (PPC).

Search Engine Optimisation

Over 120,000,000 people use Google's website every month - and although Google is by far the biggest search engine, it is just one of hundreds including Yahoo, Ask and Bing. With that sort of volume, search results as a marketing tool are pretty hard to ignore and what's more, they also deliver targeted visitors to your website. In short, if someone searches for 'accommodation in your town' you want to be as close to the top of the results as possible.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of making a site more likely to rank highly for chosen search terms. At the basic level, good SEO is pretty straightforward and while you might not be challenging sites like TripAdvisor or Expedia in the rankings, *even simple improvements can put you ahead of your competitors.*

Search engines rank websites on a complicated array of factors but almost all of them value two key points: **content and links**. Content is the stuff that appears on your website, the words, pictures and other bits like video and audio. When someone types 'donegal cottages' into Google, Google runs off and looks for web pages that have that text included. The first step then is to decide what terms and phrases you would like to be found for and then to include those terms in your website. These can be included in the content on the page, your page titles, how you name your links, how you describe any images that appear and even the name of your website.

But if it was just a matter of the words on the page, people would simply create pages stuffed full of key words and nothing else (and some do). To make sure that reputable sites are displayed at the top of the results, the next thing that search engines consider are links into your website.

It acts a little like a popularity contest. If Site A creates a link to Site B, then the search engines count that as one vote for Site A - more votes means a higher placement. Of course, not all votes are counted equally. If the Irish Times linked to your website you'd expect that to matter more than if Joe Bloggs down the road did - and by and large it does. Each site has its own ranking, so each vote is therefore given a weight - the more important a website, the more its vote is worth.

In short, you want to get as many votes as you can from established and popular websites.

A Word of Warning:

There are lots of unscrupulous 'SEO' companies out there. If you do decide to hire someone to help with your SEO, get plenty of references first.

Better yet, spend some time to learn the basics for yourself.

Pay-Per-Click

When you look at the results of a search using Google or another search engine, you will usually see two columns. The results on the left are the natural search results based on the normal search engine algorithms. The results in the right column (and sometimes highlighted above the normal search results) however are advertising. In particular these are called pay-per-click ads as the advertiser only pays (anywhere from a few cents upwards) whenever someone actually clicks on the advertisement and visits the corresponding website. Google's version is called Google Adwords and anyone, including you, can place ads in this area - where your ad appears is based on how much you are prepared to pay.

So say for example that you want to get found for the term 'holiday cottage cork'. You can bid on this term based on the maximum you are willing to pay per visitor to your website – and set a daily or monthly budget. So long as you have a little money to play with, this can be a quick way of getting traffic to your website.

As with search engine optimisation, you want to spend some time figuring out what terms and phrases that you want to target. Google Adwords has useful tools to help generate new ideas and estimate how much traffic those terms will deliver - and how much that'll cost you. You should also do simple research by searching for any terms that you are considering - the more ads you see in the right hand column, the more you can expect to pay to get yourself to the top. You'll also want to take your time in creating the small text ad that appears, as this will have a major impact on the number of people who click through - as always you should base this ad on the kind of guest you are targeting and your overall marketing message.

All that aside, make sure to set your daily and monthly budgets so that you keep within a figure that's comfortable for you - and that you don't blow it all in one day. Once you're started, make sure to keep an eye on how your ads are performing and test new combinations of advertisements and keywords to find the best mix for you.

