

Piers Ford escapes the car fumes of London to talk to Sarah Callender Beckett in the delightful surroundings of Combermere Abbey seated in deepest Shropshire.

Thoroughly Modern Marketing

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As chairman of Premier Cottages Direct, Sarah Callender Beckett is a formidable standard bearer for luxury self-catering tourism. Quality, you feel, is her watchword. Woe betide anything that doesn't come up to scratch, whether it's the designer interiors of the stable conversions on her Shropshire estate or the integrated marketing strategy behind Premier Cottages Direct's determination to be a commercial force in Britain's sorely buffeted holiday industry.

Premier Cottages Direct is a collective of independent holiday cottage owners, founded in 1996, which eschews agencies in favour of direct customer contact, forged via a highly interactive, data-driven website and a brochure packed with the cream of British rural retreats, including Callender Beckett's cottages at Combermere Abbey. The ETT Group provides much of the marketing communications infrastructure for this increasingly sophisticated organisation, which now has over 150 members with more than 1000 properties throughout the United Kingdom. > page 10



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...or the integrated marketing strategy behind Premier Cottages Direct...**

Premier Cottages Direct has always had a top drawer product to sell. Now it also has an integrated modern marketing strategy to match



< Founded as a Cistercian monastery in 1133, Combermere has been a family home since Henry VIII turned the abbot out in 1536 and gave the estate to Sir George Cotton. One of his descendents, Sir Stapleton Cotton, earned the title of Viscount Combermere for his military exploits under the Duke of Wellington. To celebrate his elevation, throughout the 1820s he developed the estate, giving the abbey a Gothic facelift and, in 1837, building the stables to house 36 horses and several carriages.

However, within just two generations, the Combermeres were bankrupt. In 1919, the estate was bought by the Crossley family, the dynasty of Mancunian industrialists behind

Crossley Cars and Crossley Engineering. In Combermere, Sarah Callander Beckett's great grandfather found a domain which met his desire for the pleasures of country life within easy reach of the engine rooms of his business back in Manchester: an aspiration which chimes pleasingly with those of modern visitors who book cottages here to make their own rural escapes from busy and complex lives.

Sarah Callander Beckett, who lived here for much of her childhood, inherited Combermere Abbey from her mother in 1992, returning from an international career in marketing and public relations to try and make some commercial sense of an estate facing typical and urgent problems. > page 12

**Above:
Combermere Abbey, a family home since 1536**

**Right:
Part of the stable conversion housing the designer interiors of Combermere's luxury holiday accommodation**

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A TASTE OF PREMIER COTTAGES DIRECT'S PROPERTIES



Bruern Stable Cottages - Oxfordshire



Blaize Barn - Suffolk



Wolfen Mill - Lancashire



Spring Lake Lodges - Cotswolds



Red Doors Farm - Devon



The Sherriffs - Herefordshire



Spacious interiors come as standard at Combermere

‘The estate had undergone all the changes that these places had experienced,’ she says. ‘My grandmother told me that when she moved here in the 1920s, there were 11 servants living in the house. In Sir Stapleton’s time, the estate probably employed about 50 people – not including those involved with the farm enterprises – simply to make sure that the parkland, woodland, the house and all the activities associated with living somewhere like this were supported. Of course, this is a lifestyle none of us have any more. But the buildings, now listed and with huge legal maintenance obligations, are still of a size to support it! Simply, we faced very large expenses in terms of big buildings for which we had to find uses.’

Callander Beckett turned to the stables, an appealing red brick structure with multiple gables, built around three sides of a cobbled courtyard and situated a useful distance across the park from the abbey. Inspired by her professional experience in the tourism sector she conceived the idea of luxury holiday accommodation for discerning customers. After three years of planning and raising the finances, and a further year of building, the stables were converted into 10 cottages, each with an interior designed by a well-known name from the fashion industry.

‘From the start, it seemed quite obvious that we needed to tip the scales and reverse things’, she says. ‘So now, at full capacity, we can have 49 people paying to come here, rather than me having to pay 49 people to let me enjoy a life that I couldn’t possibly afford! But it’s wonderful because what we now have here is a commodity which, I believe, more and more people want: peace and quiet, in a protected environment, with a safety factor for children and the enjoyment factor of being surrounded by nature as it was intended with the opportunity to experience it.’

