

FAMILY AND CRUISE OPERATORS CAN EXPLOIT GOOGLE'S FAILINGS



Niche operators in the cruise and family sectors can exploit the failings of not only mainstream agents but also Google, according to industry bosses at the latest World Travel Market CEO Round Table.

Searching for family holidays online is difficult, according to Julia Lo Bue-Said Managing Director Advantage Travel Centres, because “what is needed when searching for a family holiday – adjoining rooms, suite only – are not reflected in the search categories.”

Jason Dwyer, Managing Director bookableholidays.com agreed. “Families need to be able to drill down into the detail to get the right product,” he said.

Rob Sinclair Barnes, Marketing Director, Amadeus added that “with families, destination is secondary. It’s about the facilities.” He continued: “This is why so much of the family market is based around repeat visits. It’s too much of a risk for a family to try somewhere new if they have already found somewhere suitable.”

The shortcomings of natural search, as well as mainstream web sites, for families was noted by other guests. Chris Roe, e-commerce Director Virgin Holidays said that pricing was difficult to compare online in the family market “because it depends what the airline’s reservation systems defines as a child.”

Dean Harvey, Digital Development, Director Designate, went one stage further. “The industry owns the problem because it is not providing the content,” although he noted that “parenting has also changed, and this has allowed smaller operators to emerge and to win online.”

Seamus Conlon, Managing Director, www.cruise.co.uk suggested that the family sector needed to think in terms of groups. “A family is just a group of people who need a certain set of rooms. All the kids stuff is extra.”

But industry veteran Dermot Blastland, now a non-executive director at On The Beach, took a different slant. “Is there really that much dissatisfaction out there? As an industry we take millions of families on holiday every year and a lot of them book online, yet we’re talking as if it’s chaos.”

Cruise is at a similar disadvantage online. Blastland said that “most cruise web sites are built for the cruise company, not the traveller.” Around 80% of cruise in the UK is bought through agents, said Andy Harmer, Director, CLIA UK suggested “travel agents are successful because they give customer what Google can’t.”

However, there is a role for online in the cruise sector. Giles Parnwell Director Distribute Travel, said: “One option is gathering the information from the customer online and servicing that request offline.” Blastland pointed out that the debate around personalisation “has been around for decades. Thomson, where Blastland used to work, wants to go direct to the customer so that can control the content it holds about the traveller, which gives it access to purchase history and other preferences.

Many travel agents just haven't built up the database of their own customers."

Facebook log in is an option for cruise lines or agents who want a more personal relationship with their customer, according to Harvey.

Social media is an area where cruise could also gain traction online. Conlon added that his site "has 100,000 reviews and we find that people love to read the reviews - it's online entertainment."

However, the biggest issue for cruise remains pricing. Roe suggested that the low lead-in prices offered by cruise lines and specialist retailers "did the cruise industry no good." Kathryn Beadle Managing Director Hurtigruten noted that "market leaders inevitably compete on price and that can lead to price wars."

The event was moderated by Steve Endacott CEO OnHoliday Group. He concluded by referring back to the product. "Kids have evolved and might now demand a different type of holiday." He also noted that cruise hadn't done enough to capture the family market.

This was backed up by Sinclair Barnes who cited Amadeus research which found that only 6% of people thought that cruising was good for families.

The group agreed with WTM Head of Marketing and Communications Micaela Juarez, who identified a gap in the market for the travel industry to take an 'Amazon approach'.

"There is no aggregator of travel product that stores what you want and like," she said. "The searches of tomorrow should enable holidaymakers to see holiday types that they may like.

However, the industry needs to be careful not to scare consumers with what might appear a 'big brother' approach."

The event is part of the new partnership between The Travel Tech Show at WTM and Amadeus.

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