

Travel SEO – How to Target Searchers at the Right Stage of the Buying Cycle

Having been involved in a wide range of travel SEO projects during the last 12 months, I thought it would be a good time to write about the buying cycle of searches when purchasing a holiday online.

I recently took a look at the most important aspects of travel PPC and below I have listed how we interpret the typical search behavior of online travel customers when looking to purchase a holiday online:



Get Holiday Ideas – At the initial stage the travel consumer has a reasonable idea about the type of holiday they are looking to go on, but will still be looking for inspiration. They will go straight to a search engine to find further information about the destinations they can visit to meet this requirement. They will try to identify the holiday via a series of searches such as “summer holiday 2012”, “beach holiday”, narrowing down towards the location with searches such as “beach holiday in Europe” etc.

Destination Research – The type of results users will be looking for at these stage are generally travel guides; they have a budget in mind but the most important goal is to identify the location. Users will continue by performing informational searches such as “Climate in Greece”, “hurricane season in the Caribbean”, “best Mediterranean beach holidays in September”.

Confirm Location – In order to find a suitable destination which meets the user’s needs they will perform queries such as “summer holiday in Italy”, “weekend in South of France”, “self-catering holiday in Tenerife” or “all-inclusive honeymoon to the Maldives”. Once comparing multiple destinations a decision is made to confirm the destination. Next they are likely to research deeper into the more specific locations via various research and long-tail queries such as “beach holidays in the South of France”, “best location in the French Riviera”, “hotels in Nice”, “where to stay in Monaco” etc.

Compare Packages & Transport Options –The next stage is to identify the preferred mode of transport, this will include various comparisons for flights, trains or driving. Users will look for a range of travel related queries such as “cheap flights to Nice” and “Eurostar to Nice” as well as considering holiday packages which include transport. These are still mainly research based queries, but the user now has a clear idea about where, when and how they want to go on holiday.

Select Hotel – Ok, they’ve found a cheap flight to Nice, which is the best travel option so far, now time to find a hotel which matches up with this or perhaps a holiday package which combines both at a cheaper rate. Back off to Google searching for “hotels in Nice” this time. They will scan for the best option to find the most suitable hotel features/location and at the most reasonable price. Again more research, checking out the hotel review websites.

Decision Time – Once they’ve read the reviews and found the perfect holiday, will they add this to a shopping basket and order like you would with any other e-commerce website? No, probably not. Some travel websites you may have to enquire to confirm pricing details and then book over the phone, others you can check for availability and book there and then. But instead they’ll probably think it over one last time, just to make sure.

Revisit Website to Book – Ok, they’ve thought it through, decided it’s time to get away from the UK’s glorious grey summer skies, booked the dates off work and got their credit card ready, great! So back to find the holiday previously selected. If they’re clever this would be saved as a bookmark, the problem is many people won’t have remembered to have done this and even if they did there’s a good chance it’s a dynamic URL which may no longer work. So instead you perform a brand query “Expedia” or “Expedia holidays to Nice”, for example. Eventually browsing to the correct listings and hopefully finding the price hasn’t shot up considerably!

Purchase – They’ve reassured themselves (several times) this is the holiday package they want to purchase and they proceed to complete the transaction either online or over the phone.

After Sales – The buying cycle will continue following the sale with customer service and support involved, hopefully with the opportunity for repeat business in the future. This means it’s important to ensure you dominate all brand queries, both paid and organic. Making sure that when potential customers are searching for your brand they only find you and the glowing reviews and PR you want them to, without a competitor in sight!



How does this affect your SEO strategy? By now you should have a clearer understanding of searcher’s needs and have a good idea of which stage of the buying cycle they are at for each specific search. But which type of users do you want to capture and at what stage?

Identify Your Audience and Goals – Firstly you must consider the market and type of users you are looking to attract to the site, Google provides the following travel search marketing tips to consider:

What is the end objective for your business – transactions, branding, lead generation? Your approach may differ based on the decided outcome.

Determine the success metric in advance. What cost per transaction is acceptable? What is your target gross/net ROI?

Have a clearly defined target market or user in mind. Are you primarily interested in attracting leisure or business travelers and/or discount, mid-scale, or luxury travelers?

Research Your Keywords – Google’s research showed that catching the user at an early stage of a buying cycle can still result in a sale 40% of the time. This is very interesting and creates a strong argument for capturing users early into their search for a holiday. However the main difference between targeting keywords for paid, as opposed to organic search, is the volume of keywords you can target. PPC allows you to have flexibility over the keywords which generate traffic and is very much about refining keyword selection and continually changing key targets based upon performance and seasonality.

With SEO you’re unlikely to get that luxury and have little margin for error when selecting keywords with high-conversion potential. I would highly recommend using the pay-per-click data you have collected to help identify the top converting keywords. After all if six months after optimising for “When to go on holiday to Cancun” you finally generate enough clickthrough data to realise this has a 0.1% conversion rate, it’s then very difficult to re-adjust and target “luxury holidays in Cancun Mexico” instead.

Test, Test and Test Again – Despite targeting the early stages of the buying cycle proving to be more successful than expected, I would still recommend targeting more specific queries as this is more likely to generate targeted visits from users who have a clearer idea about what they are looking for. For example, someone searching for a “long-weekend city break in New York” is more likely to complete a sale than a user performing an informational query such as “places to visit in New York”. At this stage the user is also likely to be narrowing down the number of websites they are looking to shortlist for completing a sale, so the competition should be fewer than a more generic search.



However, if you have a strong website which can rank highly for more competitive and popular search queries it may be worth targeting information keyword phrases, a lower conversion rate is likely but this may be outweighed by the increased search volume. You should also consider the search volumes and conversion rates of plural and singular versions of keywords before selecting which to target.

You must also remember all travel websites are different and will not have the same conversion rates,

for example, “all-inclusive honeymoons” may be a high-converting keyword for a honeymoon specialist but not so successful for a general website offering the same package. While an average e-commerce transaction will take a few days, it can take 2-3 months in many cases for an online holiday sale to be completed and users will revisit the website by multiple channels and keyword searches, this means you need to test and track user activity over a longer period of time to ensure that you value the importance of a traffic source or keyword leading to a sale.

Now You Are Ready to Begin Your SEO Campaign... In summary, to find the best keywords you need to consider both the conversion rates and search volumes in order to estimate the overall value of referred converted sales. Search engine optimisation is a long-term process, so the effort put into evaluating the quality and cost-effectiveness of keywords via paid search is incredibly important to ensure you're targeting the most valuable traffic sources as a business.

Once the top-keywords have been identified, then it's time to optimise and push towards achieving the high search rankings. Then you can take a holiday of your own to sit back and relax, whilst enjoying the 56% clickthrough rates which are only possible via the top organic listings!

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