Online Travel Agencies: More Than a Distribution Channel

Written and Researched by
Bill Carroll and Lorraine Sileo
This research made possible by Expedia Lodging Partner Services.
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Online Travel Agencies: More Than a Distribution Channel

Written and Researched by Bill Carroll and Lorraine Sileo

Online travel agencies (OTAs) have been both coveted and criticized since they rose to prominence in the early 2000s. Representing 13% of global travel gross bookings and growing at 12% annually, OTAs play a pivotal and expanding role in the travel landscape. However, in a climate where suppliers are pushing their direct distribution, OTAs can be seen as just another intermediary in the value chain. This view overlooks the value of OTAs, which goes beyond assisting with the sale of excess inventory during soft demand. OTAs offer suppliers unprecedented reach around the globe and are a valuable marketing tool. As a result many hotel suppliers have built a symbiotic relationship with OTAs, benefiting from their influence while managing their own direct distribution as well.

Purpose of White Paper

The purpose of this paper is to explain the role of OTAs in the travel landscape as a significant and effective marketing and distribution channel. It specifically supports OTA value at broadening reach and attracting new customers including international guests to hotel properties and encourages hoteliers to effectively use OTAs as an integral part of their marketing and distribution strategies. The paper applies current research from PhoCusWright and academic studies to support these perspectives.

The OTA Proposition

OTAs provide a trusted and effective platform for consumers to dream, shop and buy travel, and share information about their experiences. Their reach includes websites, mobile sites and apps, and call centers. In some cases they also own metasearch companies (Expedia-Trivago, Priceline-Kayak, Odigeo-Liligo).

Online travel agencies play a pivotal role in travel distribution. With gross bookings exceeding $150 billion in 2013, OTAs now represent 38% of the global online market and 13% of the total market. In the U.S., OTAs have a 15% market share and gross bookings are expected to jump 5-6% annually over the next two years, rates that exceed overall travel market growth. Their influence in accommodations
continues to spread. OTAs were responsible for nearly $19 billion in hotel gross bookings in the U.S. in 2013, representing 15% of total hotel sales.

A variety of OTA brands serve multiple customer segments – leisure, business and group. They are global in reach and innovative in functionality. They are marketing engines, search engines, booking engines and execution platforms for consumers. OTAs also hold a prominent place in travel information search and multi-device (mobile) applications.

And, while OTAs compete for marketing spend with other search, metasearch and content sites (e.g., Google, Kayak, TripAdvisor, Trivago), these services also act as partners, providing additional reach and distribution.

Hoteliers operate in a highly competitive environment. To optimize their asset values they must make effective use of OTAs and other marketing channels. For hoteliers to underestimate the marketing reach of OTAs as both distribution and marketing platforms is a mistake. To be overly reliant on any one channel is also flawed. Hoteliers must strive to strike the right balance to reach multiple segments of the marketplace and optimize the mix of transactions to achieve occupancy and profit targets.

From Perception to Reality

Consumer options have exploded. Armed with laptops, smartphones and tablets, travelers are using multiple devices and searching myriad sites to plan their trips. In burgeoning travel markets like China and Russia, young, adventurous and newly minted “middle class” consumers will grab their handhelds to book their getaways this year, many though OTAs.

While OTAs are indeed intermediaries, they do more than shift share among hotel competitors. They can be an effective tool to: preserve market position, extend search marketing, meet consumer demand for packaged and spontaneous travel, support yield management, and execute integrated marketing strategies. Hotels can and should manage OTAs to optimize revenues versus costs.

The paper utilizes existing PhoCusWright and published academic research to make the following points.

- Ad spend for managed corporate travel
- B2B travel industry advertising
- Costs associated with content creation, social media management and company-owned assets

1. OTAs Have Global Reach and Influence

The travel industry continues to expand globally. Over the next two years, worldwide online travel is expected to jump 11% as more and more vacationers use their desktops/laptops, smartphones and tablets to make purchases. A new generation of travel-
ers will book their first trip online – not through a travel agency or call center or walking up to a desk. OTA gross bookings are growing at two to three times the pace of the total market in emerging regions.

Keeping up with new market demand globally – including unique cultures, preferences, payment trends, inventory and languages – is a complex and costly undertaking. Expedia, for example, has 150 travel booking sites in over 70 countries with websites localized in more than 30 languages. As well, the global travel industry continues to book travel online, with some regions still growing in double-digit percentages. The percentage of all travel booked online continues to rise around the world (see Figure 1).

