INSIDE THE MIND OF TODAY’S LEISURE TRAVELER

How hoteliers can maximize revenue by tuning into the habits and preferences of today’s leisure guests

THE TOP 10 TAKEAWAYS FROM FUEL’S 2019 LEISURE TRAVEL TRENDS STUDY
Leisure travel is booming, and everyone wants in on it. According to the U.S. Travel Association, domestic and international travelers spent $1.1 trillion in the U.S. during 2018 across an estimated 2.3 billion person-trips (defined as one person on a trip away from home overnight in paid accommodations). Those are some big numbers, and since hotels are no longer concerned with persuading travelers to hit the road, they are free to spend time—and money—nailing their image and refining their messaging.

We have a lot to say on the matter. Fuel, the premier specialized software provider and digital marketing agency for the hotel industry, commissioned an extensive research study to better understand the mindset and behavior travelers exhibit when researching and booking a hotel. This study provided comprehensive data that delves into the mindset of leisure travelers, what motivates them, what their pain points are, and how to reach them.
Hotels, online travel agencies, and review sites such as TripAdvisor are all locked in a constant battle to see who can become the primary tool for traveler bookings. Despite this, Fuel’s study shows that for the majority of travelers, search engines are where they begin the process of finding a hotel room. In fact, 43.7 percent of those surveyed in the study reported they rely on search engines first when looking for rooms, followed by 18.3 percent on OTAs and just 5 percent on TripAdvisor.

This just makes sense. It’s logical that search engines such as Google are the most prominent tools used by guests early in the booking process, but the power OTAs wield during this period is worrying. Hotel companies in recent years have doubled down on advertising campaigns to increase direct bookings by educating guests that discounted rates and loyalty benefits are only available through direct channels, but the results have been slow to materialize.

The good news is that Fuel’s data places hotel websites third on the list of tools used to begin research at 10.3 percent, above vacation rental sites such as Airbnb at 6.2 percent. The bad news is that this figure is down substantially from last year, where hotels’ websites were searched out first 17.4 percent of the time. So while hotels retain a strong position in travelers’ subconscious, they are being replaced by more efficient ways to compare rates and availability, which may become even more of a concern in the near future.

HERE ARE THE TOP 10 TAKEAWAYS FROM THE REPORT:

1. TRAVEL PLANNING BEGINS WITH SEARCH ENGINES

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Clearly some guests are visiting hotel websites at the onset of the booking process, but even more of them visit these sites before ultimately booking. According to Fuel’s research, 86.7 percent of respondents said they visit a hotel’s website prior to booking. This is an overwhelming and significant number, and a credit to the hospitality industry’s pull in the online community. It also means the way your website presents your property plays a key role in whether or not you ultimately secure a booking.

For hoteliers, this is not new information. A fleshed-out list of amenities, a simple booking process, and high-quality imagery are paramount to succeeding in the online marketplace, and in some cases this is considered the bare minimum. Providing up-to-date photography remains a common sticking point in hospitality, and going the extra mile visually can give your hotel a bookings boost and help you stand out. One quick tip: If your hotel’s listing on an OTA has better photography than what you can find on your own site, that is a problem—and a good place to start making improvements.

For many reasons, this may be the most important statistic reflected in Fuel’s study. It highlights that your hotel’s website is certainly seeing visits from travelers, and that it is the ideal place to combat future OTA bookings through the use of strategic marketing and savvy positioning.
When travelers begin the booking process, they tend to start with a search engine, and then many of them eventually make it to your hotel’s website—so how many sites do they visit during this process? According to Fuel’s study, 41.5 percent of travelers visit between three and five websites on average over a 26-day period before making a booking, while 30.7 percent of respondents claim to visit just one or two sites during this process.

It is of note that Fuel’s data contradicts Google’s, which claims travelers visit in excess of 20 sites before booking. Fuel’s data shows younger travelers visit more websites on average than older travelers during the booking process, but despite this, 90 percent of respondents still visited 10 or fewer sites when booking. With the average number of site visits reaching 5.2 overall, this gives room hunters plenty of time to weigh your messaging against your competition’s, and highlights the importance of having a powerful and magnetic presence on your home site.
The value of online reviews is difficult to quantify, but 79 percent of respondents said they would not book a hotel stay without first reading reviews, a 4.3-percent decrease from last year’s results. However, the source of these reviews remains important. Last year hotel websites were considered the most trusted place to peruse reviews, but this year TripAdvisor took the top spot, with 95.1 percent of travelers indicating the website’s reviews were somewhere between “Somewhat Believable” and “Extremely Believable.”

Despite losing the top spot, reviews found on hotel websites were considered more trustworthy than those on OTAs and Yelp. Reviews on hotel sites also earned the highest percentage of “Extremely Believable” scores, 14.5 percent compared to TripAdvisor’s 13.8 percent. Despite the fact that “Very Believable” and “Extremely Believable” were options in Fuel’s survey, the lower option of “Believable” received more than three times as many responses as the next closest selection.
With trust in reviews trending downward, Facebook has stepped in to replace them as a modern method of gauging interest in a destination or property. In this year’s survey, the number of people visiting a hotel’s Facebook page prior to booking increased from 34.7 percent to 39.3 percent. For travelers under 35 it is even more important, with 51.4 percent of them using Facebook for research purposes before a trip.

