

Defining of Five Phases of the Online Travel Experience

These are exciting times for Travel and the pace of evolution is certainly head-spinning but full of opportunities, being a key success factor to understand “where we are headed” but I mean “we” in the collective sense...Consumers....travel marketers...and Google. And as in Google we are very focused on the user experience so we like to frame my reflections around what we see in consumer behavior. And the way we like to talk about the Travel consumer is by looking at the phases of the travel cycle, which is actually a flow where the sharing stage as one person’s shared experience often inspires the next person’s dreaming phase.

Phase 1: Dreaming

The Web has now surpassed traditional word-of-mouth as the primary source of inspiration for travel. Travellers search online before they decide where or how they are going to travel. They are reading blogs and reviews and they are also watching online travel videos more and more, both leisure and business travellers. So potential travellers are clearly finding inspiration on the Web and the question we need to ask: Is my brand present at relevant inspiration points?

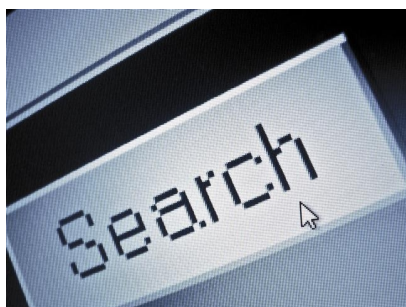


One way to tap into this opportunity is being present on relevant “upper funnel” or “early cycle” search terms that fit your brand. In addition to being present in Search, there is also a great opportunity to inspire potential travellers with Display ads in relevant content.

Phase 2: Researching

Once consumers move beyond dreaming and start narrowing down their options, they get deep into the Researching stage where they spend quite a bit of time. Search is the number one planning tool for leisure and unmanaged business travel but another trend we are seeing is searching with increased specificity. Longer query strings with more detailed requests. And the intensity of research continues to increase, with increasingly more sites visited and more sessions before making a booking. As research is clearly a critical stage before booking, the question to ask is: Do we really understand our consumer’s path to purchase? One angle of this question is do we know what search terms our customers along the

way and are we capitalizing on the opportunity to be in front of them? As important, are we ascribing the appropriate value to terms that provide assistance throughout the cycle?



Google, within AdWords, have created what calls Search Funnels, which brings to light the value of terms along the path to conversion allowing the advertiser to give more appropriate credit – and budget – to the “assist” terms. Frequently what we see is a shifting of attribution further up the funnel which allows advertisers to bid on both assist terms and final click terms more in line with their true value to the process allowing marketers to cast a wider, more cost efficient net.

The other major development in the research phase these days is with Mobile, whose usage by travellers has more than doubled and mobile travel queries are growing astoundingly. No doubt, the year of mobile has arrived. And with regard to how marketers are tapping into this rising trend, the question to ask is: Are we optimizing our campaigns for the mobile experience? One general piece of advice that is critical to being successful here is to set up unique campaigns for mobile separate from desktop oriented ones. The experience on the mobile device is significantly different than that of PC at this point in time and it does not suffice to just copy existing search campaigns to target mobile users.

Phase 3: Booking

Online bookings continue to rise but we are also seeing impressive growth in mobile bookings for air and hotel that it is even accelerating further in 2011. So the question becomes: Can your consumers easily find and book your brand via any device? In the mobile field apps are certainly one approach to this but we are seeing marketers capitalize on the opportunity via Search advertising as well. Google recently added the ability to add a phone number to mobile ads for those companies that have a call centre they found that calls generated via the Click to Call ads were much more likely to result in a booking than other lead channels. And adding the phone number also improved overall click through rates which strongly contributed to an increase in bookings over mobile devices.

Phase 4: Experiencing

The most important take-away about the Experiencing phase is that people continue to search and book en route to and from their destination and while they are sitting by the pool. Travellers nowadays have a “portable concierge” that they take with them on their trips – whether it is a smart phone, a laptop or a tablet – and they are using these devices frequently throughout their travels – to look up and book excursion opportunities, make restaurant or car service reservations, etc.



So the question to ask yourself is: Do we make it easy for our customers to find concierge type information when they're traveling? And there's kind of two sides to this: Are you making it easy for your customers to get online with reliable access when they are traveling with your brand – in-flight, in-room, on the train, around your property, etc.?; Secondly, are you offering up useful information to guests and travellers that helps enhance their trip and they experience the brand?

Phase 5: Sharing

As I said before, the big thing about sharing is that it's not really "the end". Overwhelmingly, the trends show that one person's shared experience becomes another person's inspiration for dreaming and the cycle begins all over again. Most of travellers read reviews from other travellers and this number continues to grow every time we look at it. So the big question when it comes to sharing is: Are we part of the conversation? Are we engaging with travellers about their experiences? (and going in with an open mind and thick skin about what we may learn!)



Lastly, I want to make a general comment about how travel marketers have addressed these phases to date. My observation is that there is intense, almost obsessive, focus on the Booking stage of the cycle. Generally speaking, the early stages of Dreaming/Researching and the Experiencing stages have been under-served and represent major opportunity to influence decisions and build loyalty.



Source:

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