Major OTAs are accelerating ahead of the overall industry on a worldwide basis. Globally they are expected to expand gross bookings twice as fast as the overall market as emerging regions in Latin America, Asia Pacific and Eastern Europe take off (see Figure 2). In the U.S., where OTAs have existed for more than 16 years, their gains are more commensurate with the market as a whole.

Global growth is fueled by investments in multi-lingual, culturally relevant displays as well as alternative payment systems. Local knowledge is attained by both organic growth and international acquisitions. Over the past 10 years, Expedia and Priceline have made a series of significant international (non-U.S. based) acquisitions and partnerships, particularly in Europe and China.

Europe is the largest region in the world in terms of OTA gross bookings, followed by the U.S. and Asia Pacific (see Figure 3).
In a shifting landscape where mobile usage is overtaking PCs, OTAs play an even more crucial role (see Figure 4). They are investing heavily in mobile websites and apps and can service consumers via multiple devices throughout all phases of the travel process. This allows OTAs to be present not just in the dreaming, planning and booking stages, but also as travelers are in transit, checking and changing itineraries, reading reviews, sharing experiences, and choosing restaurant options, hotel accommodations, tours and activities. This mobile presence allows OTAs to capture much of the last-minute hotel market, a significantly growing portion of all hotel sales. According to PhoCusWright, 72% of OTA mobile web bookings are made within 24 hours of the stay.1

Mobile is the fastest-growing method for travel booking. The percentage of travel booked via mobile devices is expected to at least double in the U.S. and Europe over the next two years (see Figure 5).

Because of their brand reach and investment in mobile-optimized sites and apps, OTAs will represent one fifth of all smartphone and tablet bookings in the U.S. by the end of 2014 (see Figure 6). Much of that will be hotel rooms: Nearly 60% of the $13 billion projected in hotel mobile sales will be transacted via OTAs in 2014.
As mobile grows in global prominence, OTAs offer the scale and expertise to assist hotels in expanding their mobile (and multi-device) footprints. By leveraging their technological innovation, multiple brands, and localization and marketing capabilities, OTAs can effectively drive mobile demand on a global scale to hoteliers in a cost-effective manner.

2. OTAs Provide the Services that Consumers Want

OTAs are a preferred shopping and booking channel for hotel accommodations in the U.S., Europe and other parts of the world. They are the leading online shopping and purchase method in the U.S., outpacing supplier websites, phone and other methods (see Figures 7 and 8).

Question: What type(s) of websites do you typically use when comparing and choosing leisure travel products? Select all that apply.

Base: U.S. travelers who used websites to compare and choose leisure travel products (2010 N=2,008; 2011 N=1,587; 2012 N=2,041; 2013 N=1,485)

Question: Please indicate which method you typically use to book each type of travel component. Select one response per row.
Base: U.S. travelers who purchased lodging (2011 N=1,687; 2012 N=1,997; 2013 N=1,716)
Note: Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.
Source: U.S. Consumer Travel Report Sixth Edition
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Further, please indicate what types(s) of websites did you read traveler-submitted ratings/reviews? Select all that apply.
Base: U.S. travelers who read reviews online (2011 N=1,564; 2012 N=1,989; 2013 N=1,082)
Source: U.S. Consumer Travel Report Sixth Edition
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Consumers, especially younger travelers, typically prefer the depth and breadth of OTAs vs. supplier direct channels. These savvy consumers are looking for the best accommodations that fit their preferences and budgets and prefer to cross-shop. They rely on reviews and mapping services and overall comparative capabilities of OTAs to find what’s best for them.

User reviews rank among the most important features for travel decision-making, and it's not all TripAdvisor. Next to travel review websites, OTAs rank as the second most popular source for ratings and reviews in the U.S. (see Figure 9), ahead of search engines and hotel websites. As a differentiator from TripAdvisor, some OTAs offer the advantage of authenticated reviews (associated with guest stays at the property).

When customers book via an OTA and other intermediaries, these third-parties can also be personal travel assistants, supporting the consumer throughout the travel experience (see Figure 10). OTAs are available 24/7 and accessible via any device the consumer wants to use in a multi-lingual display.

FIGURE 10: OTA Real Time Traveler Assistance

OTAs provide one-stop shopping via breadth of content across multiple travel segments: (i) carriers: air, rail and bus; (ii) lodging: hotels, B&Bs and rental properties; (iii) cruises; (iv) rental cars; (v) ground transportation; (vi) attractions/activities. Shoppers get a comparative information view across properties, ranked by authentic user reviews, type of property, star classification, facilities, location and other criteria, all within selected destinations. In many cases, price and inventory availability are real time. And, perhaps most important to the consumer, this information is provided with comparison prices.