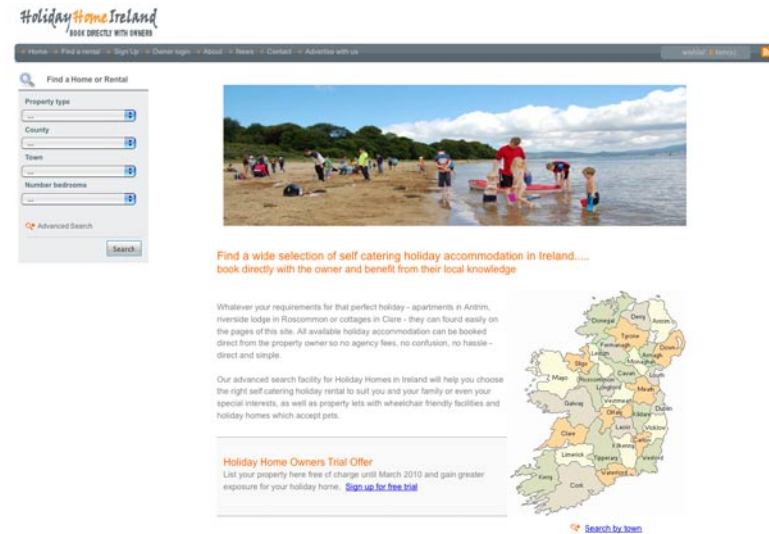
The screenshot shows a Google search for 'donegal cottages'. The search bar contains the text 'donegal cottages' and the search button is visible. Below the search bar, there are two columns of results. The left column contains organic search results, including links to 'Donegal Cottage Holidays', 'Self Catering Donegal', 'Stunning Holiday Offers', 'Donegal Holiday Cottage Ireland - Self Catering Holiday Home ...', 'Pet Friendly Cottages in Donegal Ireland', 'Donegal Irish Cottage Rentals | self catering holiday homes in Ireland', 'Irish Cottages in Ireland – Cottages in Donegal Ireland', 'Ireland Self Catering Cottages Donegal', and 'Donegal cottages. Find and book 2 bedroom cottages in Donegal ...'. The right column contains sponsored links, including 'Irish cottages', 'Donegal Holiday Cottages', 'Holiday Cottages Donegal', 'Shamrock Cottages', 'Irish Holiday Cottages', 'Sligo Cottage', and 'Donegal Accommodation'. The search results are dated 'Results 1 - 10 of about 275,000 for donegal cottages (0.24 seconds)'.

Listings Websites

There are literally dozens of websites out there that will happily list your self-catering accommodation for a fee. Some are good, some are appalling - and while low fees might be appealing, it is easy to waste your money. We know; we've done it ourselves plenty of times.

That, of course, is one of the reasons we started DonegalCottageHolidays.com and HolidayHomeIreland.com - to create a simple way for accommodation owners to list their properties and get enquiries. We certainly suggest checking us out but in more general terms, here are a few things you should be looking for when choosing a site to list on.

- **How much control do you have?** - Being able to update your listings as and when you want is a great feature to have if inspiration hits you in the middle of the night or you want to plan for local events.
- **How easy is it from the guest's perspective?** - If users find it difficult to find what they want, they'll also find it difficult to find you.
- **How do their sites perform in the search engines?** - Any site that offers to get you high in the search engine rankings should be able to do it for themselves.
- **How much information can you upload? How many pictures?** - Prospective guests like information and lots of it. A good site will let you upload tons of text and plenty of big pictures.
- **Who's in charge of taking bookings and payments?** - Some sites will allow guests to book online (sometimes for a percentage of the booking), others let them book directly with you. Keeping control of the booking process can be useful so give this some thought.
- **Does it target your market?** - Location targeted sites are often better than less focused ones.
- **Who else is listed on the site?** - Where are your competitors listing themselves? This can be a good indication - but fast growing new sites might give you the advantage.
- **How is the site promoted?** - Again, if the site is good at promoting themselves, that's a decent indication that they can promote you well too.
- **What does it cost?** - This should be the last consideration but obviously worth factoring in. The idea is to ensure a positive return on investment. A site that costs €200 a year is well worth it if it delivers €2000 worth of bookings - a free site that gives you nothing isn't worth the effort.



As with any purchase, recommendations and testimonials are good indicators (so feel free to contact other property owners who list on a site) but one of the simplest measures of a listing site is how often you find it in your own searches. As a final note, beware of sites promising you the moon for next to no money (or even free) - unless they can back it up with proven results

Top 10 Tips for Getting the Most from Your Online Listings

Most of the rules that apply to your own website also apply to listing your property on a 3rd party website but there are a few extras tips worth mentioning. Here is our top ten:

1. Use **high quality photos** and set your best one as the main (or first) photo in your listing
2. Include as many **contact options** as possible (phone, email, mobile)
3. Use **seasonal photos** - use snow scenes in winter, blue skies in summer etc...
4. Keep on message and **tailor your descriptions** to your target market
5. Don't be afraid to let your **personality** come through and **share your local knowledge**
6. Keep **Search Engine Optimisation** in mind when writing the text for your listing
7. Spend time on **summaries and extracts**, these are often the first things people will see when presented with your property in a list of others - use your elevator pitches
8. **Avoid clichés** - you want to set your listing apart
9. **Update your listing regularly** and include details of upcoming events in your area, keep it fresh
10. Make sure to check your **grammar and spelling**, it matters

Email Marketing

The best use of email marketing is to keep in touch with previous guests - generating repeat bookings and word of mouth. Email marketing **should not** be used to spam prospective guests. Even if you are able to get your hands on an 'above board' list of prospects, it is highly unlikely that they will respond to unsolicited email. First off, there is no way of knowing if they are planning a trip to your part of the world. Secondly, even with the best demographic information it's difficult to make sure that these cold prospects will match the kind of guest that you're trying to attract. The best case scenario is that a fraction of 1% will respond - worst case scenario is that you will waste your time entirely and annoy a lot of people in the process.