Callander Beckett has built a seductive portfolio of luxury add-on services. As well as the outdoor pursuits and sports which are available on tap, guests can arrive to home cooked meals and fridges primed with cool drinks. They can buy homemade food from the freezer and indulge in a range of spa therapies.

‘My view was that the exterior was quite extraordinary and unusual, so the interiors needed to reflect that too,’ she explains. She approached designers who might consider creating the interiors for the cottages. The first wave included names and brands like Jane Churchill, Nina Campbell, Laura Ashley and Ralph Lauren.

‘They were really intrigued by the idea of a two-bedroom cottage they could style and use for their own PR purposes afterwards,’ says Callander Beckett. ‘That saved me a lot of advertising money because at the end of doing a major building like this, marketing and advertising funds were rather thin on the ground. And it paid off, because people like to come to different ones to try them out.’

‘I’d lived in America, where five star means five star, and that’s what we went for, inside and out. When we started, I hadn’t been involved in self-catering. I just felt there was a market for people to come and be pampered, spoiled, somewhere that was home away from home, aesthetically and sympathetically put together.’

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All the cottages are named after people who have had some connection with the estate throughout its history. Callander Beckett chose to be interviewed in *Empress*, which had just been 'refreshed' for the new season. And on a mild spring day, with birdsong drifting through the open door and the hay-like scent of seagrass wafting up from the newly covered floor, the aesthetic and sensual success of the project comes gently into focus. This is what Premier Cottages Direct customers want, whether it's for a summer holiday, a long weekend in the winter, a family reunion or a few days to recharge the batteries.

But however enticing the interiors, and however good the walking and the fishing – and here they would be hard to beat – the economic imperative remains the driving force. An eclectic selection of reclaimed outbuildings isn't the only thing Callander Beckett has in common with the other members of Premier Cottages Direct. They also share the need for a sophisticated and thoroughly modern approach to marketing.

As she points out, these are tough times in a competitive industry. British tourism has been under siege in recent years. The rise of the package holiday, the foot and mouth crisis and an uncertain economic climate have all inflicted pain. Changing working patterns have also altered our holiday habits.

In addition, during the 1990's, industry consolidation meant that exclusive holiday home owners and their customers, used to the service levels of specialist agencies, found themselves under the umbrella of larger tour operators less geared to meeting the needs of a market driven by individual tastes and needs.

So in 1996 Premier Cottages Direct was born. Founder Robert Dosser, another owner, galvanised a group of fellow independents, including Sarah Callander Beckett. Through a series of meetings, the co-operative evolved around the production of a brochure which would feature members' property and allow customers to book directly with the owner.

Members were given shares for their interest in the non-profit making company. Customer databases were shared, creating a strong mailing list based on direct rather than agency bookings, and board members assumed responsibilities which reflected their skills and experience. Callander Beckett assumed the marketing brief and then, in 2001, took over as chairman.

'Premier Cottages Direct has taken on a very different shape since we started', she says. 'All the board members still have a responsibility, but we've moved into a new age. We began with something – a brochure – that looked professional but was created hands-on by us because that was the only way we could afford it. But four years ago, we started to use professional designers and publishers because we're in a very competitive professional market.'



And that's where the wide-ranging relationship with ETT and its sister companies comes in. The original concept of marketing and selling direct to the customer remains, but Premier Cottages Direct has long since recognised that this relationship is now conducted in a multi-media world.

'We don't want our customers to feel that we're overly business-like; there's still a comfort level for people in talking to somebody on the phone on specific points and queries,' continues Callander Beckett. 'But business-like we have to be. A lot of the initial weeding out is now done on the Internet and it's a lot of business for us, so an up-to-date web site is really important.'

The brochure continues to be the lynchpin of the company's marketing strategy: 164 pages packed with high quality images of the cottages and detailed information on their amenities, facilities and locations, plus contact details for direct booking. The annual build-up to production starts in February, when ETT liaises with every member to design their entry, and culminates in a print run of 190,000 in September. Not only is it a successful marketing vehicle, but along with the web site, it's also a valuable tool in encouraging members to raise their own standards.