The depth and breadth of inventory allow OTAs to offer packages at lower prices to the consumer than if purchased separately. For travelers willing to take some risk by not knowing the name of the hotel (only its general location, star rating and possibly price),
opaque (name your price: Priceline) and semi-opaque services (e.g., Travelocity Top Secret Hotels, Expedia Unpublished Rate Hotels) are welcome resources.

3. OTAs Fill The Gaps
Hotels rely on OTAs to reach this important and growing segment of the population: travelers who are not always brand loyal are searching for value as well as amenities, and who prefer deals – whether a single-night hotel stay or weeklong dream vacation.

OTAs can help suppliers...

- Reach non-brand loyal travelers
- Reach a younger demographic
- Reach a higher-yielding packaged traveler

Major hotel chains continue to build their direct website business, investing heavily in marketing and functionality. They also covet and support their customer relationships (particularly among loyalty club members). Yet only a segment of the traveling population is actually faithful to a particular hotel brand (see Figures 11 and 12). And nearly half of those who are members of a hotel loyalty program book outside that program some or all of the time. In addition, some OTAs have their own loyalty programs that reward bookings made with any supplier, not just one, and capacity to use those rewards for multiple products.

**FIGURE 11: Hotel Loyalty Incidence**

Questions: Are you a member of a loyalty or frequent flyer program for any of the following types of travel companies? Select all that apply. Which of the following, if any, have you done while traveling for leisure in the past 12 months? Check all that apply. Which type(s) of internet websites/apps do you typically use when comparing and choosing leisure travel products? Select all that apply.

Base: U.S. Leisure travelers (N=1,850)

Source: U.S. Consumer Travel Report Sixth Edition
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PhoCusWright and academic research indicate that a leading factor in leisure hotel choice is price, followed by location (see Figure 13). Other leading factors are related to satisfaction, such as previous experience, brand, amenities, star classification and positive reviews.

**FIGURE 13: Factors Influencing Last Hotel Decision**

Question: What factors influenced your last hotel decision? Select all that apply.
Base: U.S travelers who stayed in paid lodging (2013 N=1,471)
Source: U.S. Consumer Travel Report Sixth Edition
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reviews. Therefore, when consumers are making hotel choices related to their own leisure hotel stays, they are often more influenced by price and other service qualities than loyalty programs.

For these same reasons, a coveted segment of the traveling population – millennials – is also less likely to be loyal to a particular travel brand versus older travelers. Use of OTAs for lodging purchases is highest among those 18-34 years of age (see Figure 14), indicating the preferences of a new generation of travelers.

Packages and opaque/semi-opaque services allow hotels to offer deals without compromising on the retail rate. Packages are not only a valuable option for revenue management, they also attract travelers who are likely to book earlier, stay twice as long, and cancel half as often as standalone hotel bookers.

4. OTAs Go Beyond Distribution

For hotels, OTAs are more than a distribution channel. They have marketing influence similar to search engines and metasearch sites, and they can engage customers globally through all the stages of the travel experience – with whatever devices their customers choose to use. OTAs have extended their influence through mobile (multi-device) usage and metasearch, and that influence will continue to escalate.

In 2013, U.S. OTAs spent nearly $700 million on advertising, and that figure is expected to jump 8% over the next two years. Of that amount, nearly eight in 10 dollars was spent online, mostly on search, metasearch and display.

Question: Please indicate which method you TYPICALLY use to book each type of travel component. Select one response per row.

Base: U.S. travelers who purchased lodging (2011 N=1,687; 2012 N=1,997; 2013=1,851)

Note: Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.


Hotels should not consider OTA usage as merely a distribution cost. OTAs rank higher than search engines in terms of travel decision-making (see Figure 10), and a portion of the cost of OTA use goes beyond commissions or merchant rates and falls into the marketing budget. Hotels generally spend about 6-9% of their revenue on sales and marketing – and some of that should be allocated to OTAs. (On the contrary, major OTAs spend 35-40% of their revenue on sales and marketing).

The key to successfully managing OTA use is for hotels to assess their full value as a distribution channel and as a marketing platform versus the benefits of other channels and media outlets. Hotels should integrate OTA participation within an overall marketing strategy and with effective revenue and channel management. Only by considering both the distribution and marketing costs can hotels fully measure return on investment (ROI).

Some hoteliers and industry experts undervalue the net cost of participation in OTAs by considering only their merchant markup – the net rate paid to the hotel versus the OTAs’ price to the consumer. For example, the OTA collects $160 per day from the consumer and remits $120 to the hotel, which then mistakenly compares this cost to booking the same transaction as if made through the hotels’ brand website at the same price, $160. Erroneous assumptions include:

(i) The hotel could have gotten this (and other) booking(s) from consumers without OTA participation, and

(ii) There is no marketing value of OTA participation that produces future bookings.