Permission based email marketing on the other hand is hugely effective, inexpensive and, when done well, even welcomed. Permission or opt in email marketing is based on your guests willingly providing their email addresses in return for information that you will provide. Your communications are therefore expected and, provided they are of value, welcomed.

You can start this process by making gathering email addresses part of your process. This is easily done at the time of booking but make sure to let guests know that you'll occasionally send them special offers, news or updates. Once you've started to build your list you will need some kind of email software to manage your lists and send out professional quality emails. Your normal email software simply won't cut it for this kind of thing - as your list grows sending tons of emails could end up getting you blacklisted by Internet Service Providers (i.e. they think you're a spammer). A reputable bulk email service will have agreements with Internet Service Providers to make sure they get through.

Over and above this, a professional email service will help you organise your contacts into different lists (perhaps based on your customer sketches?). You will also be able to create professional looking email templates including your branding, and track responses to the messages you send.

So what should go into your emails? Here are a few ideas:

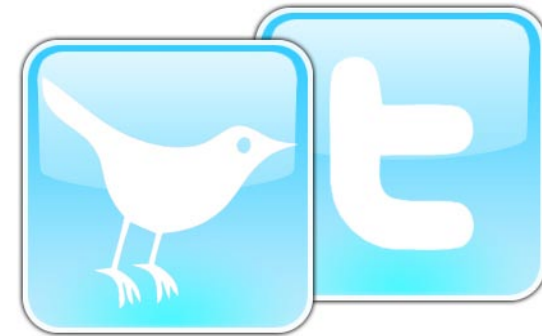
- An email before big events or key travel times, talking about what's coming up in your area (keep the sales pitch light)
- Special offers or details of packages you've created
- A quarterly newsletter style email promoting your area and perhaps some nice pictures of happy guests
- A planned series of follow up emails asking for feedback after a guest's stay

Although there's no replacement for your own list, keep email marketing in mind when discussing potential partnerships and referrals with other businesses. An endorsement from them via email (i.e. them to their list) can be a great way of spreading the word.

Social Media Marketing

From Twitter to Facebook and YouTube to blogs, social media marketing is all the rage at the moment - but how can you use it to market your property? We could literally fill a book (and many people have) with tips and strategies for using social media in marketing but often the best bet is to dive in and have a go. That said, we'll have a quick look at some of the main social media tools that you might consider using.

Twitter - The social networking site du jour, Twitter allows you to publish short messages (140 characters only). The messages are meant to be about 'what you're doing' but in reality people use it in all sorts of ways: to keep in touch with others, to point out interesting links and to ask questions for example. Once you've created an account, you can start following people, which simply means subscribing to their updates. You will only see the updates of the people that you subscribe to and, in turn, others will only see your updates if they choose to subscribe to them or visit your profile page.



The simplest way to approach Twitter is to think of it like a big networking event - introduce yourself to people, join in the conversation and have something interesting to say and people will take notice. After a while you can start to introduce information about your property and what you have to offer - just don't focus on this from the outset, as you don't want to come across as 'spammy'. One approach is to avoid talking about your property directly at all - and talk about what's happening in your area instead. If you become associated with your area, people will be more likely to find you when looking for information about that area or point others in your direction as a local expert - leading to more interest in your property too.

A few quick tips for using Twitter:

- use something like Tweetdeck (it's free) to help organise your Twitter usage
- include your own name and link to your website in your profile
- use Twitter Search (search.twitter.com) to find people to follow and join in conversations about your area
- follow people you know
- don't follow dozens of people right away
- don't use direct messages to spam people
- use Twitter as a listening tool first to get a feel for how it works
- use a tool like TwitPic to link to photos
- check out the tutorials available on the site to get a hang of the lingo

Facebook - Facebook is similar to Twitter in that you can follow people, be followed back and let those people know what you're up to. Facebook however gives more scope for building up your profile with images and links. If you are using Facebook for business you might consider setting up both a personal account and a Facebook Fan Page for your business - this increases the number of 'friends' that you can have.

