

# THE IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE GUEST ENGAGEMENT

HOW HOTELIERS CAN LEVERAGE IMPROVED LISTINGS, DATA INSIGHTS AND TAILORED GUEST RELATIONS TOOLS TO STAY AHEAD OF THE CURVE

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Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), like Expedia, provide travelers with a variety of accommodation options in one place, and put information at their fingertips. OTAs are the leading resource during the planning phase of a trip, and remain prevalent through the booking path, with OTAs converting the most travelers.

Tools, data and insights available via OTA extranet sites, like Expedia® PartnerCentral (EPC), offer hoteliers the opportunity to inspire and convert travelers, set expectations, create personalized experiences, identify and address issues to better meet guest needs, improve guest experience and drive repeat bookings. But understanding the phases leading up to the trip, and the traveler experiences throughout, is a fundamental part of maintaining a hotel's online reputation.

## Understanding the Traveler Journey

Let's look at the traveler journey. There are four phases: dreaming and planning, shopping and booking, the trip itself and post-trip. Throughout this journey, today's tech-savvy mobile-first travelers are looking for personalized content that is relevant to their preferences – not generic according to a Skift + Revinate report<sup>i</sup>. Travel seekers have unlimited resources and most take advantage of them when considering a purchase, resulting in an intricate and far from straightforward booking process.<sup>ii</sup>



So what tools can hoteliers use to help attract and engage travelers throughout their journey?

## Influencing the Guest Experience

OTAs play a significant role in the early stages of the traveler journey and are critical for capturing the eyes of major international travelers.<sup>ii</sup> Travelers want to imagine themselves in a destination and experiencing their vacation. So how does a hotel make it easy for travel shoppers to visualize their stay, while also differentiating a hotel's property?

The tools available in Expedia PartnerCentral (EPC) can help hoteliers inform, influence and engage with travelers throughout their journey. Using EPC, Expedia's partner portal with a suite of self-service tools, hoteliers can access market data about what traveler shoppers are most interested in to help improve property content, optimize photos and provide tools to better engage and influence a hotel partner's online reputation.

With more than 600 million traveler visits to Expedia's portfolio of brands each month, hotel partners have the opportunity to capture consumer interest and visibility. But how does a hotelier know if the content they are providing resonates?

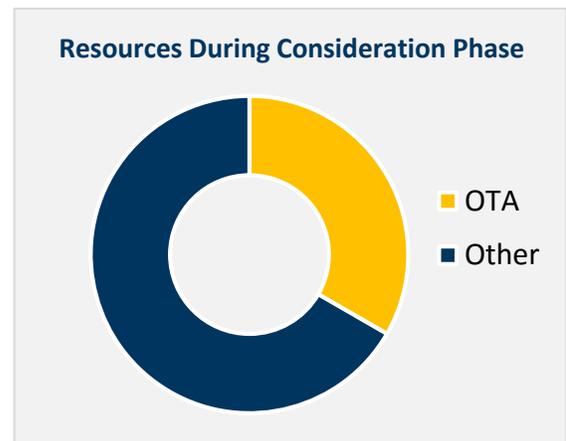


Figure 1: Nearly 1/3 of travelers use an OTA during the consideration phase.<sup>ii</sup>

## Attracting Travelers with Dream-worthy Content

During the initial dreaming and planning phase of the journey, travelers are viewing immense amounts of content and researching their options. Once they've chosen a destination, robust hotel descriptions, compelling imagery, and information on nearby points of interest all influence a traveler's hotel booking decision. An Expedia Media Solutions study found that 35 percent of U.S. travelers start their search with multiple destinations in mind and average 140 visits to travel sites in the 45 days leading up the booking.<sup>ii</sup> These insights confirm the importance of content and how it can provide an opportunity to inspire travelers and empower hoteliers to be a true destination ambassador.

### Photos

Property photos are critical to the marketplace listing. Expedia research found that travel shoppers often gravitate toward images that evoke emotional reactions. Rooms, restaurants, and general spaces with pleasing views instilled a feeling of delight for the hotel and photos showing unique and attractive features also inspired a good reaction. Furthermore, images that looked natural and undistorted instilled a sense of trust that the photos were an authentic and realistic depiction of the hotel.