Instead, PhoCusWright research shows that consumers use OTAs to shop nearly as much as they use search engines, and leisure guests are more likely to use OTAs – as opposed to business travelers who probably would book through a travel management company (TMC) and/or global distribution system (GDS). This increases the likelihood that the OTA booking would be incremental. There’s also an impact from merely being featured on an OTA site. Therefore, hotels should ascribe some media value to being displayed in an OTA. How much is not clear; ascribing no value is an error.

A 2012 PhoCusWright article illustrates the net operating income effect of share-shift gain (or loss) from OTA participation versus cost. It counters the argument put forth in “Distribution Channel Analysis: A Guide for Hotels” that there is no “billboard effect,” recommends that hoteliers effectively manage the participation of OTAs, and provides a set of suggestions for hoteliers to follow in evaluating OTA participation. Its conclusions:

1. A “billboard effect”? – the increase in direct bookings a property or brand experiences when it is featured on an online booking site – is probable for a hotel operating within a competitive set, though the specific impact could vary depending on market circumstances.

4) PKF Consulting.
2. Hoteliers should consider the full “marketing effect” of OTA participation – e.g.,
the impact on sales through all channels generated from OTAs – not simply the net
markup cost versus a direct booking.

3. Hoteliers should use an analytical approach to evaluate the ROI for both participa-
tion in distribution channels and marketing activities. (See Appendix A.)

4. Hotels and OTAs would both be better served if there was more research and
(shared) robust information available about the media effects of OTAs versus their
distribution costs.

The most authoritative and well-known statistical study to date on OTA marketing impact
was produced by Chris Anderson of the Cornell University School of Hotel Administra-
tion. Using clickstream analysis, Anderson found extensive consumer use of OTAs and a
positive statistical correlation between hotel reservation activity and Expedia appearanc-
es in the path. His research found:

- a lift in reservations from appearance on an Expedia page-one display of 7.6% to
  26% in months where the hotel was displayed versus months when it was not
  (2009)

- a ratio lift of 3.1-to-1 to 8.75-to-1 when Expedia appeared in the clickstream
  compared to when it did not (2011)

Although correlation does not necessarily imply causation, and results may differ under
other circumstances, the statistical results are significant. They indicate a very high proba-
bility of a relationship between participation in Expedia and incremental bookings. While
there have been critics of this research, no one has refuted the measured results.

Other studies have focused on the type of information consumers use when choosing
hotels. Those findings show that consumers want amenities that add value (e.g., free
Wi-Fi, fitness center, etc.), and that OTAs are an information source. Recent studies by
Breffi M. Noone and Kelly A. McGuire suggest that user-generated content (reviews) has
a significant effect on perceived value when evaluating price-versus-benefit tradeoffs.

The studies also found that brand name as well as TripAdvisor rankings and ratings im-
pact consumer choice.

Not surprisingly, price is a prominent factor. Other important considerations that impact a
consumer’s expected hotel experience: images, descriptions, ratings and reviews. Studies

8) Ibid.
9) Manus Ward and Mathew Shafaghi, “A Literature Framework Analysis of Online Hotel Accommoda-
481-494.; Peter Jones and Meng-Mei Chen, “Factors Determining Hotel Selection: Online Behaviour by
Leisure Travelers,” Tourism and Hospitality Research 10, no. 1 (January 2011): 83-95; and Ugur Yavas and
Emir Babakus, “Dimensions of hotel choice criteria: congruence between business and leisure travel-
choice,” International Journal of Hospitality Management 35 (December 2013): 246-257; Breffi M.
Noone and Kelly A. McGuire, “Effects of Price and User-Generated Content on Consumers’ Prepur-
chase Evaluations of Variably Priced Services,” Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research (Feb. 27, 2013):
10.6348012461551; and Breffi M. Noone and Kelly A. McGuire, “Pricing in a social world: The influence
of non-price information on hotel choice,” Journal of Revenue and Pricing Management 12, no. 5 (July
also show that OTAs represent a significant share of the sites consumers review – namely because major OTAs have all the key information that consumers use when making travel choices.

Recent (2014) academic studies summarize the most influential factors for hotel purchase intention across multiple countries. These confirm results found in several U.S.-based studies (see Appendix B). The major OTAs – Expedia, Priceline and Ctrip – effectively address these factors and continue to invest in functionality that enhances the user experience.