A simple way to start on Facebook is to take photos whenever you visit your property and add these to your profile. You can also write short text updates about what you're up to and what's going on in your area. With Facebook and all social sites, you need to keep updating your profile regularly and be an active participant in the community. It's bad form to talk about your holiday let all the time, but keeping active will keep your name in front of people, especially if you link up with local people or others in the tourist trade. Facebook and other social networking sites will also normally have groups for people with shared interests - have a look for groups associated with your area or topics of interest to your target guests. Getting involved in a group for surfers in Ireland will not only help introduce you to that market but will also be a great source of information for you.



YouTube - YouTube is an online video sharing website and there are plenty of others like Vimeo and Viddler. Creating video can be a great way to help differentiate your listings and website (as we'll discuss below) but adding regular video snippets to YouTube is also a great way to get yourself found for people looking for information about your area. Try doing short 2-3 minute videos about local sites and places of interest. When you upload them, make sure to use your keywords and location name in titles, descriptions and tags. If you're handy with video editing software you might include some simple graphics displaying your website details.

Blogs - What started out as personal online diaries have become mini publishing platforms - some of which even power major sites like CNN.com. We're talking about blogs, or more specifically, blogging software. There are plenty to choose from including hosted versions like Wordpress.com, SquareSpace or Blogger (i.e. these exist on a third party website) and self-hosted versions which you can host on your own website. Having it on your own site (ex. www.mysite.com/blog) will normally give you more flexibility and help improve your SEO.



The idea behind a blog is that you create regular updates, usually on a given topic. One approach for blogging for accommodation providers is to publish updates about your area - what's on, interesting sites, places to go and things to see. In doing this you increase your chances of getting found by people searching for information about your area, demonstrate your local knowledge and easily create marketing messages for your niche markets. (For example, you could review a few country walks to attract Roy Rambler or add some snapshots of the local beach to tap into the surfer market).

You can incorporate text, images and video in a blog - it's also a great place to be a bit more informal and let your personality shine through. You can even use your blog to elicit feedback from your guests - like a flexible guestbook.

Other Social Sites to Consider

- **Bebo** - This is particularly popular with a younger audience but if you're targeting backpackers it might be worthwhile taking a look.
- **LinkedIn** - This is a professional networking community, good for business contacts.



LET US CREATE A YOUTUBE VIDEO FOR YOU

Send 20 good quality photos (10 of your holiday home and 10 of your locality) to sales@donegalcottageholidays.com and we can create a video presentation for you. It's free of charge for advertisers on donegalcottageholidays.com

Using Multi Media Content

Whether it's for your own website, a directory listing or for any other use, multi-media content is not only the future of online marketing but also exactly what customers want to see.

Using Pictures - Great pictures are an absolute must for marketing your property - online or off. Here are our tops tips for great pictures:

- Use a high-quality digital camera
- Save your pictures in a variety of sizes and types so you can use them in different settings
- Take lots of shots so that you can use the best
- Include pictures of both the inside and outside of your property
- Include pictures of your key selling points - match your photos to your customer sketches
- Take your snaps on a sunny day
- Tidy up and set the stage before you get started
- Keep people and animals out of your pictures
- Keep the software to a minimum - a little touch up is OK, making cloudy days sunny is not
- Consider hiring a professional for an hour or two (you can get someone for €100 or so)



Using Video - Video is not expected (yet) but it can be a great way of setting your property apart. Here are a few ideas:

- **Keep your video short** - 1 or 2 minutes is fine, any more than that and you risk boring your prospects
- **Edit your video** to get rid of the boring bits - there are plenty of free and low cost video editing packages available
- You **don't need an expensive camera** - Flip Video sell a handheld high-definition camera for around €200
- Video is trickier than photos, **consider hiring a pro** to either create it or edit your footage together (a good **multimedia student** might also be an option)
- Consider a **video montage** made up of still photos and using a simple soundtrack to bring it to life

Multi-Media for SEO - Most search engines still prefer text when ranking websites so consider including text alongside your video and images. You should also describe any pictures or video that you add to your website or listings (you'll often be able to set either captions or 'alternative text' which are designed as an alternative for people with visual impairments). Finally, make sure to upload your images to a site like Flickr (www.flickr.com) and your videos to something like YouTube (www.youtube.com) - label and title them using some of your keywords as they often show up highly in search results, especially on Google.

Bringing it All Together – Congratulations! You've Just Created a Simple Marketing Plan

Provided you've done your homework, you've now got everything you need for a simple, effective marketing plan. A target market, a message for that market and a list of methods for connecting the two.

So what else do you need?

Perseverance. Nobody ever built a business overnight, and while you might just be trying to find enough guests to fill your one bedroom holiday apartment, you still need to treat it like a business. That means taking the right actions over time to implement your marketing plan - and making changes and improvements along the way.