Understanding how photography can impact a traveler's booking decision is critical, which is why Expedia works closely with lodging partners to address content and its influence. Offering scalable photo guidelines to aid in everything from using a smartphone to capture photos to

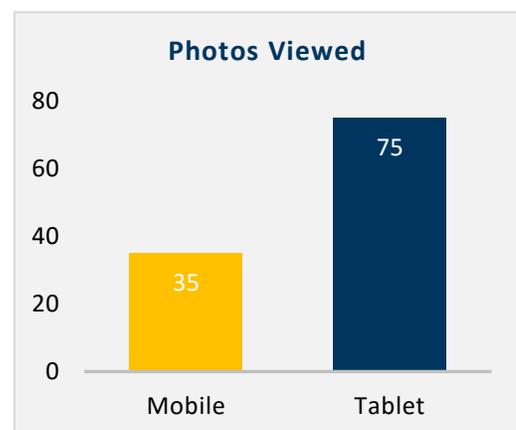


Figure 2: Expedia research found that, on average, shoppers reviewed 35 property photos on mobile and 75 property photos on tablets.

hiring a professional photographer, Expedia helps hotel partners choose the right images to make the best impression.

#### Local Market Recommendations

Hoteliers should be the local expert for their property, and share insights into local activities and landmarks. Expedia's Points of Interest tool helps attract more travelers by highlighting cultural landmarks, unique activities, and experiences in a property's local neighborhood. This tool allows hoteliers to review and curate their local points of interest.

Now that a hotel's compelling content is attracting travelers to their listing, how can they use data and analytics to secure the booking?

**When determining which hotel to book,  
consumers rank location above amenities,  
price and ratings.**

Figure 3: Sullivan and 20/10, [Where They Go. Why They Stay](#), 2016

### **Use Market Data to Help Lock in Bookings**

As travelers move into the booking phase, they have narrowed down their options and are closer to purchasing, but hoteliers still need to account for travelers' diverse needs and budgets. They can attract more travelers, and increase the likelihood of converting a booker, by offering a wide variety of room types and rate plans to appeal to the diverse traveler needs. Understanding the market and offering competitive rates and availability can be what helps travelers make that final booking decision.

As with a traveler's purchase decision, making pricing and strategy decisions is easier when hotels have market data to back them up. Recognizing the value data can play in their partner's success, Expedia has built a powerful set of tools to help hoteliers understand their performance, be more competitive in their market, and grow their business in the Expedia Marketplace.

Leveraging performance and market information, paired with public shopping data, can help hotels set strategies that convert travelers. Expedia offers several analytics tools to help with revenue management and property performance, which provide valuable information on a property's revenue performance.

### **Easier – and Earlier Guest Engagement**

Success! The traveler has booked a stay at a hotel's property. Once a traveler has booked, the hotelier can begin delivering on guest experience by opening the lines of communication. Lodging partners told Expedia it was challenging to communicate with travelers who book through OTAs, and they needed the ability to communicate with guests *before* they arrived at the property, not just on-site.

**9.8M** MESSAGES

exchanged between hoteliers  
and guests with EPC  
Conversations since launch

Figure 4: Expedia, Inc. 2017

From this feedback, Expedia developed a guest communication platform, EPC Conversations, to help create first impressions and set expectations with custom welcome messages or check-in instructions. The tool allows hoteliers to acknowledge, confirm, and manage special requests and provide information about the property's offerings helping to enhance engagement.

EPC Conversations has been extraordinarily popular among guests and hoteliers. Since launch, more than six million conversations have been started between hoteliers and their guests, resulting in 9.8 million

exchanged messages. This illustrates that guests value communication from hotels during the days and weeks leading up to the stay, to set expectations for the actual stay.

## The Stay

Continued engagement with a traveler once they embark on their journey is key to creating a positive experience, particularly when a guest arrives at their destination and experiences the property for the first time. It's important to uncover potential issues and communicate with guests while they're on-site, as this is when hotels are in the optimal position to resolve or avoid a potentially negative guest experience.