'The relationship with ETT has been excellent because they are out there producing brochures for different companies, and in order to keep their clients, they have to be ahead of the game and know what's going on,' says Callander Beckett. 'They also have the designer's eye to tweak things – sometimes very small – that have a major impact. It's all part and parcel of presenting yourself properly. For example, we now insist that our members have professional photographs taken of their property. We're in a position to insist on that because Premier Cottages Direct is producing business for them, and it's vital to maintain the quality and keep it up there, in front.'

ETT also acts as a print management consultant for Premier Cottages Direct, drawing up rosters of web offset suppliers, supervising the tendering process and managing the job on the presses of the chosen supplier. In addition, it fulfils a broader marketing consultancy role, advising the company on strategy, design and brand issues.

The constant lifting of standards was a key factor in outsourcing other aspects of marketing, most notably the design and maintenance of the Premier Cottages Direct web site. ETT's sister company, Affinity New Media, was awarded the contract in 2002. Production liaison for both the web site and the brochure is now handled by a third division of the ETT Group, Access Telemarketing and Data Services, which collates and channels data for members' entries and takes responsibility for its integrity throughout the production cycle.

A TASTE OF PREMIER COTTAGES DIRECT'S PROPERTIES



Lower Dolgenau - Wales



Thatcher's Rest - Ireland



Watermill Cottage - Gloucestershire

◀ 'The benefit of working with companies that are closely linked, but separate, is where the relationship with ETT comes into its own,' says Callander Beckett. 'The sharing of material is very smooth and because of the way we are set up, it works well. We're a part-time board and if we expect our board members to work pro bono on projects, we need the support of a professional contracted operation underneath so that they don't spend all their time working for Premier Cottages Direct at the expense of their own businesses.'

Mark Littlewood, director of Affinity New Media, says that achieving a consistent tone, look and feel across Premier Cottages Direct's printed and online material was one of the main criteria to be met. In modern marketing, a strong brand is everything.

'Because we are part of ETT, it wasn't like coming to a new agency which knew nothing about the brand,' he explains. 'Sharing the information allows us to achieve a smooth corporate continuity for the client company.'

Affinity has created a secure data driven web site for Premier Cottages Direct, with a powerful back-end database. Each entry – many of them sub-divided into several properties with the same owner – is treated as an individual product with its own dynamic content, managed by Affinity Media Assistant, the company's own content management software which has been developed specifically to provide intuitive control over complex databases for clients.

'The power of the site enables individual property owners to update their own website, where previously content was the responsibility of one person at Premier Cottages Direct,' says Littlewood. 'We simply applied the train of thought that by granting a degree of controlled, shared access, the wealth of information on the site can be made available to all.'

Owners can access designated areas on their own pages and make any changes themselves – upload new photographs, amend the text, change the pricing structure or details of special features, for example – in a secure environment, without any technical expertise.

Another important facility is the Late Availability section, a powerful area of the site originally created to allow owners to advertise vacancies within the next 28 days and now developed to cover school and national holiday periods. This has already proved a valuable way to meet the constant challenge of keeping site content fresh. Each advertisement on the Late Availability board links back to the cottage's main listing.

Because the data is held centrally, the equally-empowered site visitor can search for properties according to their own preferences, by region, capacity, swimming pool, disabled facilities, permission to bring pets or even whether or not they have a real fire or a wood-burning stove. Searches can be run from drop-down menus or by clicking on maps and browsing. And of course, regular customers can simply go straight to their favourite properties.

Further interactive devices include a brochure request facility and an opportunity for customer feedback – fed into the all-important database which forms the basis for the company's mailing list – and a link for owner recruitment.



'The relationship with ETT has been excellent because they are out there producing brochures for different companies, and in order to keep their clients, they have to be ahead of the game and know what's going on'

'Overall, the efficiencies have focused on less anxiety about the servicing of our members' queries or problems,' adds Callander Beckett. 'The knowledge that the contracts are in the hands of a very professional group and if there's a problem it's dealt with straight away. When we started our fledgling business, things weren't always attended to immediately. Now, there's somebody to tell if you're not happy. You ask them to look into it, and you receive an e-mail saying they've corrected it. It's reassuring for the members and it means our technical director Graham Taylor is quite comfortable with the level of support he's getting.'