Start by creating a simple 'to do' list including your guest sketches, drafting your marketing message and drawing up a shortlist of marketing methods to try out. Be realistic about how much time, effort and budget you can allocate to the process and look for quick wins - i.e. the marketing methods that are quick and easy to implement and likely to generate new guests quickly - as well as more fundamental building blocks like your website. Get started on these ASAP and leave the more adventurous stuff to the side until you've made some progress.

Once you are up and running with your marketing, it's hugely important that you find ways to track your results and see exactly what is - and isn't - working. If you list your property on three different sites (including DonegalCottageHolidays.com of course) then make a note of every enquiry and confirmed booking. You can do the same with just about every other activity you undertake. Once every few months sit down and take a look at all the results (being realistic about how long some methods will take to bear fruit).

The definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again and expect to see different results. So, if something isn't working, don't simply ignore it - either make changes to improve your results or stop doing it altogether and focus your energies elsewhere. By the same token, if something *is* working, keep doing it and invest more as you go.

Ultimately a good marketing plan is only as effective as the time and effort you put into making it work. Be practical, don't look for marketing silver bullets (they don't exist) and be consistent and you'll see the tangible results: more enquiries, more bookings and more profit. And make sure to let us know how you get on - we'd love to hear from you.

All the best,

Brian - sales@DonegalCottageHolidays.com

About DonegalCottageHolidays.com

This free report was created by DonegalCottageHolidays.com - one of the leading sites for accommodation booking in Donegal, helping over 500 holiday let owners fill their vacancies and make more money, without spending a fortune in the process.

We also publish HolidayHomeIreland.com - a growing listing site where holiday home owners throughout Ireland can advertise their properties and potential guests can book directly, keeping you in control of the customer relationship.

DonegalCottageHolidays.com



Why Advertise with DonegalCottageHolidays.com & HolidayHomeIreland.com?

Top Search Engine Placement

We are currently on the first page of the 3 major search engines for the term **holiday home Ireland** – helping you get seen by more potential customers. The results are even more impressive for **donegal cottages**.

Totally Automatic

The site is totally automatic; once you have filled in the property form your details will be converted to a web page instantly.

No Delay

There is no delay, we don't want people who are looking for your type of property today to book with someone else. Add just a few details and then update any time, day or night. You're completely in control - meaning you can test new ideas, create marketing efforts for events and change your pricing to fill rooms up fast.

Write as much as want

Write as much as you like, no limits, and add up to 10 photos. More photos usually lead to more business.

Enviably Track Record, Great Stats and Tons of Cool Features

- Property owners like our site because it gets them business. Simple.
- Our web stats show thousands of visitors each and every month.
- Add your own property in minutes, and make changes 24hrs a day - you're in complete control
- Write as much as you want about your property, no limits. Sell your marketing message.
- Site visitors can create a printable wish list
- Comprehensive mapping feature using Google maps.
- PayPal options to collect credit card payments online
- Add 10 large colour photos, no postage stamp size pics here
- Have your photos shown in our summary listings not just your page.
- Have your details and photos sent to everyone who enquires automatically
- Free help videos
- Free YouTube videos created for you
- People like our site because owners write so much, the photos are large and it's easy to find an ideal property

Resources

Our Sites:

[Http://www.holidayhomeireland.com](http://www.holidayhomeireland.com)
<http://www.donegalcottageholidays.com>
<http://www.holidayireland.net>

More Useful Marketing Tips and Resources:

<http://holidaylettings.co.uk/resources/>

Website Design:

<http://wordpress.org>

Social Media Sites:

<http://twitter.com>
<http://facebook.com>
<http://linkedin.com>
<http://bebo.com>

Selected Irish Tourism Boards, Websites and Support:

Bord Failte: <http://www.failteireland.ie/Developing-Enterprises/Listed-Self-Catering>
Northern Ireland Tourist Board: <http://nitb.com/>
Discover Ireland: <http://www.discoverireland.ie>
Dublin Tourism: <http://www.visitdublin.com>
Cork Guide: <http://www.cork-guide.ie/>
Galway Tourism: www.galwaytourism.ie
Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau: <http://www.gotobelfast.com/>
Derry Visitor and Convention Bureau: <http://www.derryvisitor.com>



<http://youtube.com>
<http://vimeo.com>
<http://flickr.com>

DonegalCottageHolidays.com

DonegalCottageHolidays.com

E: sales@donegalcottageholidays.com

T: +44 28 71356 080