**Conclusion**

OTAs provide a platform to market and sell inventory. Attempts by hotel suppliers to completely bypass OTAs have successively failed. Hoteliers have simply acknowledged their significance and made studied and optimized use of OTAs as part of their marketing and distribution strategies.

OTAs are in a position to charge for the value they add in the market. They do provide suppliers, particularly hoteliers, with analytics and tools that they can use to optimize OTAs’ marketing and booking services:

- Real-time price and inventory access
- Market intelligence and performance tools
- Knowledgeable supplier services managers
- Promotional opportunities

Suppliers that effectively manage their overall price, inventory and marketing activities, and use of OTAs as marketing, search and distribution engines can improve profitability. The challenge for hotels is to do so in the context of the other options they have to optimize marketing. In large part, the onus is on hotels, chains and marketing services vendors to use that other information to make informed marketing and channel distribution decisions in an integrated fashion for both the near and long term.

13) For a comprehensive discussion of the approach hotels should take in evaluating the use of OTAs in a competitive environment, see PhoCusWright’s “Sage Advice for Hotels: Another Point of View on a Popular Industry Report,” (June 2012).
## Appendix A

**Hotelier Decision Matrix for OTAs and Intermediaries**

**Considerations for Channel Choice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONSIDERATION TYPE</th>
<th>CONSIDERATION</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **NEAR-TERM INCREMENTAL DEMAND GENERATION** | • How responsive (price elastic) are the consumers that use this channel?  
• How effectively can the hotel communicate value rather than just price?  
• How effectively can competitors match price/promotion offers capable of shifting share?  
• Does the channel have the capacity to generate business the hotel would not have gotten otherwise; share shift or new (to the whole comp set) demand?  
• Can the additional current and future business volume be increased?  
• Can specific attribution of value to the channel be measured? |
| **PRICE (STRUCTURE) DILUTION** | • To what extent will price and promotional offers lead to prospective and existing transient, event, and/or corporate bookings price reductions?  
• What impact will discounting have on reference prices consumers expect or expectation of future price reductions?  
• To what extent can the hotel restrict dilution of higher rates? |
| **CUSTOMER VALUATION, LOYALTY AND ADVOCACY** | • To what extent does the channel affect consumer loyalty and advocacy?  
• To what extent do offers and prices enhance service experience and value?  
• To what extent can brand trust be enhanced (or diluted) via the channel through value representations and guarantees? |

Source: PhoCusWright Inc.  
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Appendix B

Summary of Reviewed Literature on Lodging Purchase Intention

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Author (year of publication)</th>
<th>Sample country (number of samples)</th>
<th>Influential factors</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>In the context of hotel booking</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wong and Law (2005)</td>
<td>Hong Kong (638)</td>
<td>Information Quality, Sensitivity Content, Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim et al. (2006)</td>
<td>China (206)</td>
<td>Information Needs, Online Security</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bai et al. (2008)</td>
<td>China (180)</td>
<td>Website Quality (Functionality &amp; Usability)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuan et al. (200*)</td>
<td>A university (111)</td>
<td>Website Quality, Information Quality, Service Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparks and Browning (2010)</td>
<td>Australia (554)</td>
<td>Online Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wen (2012)</td>
<td>US (559)</td>
<td>Website Quality, Travelers’ Attitudes, Customers’ Satisfaction</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>In other contexts</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Van der Heijden et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Holland (228)</td>
<td>Perceived Risk, Perceived Ease-of-Use</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chu and Lu (2007)</td>
<td>Taiwan (302)</td>
<td>Perceived Usefulness, Playfulness, Perceived Price</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moon et al. (2007)</td>
<td>New Zealand (116)</td>
<td>Price National Culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chang and Chen (2008)</td>
<td>Taiwan (628)</td>
<td>Website Quality, Website Brand</td>
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<td>Hahn and Kim (2009)</td>
<td>US (261)</td>
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<td>Lu et al. (2010)</td>
<td>China (376)</td>
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About Expedia Lodging Partner Services

Expedia Lodging Partner Services (LPS) is the group within Expedia responsible for sourcing hotel supply that reaches travelers in more than 70 countries through all of the Expedia group brands, which include Expedia.com®, Hotels.com®, Hotwire®, Venere.com®, corporate travel management company Egencia®, and the Expedia® Affiliate Network. The Expedia group offers hotels international reach; access to multiple channels in a single marketplace; exposure that positively influences direct bookings on the hotel’s own website; and a dedicated team of market managers in cities around the world, who provide deep market insight and are committed to helping hotels increase their profitability.