Engaged guests are also returning guests – they are 40 percent more likely to return to the property<sup>iii</sup>, illustrating that there's an opportunity for hotels to drive incremental profit through active engagement with their guests. For instance, a recent Gallup study showed that engaged hotel guests spend about \$588 per visit versus the average guest who spends only \$457<sup>iv</sup>.

To further facilitate guest engagement, after a guest checks into the hotel, Expedia helps capture Real-time Feedback. With Real-time Feedback, guests receive a brief email questionnaire to gauge how their stay is going, which allows hoteliers to instantly read and respond. When hoteliers immediately address and resolve traveler issues, they can create a positive impression and potentially increase the likelihood of receiving higher post-trip Guest Review. Properties that respond to Real-time Feedback can see post-stay review scores that are up to 10 percent higher than those who do not respond.<sup>v</sup>

**Engaged guests are returning guests – they are 40 percent more likely to return to the property.**

Figure 5: Local Measure, [APAC Hotel Study](#), 2016

## Reliving the Journey

During the post-trip phase, travelers want to relive their experiences by posting on social media and leaving reviews – positive and negative. Understanding the role of reviews throughout the journey, and their impact on a hotel’s online reputation, is imperative for hoteliers. Online reviews provide actionable insights on what guests think of a hotel, but they also help inform decisions for potential guests, and may be the tipping point between consideration and booking. Research has shown that 49 percent of travelers won’t book a hotel without a review<sup>vi</sup> and most travelers read 6 -12 reviews before booking.<sup>vii</sup>

After the guest checks out, Expedia encourages them to write an online review through Expedia Verified Reviews. This review feature only allows people to write reviews who have booked through the Expedia Group websites and have stayed in the hotel, or booked through the Expedia Group websites and tried to stay in the hotel, resulting in highly-relevant content for Expedia travelers.

In addition to monitoring post-trip Guest Reviews, it’s important for hotels to respond to questions and concerns in reviews from past guests. In fact, 62 percent of users say that seeing hotel management respond to reviews generally “makes me more likely to book it” and 87 percent of users agree that an appropriate response to a bad review “improved my impressions of the hotel.”<sup>vii</sup>

Guest reviews are valuable to both hotels and potential guests, but extracting actionable insights from them can be time consuming and costly. With EPC, hoteliers can easily monitor their property rating across Expedia group websites. Additionally, Guest Review Insights transforms unstructured guest reviews into actionable, quantifiable data regarding how guests feel about a stay, allowing hoteliers to make informed improvements, where possible.

## Lean on the Pros

Engaging content, competitive pricing strategies and improved reviews do not have to be left to chance; they can be tracked on a data-driven basis. Various Expedia partners have found success with the new tools, overcoming issues that may previously have been barriers to booking for prospective travelers.

Investing in their online presence and guest satisfaction are key drivers for hotels to use to help increase positive reviews, generate more direct traffic, improve visibility and grow conversion.

Expedia’s suite of self-service tools helps hotels get closer to their goals of filling rooms, building the bottom line, and keeping travelers happy and comfortable for their first stay – and every visit after.

*Interested in improving your bottom line by enhancing your listings and customer engagement? Contact your local market manager or learn more about working with Expedia.*

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<sup>i</sup> Skift, [The Hotel-Guest Dynamic is Changing](#), 2015

<sup>ii</sup> Expedia Media Solutions, [The Traveler’s Path to Purchase](#), White Paper

<sup>iii</sup> Hotel Online, [Hotel Guests Engaged During Stay 40% More likely to Come Back](#), 2016

<sup>iv</sup> Gallup, [Hospitality Industry Study](#), 2014

<sup>v</sup> Expedia, Inc. 2016

<sup>vi</sup> Statistic Brain, [2017 Online Travel Hotel Booking Statistics](#). 2017

<sup>vii</sup> TripAdvisor and PhocusWright, [Custom Survey Research Engagement](#), 2014