The Majority Of Online Travelers Rate Hotel Visuals Among Top Influencing Factors In Selecting A Hotel Online

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Yet Nearly 60 Percent of Online Travelers Report Low Satisfaction With Quantity of Hotel Visuals Online

According to a recent survey of 2,931 online U.S. adults ages 18 and over, nearly three in four (73%) who stay in hotels when they travel say they start their stay by researching hotel accommodations online. When asked to consider what factors other than price and location are important in selecting one hotel over another, online travelers cite the hotel's written description (71%) and visuals (69%) as the top two most important factors, according to the survey commissioned by VFM Interactive and conducted by Harris Interactive(R).

By comparison, other factors demonstrated a marked difference in importance, including: information about the destination (62%); property star ratings (60%); the brand of hotel (53%); customer reviews and testimonials (44%); and loyalty program (31%).

Visuals Cited as 'Very Important' Most Often

Of the factors online travelers note as 'very important' in selecting a hotel online, visuals rise above all other factors measured.v More than one in four (28%) rated visuals as 'very important,' more than the description of the property (23%) and information about the destination (17%). Online travelers are twice as likely to rate visuals as 'very important' as they are property star ratings (14%), customer reviews and testimonials (13%), the brand of hotel (11%), and loyalty program (8%). The survey also revealed that certain groups of online travelers are more likely than others to rate hotel visuals as 'very important':

œ Those who research hotels online frequently (i.e., 7 or more times per year) (37%) compared to those who research hotels online infrequently (1-3 times per year) (24%);

œ Those in households with children (35%) compared to households without children (25%); and,

œ Women (36%) compared to men (21%).

Low Consumer Satisfaction with Hotel Visuals Online - Especially Those Distributed Through Travel Web Sites

The relative importance of visuals in selecting hotels online is especially noteworthy as it suggests that the expectations of online travelers for hotel visuals are not being met due to low satisfaction ratings with nearly two out of three (59%) online travelers saying they are 'somewhat satisfied' or 'not at all satisfied'vi with the quantity of visuals online. This leaves only 41 percent of online travelers who research and/or book hotels online being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the quantity of visuals online.

Broken down, there is a notable difference in satisfaction levels between online travelers who rely exclusively on third-party travel Web sites (those who only use travel Web sites such as Travelocity and Orbitz and no hotel specific Web sites) and those who utilize only hotel Web sites and no general travel Web sites. Of the one in five online travelers (21%) who report using only general travel Web sites to shop online, only 34 percent report being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the quantity of visuals, compared to those who only utilize hotel direct Web sites (10%), of which 51 percent report being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied.'

Respondents found various types of visuals important and useful in choosing a hotel. While still photographs rate highest in importance, rich media tours and videos also show broad consumer appeal.

œ **Two-thirds Say Still Photographs Are Important in Hotel Booking Decision**

Still images are common online visuals used by hoteliers today and nearly two-thirds (64%) of online travelers say these still photographic images are 'important' or 'very important' to their booking decision, with nearly one in three (30%) reporting still photographs as 'very important.'

œ **Rich Media 360º Virtual Tours and Short Videos Attract Consumer Appeal -**

The survey suggests that consumers are showing an appetite for more interactive visuals in their shopping and purchase paths. Nearly three in five online travelers (59 percent) say 360º virtual tours would be 'useful' or 'very useful' in helping them select a hotel that matches their preferences and expectations, while nearly half (48%) believe a short video showing a property's features and amenities would be 'useful' or 'very useful.'

'We know price and location play the most important role in consumer shopping behavior and decision making, but we were particularly intrigued to see that factors such as loyalty programs and hotel brand were rated so far behind visuals in importance by online travelers,' said Paolo Boni, president and CEO of VFM Interactive, which commissioned the study. 'With still image and rich media visuals rated so highly on consumers' importance and usefulness scales for influencing their selection of one hotel over another online, hoteliers should re-evaluate their online presence - particularly how they are being represented through online travel agency sites -- to address the lower consumer satisfaction visuals found online today.

’With more than 80 percent of online travelers using third-party sites as part of their hotel research online, these findings underscore the importance of a hotel’s Web image not only on its own site but also on online travel agency sites. As we dissected the results, we found specific segments of the online population place greater importance on visuals and VFM will be working with our existing and new hotel clients and travel Web site distribution partners to apply some of these consumer insights to increase conversion across the board,’ added Boni.

VFM Interactive released a more detailed summary today at the PhoCusWright Executive Conference in Orlando. The Company and Harris Interactive representatives are available to discuss findings in greater detail upon request. To receive a summary of the findings, please register at www.vfmii.com. Representatives from hotel or travel distribution companies may contact sales@vfmii.com and members of the media or industry analysts should contact pr@vfmii.com.

Survey Methodology

Harris Interactive(R) fielded the online survey on behalf of VFM Interactive between October 27 and 31, 2005 among a nationwide sample of 2,931 online U.S. adults ages 18 and over, of whom 1,953 stay in hotels when they travel and research and/or book hotel accommodations online (referred to as online travelers). The data were weighted to be representative of the total U.S. online adult population on the basis of region, age within gender, education, household income, and race/ethnicity. In theory, with probability samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the overall results have a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. The sampling error for online travelers is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. Sampling error for the various sub-samples of online travelers is higher and varies. This online sample is not a probability sample.

ABOUT VFM INTERACTIVE

VFM Interactive is the leading distributor and producer of rich media content for the lodging and travel industry. Operating the largest and fastest-growing distribution network, VFM enables hotels to maximize their presence online using the power of rich media on more than 5,000 travel-related distribution points where consumers are researching and purchasing travel products. In addition to sites such as Travelocity, Orbitz, Priceline and TripAdvisor, VFM’s distribution network also includes major search engines like Yahoo! and GDSs, including Worldspan. VFM also produces a variety of media marketing content including still images, rich media videos, 360° virtual tours and Flash productions. VFM’s clients include more than 8,000 hotels and resorts from brands and management companies such as Accor, Best Western, Choice, Crowne Plaza, Hilton, Holiday Inn, Interstate, La Quinta, Le Meridien, Marriott, MGM, Outrigger, Radisson, Regent, Sheraton, W, Westin, and Wyndham.

ABOUT HARRIS INTERACTIVE

Harris Interactive Inc. (www.harrisinteractive.com), based in Rochester, New York, is the 13th largest and the fastest-growing market research firm in the world, most widely known for The Harris Poll(R) and for its pioneering leadership in the online market research industry. Long recognized by its clients for delivering insights that enable confident business decisions, the Company blends the science of innovative research with the art of strategic consulting to deliver knowledge that leads to measurable and enduring value. Harris Interactive serves clients worldwide through its United States, Europe (www.harrisinteractive.com/europe) and Asia offices, its wholly-owned subsidiary Novatris in Paris, France (www.novatris.com), and through an independent global network of affiliate market research companies.

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