Evidence of a truly integrated approach is provided with the final link in the chain: without traffic, any web site is a redundant marketing tool. Premier Cottages Direct opted to contract Search Positions, experts in search engine optimisation (and a specialist division of Affinity New Media), to drive targeted web traffic to the Premier Cottages site.

Callander Beckett explains that the continued growth of Premier Cottages Direct will depend on the targeted use of customer data, increasingly gathered via the web site with the help of Search Positions. As the multi-media approach evolves, so will the brochure, alongside other marketing avenues and literature. Capturing information on the way each channel is used will be crucial to the company's future.

With Search Positions's Search Engine Optimisation tools, the company can now monitor activity on its site much more closely, and direct more net traffic to the site. As Julian Sharpe, manager of Search Positions, explains, keyword research is vital if you want to realise the maximum potential of your site in terms of visits and hits generated.

'Since we took over this project for Premier Cottages Direct, we've carried out considerable research into the words used to search for the type of service and holidays the company offers,' he says. 'By sharing that information with Affinity, we've been able to ensure that the content contains all the important keywords. We also monitor any shifts in word usage, watch for trends across the industry in terms of successful on-line promotion techniques, and constantly review new media opportunities to maximise site traffic.'

Since Search Positions started work with Premier Cottages Direct, site visits have doubled to almost 40,000 visits each month, and registering nearly 1.5 million hits: proof that consumers aren't just dropping in and leaving, but are spending some time looking around and, in many cases, booking holidays.

In addition to monthly reports detailing Premier Cottages Direct's position in the hit league, provided in Excel for easy importing into the company's database, and statistics of monthly traffic, provided in PowerPoint for easy inclusion in executive presentations, Search Positions carries out three other report-based services for the business: resource links, indicating other search engines which Premier Cottages Direct should consider registering with and their terms, rates and suitability; brand protection, which monitors whether other sites are poaching the company's branding terminology and any possible copyright infringements; and monitoring competitors' sites for design, quality and activity.

The steel in Callander Beckett's enthusiasm flashes through when she talks about the way these initiatives can help members to maximise their appeal to customers who are collectively interested in quality but have very different individual requirements.

'The effect of using new technology on members' businesses will definitely be a benefit to them. Initially, some had no links through their own web sites, for example. We now tell our members all about the grants that are available to help them build their presence on the Internet, just to encourage them and make it easier for the public to find them. Our portal is top quality, but if the customer clicks through to something that isn't, it doesn't sit well with us! So we're always pushing them.

We've got a nice, good-looking, well-produced brochure and we've got a really good front to the business on our web site, which has been designed to answer all the questions of a person trying to look for a holiday. We know we're getting the hits and people are getting the business. It's bound to make them more technology-comfortable.'

It's doubtful that the ghosts of the landowners, farmers, gamekeepers, servants and stable

ON-LINE SUCCESS STORY



Premier Cottages Direct search engine optimisation campaign has consisted of:

- Full Meta optimisation
- Full website audit and SEO construction
- Hand submissions to search engines, portals and resource sites
- Monthly report analysis
- Full ongoing monthly monitoring for updates

Current Position

- Unique website users per month: **38,817**
 - Downloads per month **6,944**
 - All relevant search terms listed within top 30 results, most within top 10 (see below)
 - Google UK (highest traffic provider) - 'holiday country cottages'
Position 3, page 1
 - Google UK (highest traffic provider) 'cottages in uk'
Position 9, page 1
 - Mirago (high traffic provider) 'holiday country cottages'
Position 4, page 1
 - MSN - 'selfcatering cottages uk'
Position 18, page 2
 - Yahoo - 'cottages in uk'
Position 10, page 1
 - Yahoo - 'holiday country cottages'
Position 5, page 1
- Position correct at time of going to print.

boys who once frequented so many of the properties offered by Premier Cottages Direct would feel particularly comfortable with a mouse and a keyboard. But thanks to the combined imagination, commercial realism and forward-looking marketing of Sarah Callander Beckett and the ETT Group, they'd certainly still be able to recognise their sympathetically restored homes and work places.

And they can rest assured that in the hands of Sarah Callander Beckett and her colleagues, their legacy survives as an integral part of a vibrant, exciting and sophisticated business, driven by the very latest in integrated modern marketing techniques ■

Resources: www.premiercottages.co.uk
www.affinitynewmedia.com
www.search-positions.com