However, traveler interest in social media as a research tool seems to begin and end with Facebook. Instagram is the second most used social media outlet for research, but only 11.7 percent of respondents indicated they visited a hotel’s Instagram page prior to booking. This number was higher for the under-35 crowd, but it still only reached 28.3 percent.

To take advantage of this data, be sure to fill out your hotel’s Facebook page completely with high-quality photos and detailed event information. Keeping up-to-date information on happenings around your hotel is key to success in this arena, as it shows your hotel is active and thriving. While Instagram is posting lower visitor numbers than Facebook, this doesn’t mean the platform should be completely abandoned. Instead, rethink your Instagram strategy and refocus effort from highlighting your property to celebrating your guests in order to show the best side of your hotel’s experiential offerings.

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If depreciating trust in online reviews is any indication, travelers are becoming more discerning about the messaging they come across online. According to Fuel’s data, social media posts from hotels or destinations are doing a dismal job of generating a desire to travel at just 3 percent. Billboard advertisements are doing the least for your brand, with 0.1 percent of them factoring into travel plans, while TV commercials were effective 1.8 percent of the time and magazine articles or advertisements swayed travelers at a rate of 0.8 percent.

This data plays into the growing trend of distrust lingering over online messaging, and maintaining an active social media presence today can sometimes seem like it’s more about keeping up appearances than it is about generating revenue. However, there is something to be said about maintaining a consistent image online. An attractive price and the right timing are far more important for generating actual bookings, but these opportunities may pass you by if your property’s name isn’t on the tip of your customers’ tongues.
While corporate social media posts may be missing the mark when generating traveler interest, discussions with family and friends were reported as the most important factor for inspiring travel at 50 percent. This trend serves to highlight the most powerful element at work in the hospitality industry: the industry’s ability to connect with guests and provide one-on-one, personalized experiences.

Unlike OTAs and online review sites, hotels actually have an opportunity to interact with travelers during each stay, and these interactions are reflected positively in this data. The second most common factor for instigating travel was listed as “simply needed a vacation” at 30.9 percent, and word of mouth has a hand in deciding where these travelers go once the travel bug bites.

In short, just keep doing what you’re doing, winning guests over one at a time. Good service in hospitality can’t be quantified, and word of mouth recommendations are priceless.
Mobile check-in has been gaining share in hospitality for years thanks to rising traveler demand. The technology just makes sense for the hospitality industry on both sides of the front desk, and Fuel’s data proves this with 65.6 percent of respondents wanting to check in with an app (for the under 35 crowd, that number reaches an impressive 81 percent).

But this technology is even bigger than that. Guests are clamoring for more than mobile check-in during their hotel stays, with 63.7 percent of respondents willing to use apps for on-property purchases, and 62.3 percent seeking to use them to purchase late check-out.

When considering future technology investments, hoteliers should absolutely keep young generations top of mind. These travelers want to use mobile devices for everything, and mobile check-in is at the top of the list. Hotels are fixated on technology investment, but maybe they should put a rush on this one?
Voice technology curried favor in hospitality early on in its life cycle because it allows hotels to place information centers in guestrooms, diverting many guest inquiries from the front desk, while also providing something new and interesting for guests to play with. At least, it did so in theory. According to Fuel’s research, while 37 percent of respondents said they had a smart speaker in their home, 68.6 percent said they did not want these devices in the hotel guest room.

Voice technology presents many benefits to hotel operators, but at this time it is too early to fully endorse it in hotels across the board. Not only does the technology struggle from negative public perception, it is also too fresh to fully take advantage of its positives. Voice technology needs some room to grow, and it isn’t ready yet in the eye of the public, so maybe leave it in the oven to cook a little more before serving it to your guests.
For the fourth year in a row, Fuel’s report shows guests prefer to book a leisure stay “two months out.” However, it’s important to note that “one month out” is rapidly closing in, meaning travelers are becoming more savvy in their deal hunting, or are making more snap decisions. Even more evidence is the gradual reduction in the number of guests who book six months or more in advance, down from 20 percent to just 16 percent.

In reality there are two key groups of travelers: “Deal Seekers,” who wait to book in hopes of finding a discount, and “Trip Planners,” who book early and stay longer. Deal Seekers should be targeted three months in advance of their stay in order to maximize your chance of landing a booking, while hotels can start marketing to Trip Planners as far as six months out. On top of this, the data show Trip Planners have an increased tendency to stay at the same property multiple times, offering more lifetime value overall. But don’t forgo Deal Seekers! Just because they don’t have staying power doesn’t mean they can’t fill your rooms when the time calls for it!

For more information, or a copy of the complete 2019 Leisure Travel Trends study, please visit: https://www.fueltravel.com/2019-leisure-travel-trends-study/