

Web's bumpy ride for travel industry - Webwatch with Ken Roulston

2005-06-30

As the summer holiday season approaches, it's worth noting that many businesses have been changed by the internet, but none more so than the travel industry.

Even 10 years ago we still booked our holidays by visiting our local travel agent. Today it's much more likely that you will arrange your summer break in a matter of minutes without leaving the house.

If you're planning a weekend getaway to almost any city in the world you can book your flights and make sure there is a taxi waiting at the other end, sort out a hotel reservation and even have concert, theatre or opera tickets delivered to reception before your arrival.

So why has there been such a huge effect on the travel agency, and what lessons are there for other business sectors?

The first catalyst for the revolution was the expansion of the budget airlines. When Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) and easyJet (www.easyjet.com) discovered there was money to be saved by taking bookings online instead of by phone or face-to-face, the stage was set for rapid change.

The second reason was that the newly emerging online travel agents like Expedia (www.expedia.com) and Travelocity (www.travelocity.com) saw the potential for taking products (or bits of products) from airlines, hotels and other travel providers and offering them on an a la carte menu for the customer. This idea has been taken to its logical conclusion - in terms of flights at least - by Opodo (www.opodo.co.uk), the airline alliance, as it matches potential customers with empty seats.

If you want to travel to Hong Kong, for example, you might go from Belfast or Dublin to London with one airline, from London to Hong Kong with another, from Hong Kong to London with a third, and from London back home with a fourth. You can also arrange hotels and car rental.

A similar service is offered by www.lastminute.com, possibly the best known of all the travel sites. But it is certainly not alone in the market. One of its most competitive opponents in terms of price is Travelbag (www.travelbag.co.uk), a division of eBookers (www.ebookers.com).

If you need a hotel you have a huge range of sites to choose from. One of the biggest is www.hotels.com, which makes block reservations of rooms and then sells them at a discount.

But you can also go direct to the hotel itself, where you can usually take a virtual tour of your accommodation and make special requests. One of the world's top hotel chains, the Mandarin Oriental, allows you to specify if you want a CD player and if you prefer the mini bar to be empty or full, among a range of other options. See www.mandarinoriental.com/hotel/510000001.asp.

One of the most unusual request pages is at the Chancellor Hotel in San Francisco (www.chancellorhotel.com), where you are offered a choice of 12 different kinds of pillow - which comes as news to those of us who didn't know there were 12 kinds of pillow. And if you want to read reviews of virtually any hotel in the world before you book, you can find them at www.tripadvisor.com.

Some traditional travel operators have done their best to catch up. Just look at the airline sites to see how many of them are now geared towards cheaper fares.

By way of example, see Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) in Ireland, BMI (www.flybmi.com) in the UK, United (www.united.com) in the US and Emirates (www.emirates.com) in the Gulf.

Many have also introduced frequent flyer programmes to distinguish them from their budget competitors.

The representative body of the high street travel agents, ABTA, is also fighting back, using its website as a portal to reach its 1,800-plus members. See www.abta.com, where you can search under a number of headings, such as adventure holidays. A major problem with the service, however, is that not very many of the agents in question have their own sites, so the search results tend to produce telephone numbers rather than web links.

This failure to embrace technology has been the single greatest reason for the change in the travel market. Traditional travel agents were too slow on the uptake in the early days and, as a result, their lunches were stolen by people who saw the opportunities presented by the net.

By the time the mistake was realised, it was too late. Everyone else had developed all-singing, all-dancing websites and had captured the custom.

With the exception of www.thomascook.com, www.lunnpoly.com and a couple of others, the image of the high street travel agent is now rather quaint, dusty and old-fashioned.

Several other business sectors are ripe for the same revolution - estate agents chief among them. But we'll return to that subject at a later date.

Let me leave you this week with an illustration of how a couple of traditional travel organisations have reinvented themselves. The AA and RAC both have bright, efficient websites with a fantastic inbuilt feature. Go to www.theaa.com/travelwatch/planner_main.jsp or <http://rp.rac.co.uk/routeplanner>, type in your start and finish point, and they will provide you with a detailed, print-off route plan for that driving holiday in France or elsewhere. It's a great example of how to keep up with the times.

About the Author



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This article comes from Hotel News Resource

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