

Google U.K. and comScore Reveal Importance of Search Engines at All Stages of Path to Purchase in Travel Sector

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Google U.K. and comScore, Inc. (Nasdaq: SCOR), announced the results of a study into online consumer behaviour in the travel sector, finding that consumers are using search engines in more sophisticated ways to research and purchase travel in the UK.

The Internet is rapidly becoming the number one resource for the travel consumer. The study revealed that 20 million people in the U.K. utilized search engines for travel information in the first quarter of 2007. Key findings include:

On average, consumers take nearly a month to go from their first search to a purchase

On average, customers make 12 travel related searches, visit 22 websites and take 29 days from the first time they search until they make a purchase. Forty-five per cent of transactions occur four weeks or more after the first search. The time spent online is lengthy, representing a prolonged opportunity for advertisers to reach and influence consumers while they search for information.

On average travelers visit the purchase website 2.5 times

Most shoppers visit the site they eventually purchase from more than once, averaging 2.5 visits. For tour operators this was significantly higher at 3.9. Just ten per cent of the transactions take place on the first search referral to a given site, and 38 per cent of transactions happen at four weeks or more after the first visit. Travel companies face a growing challenge to retain the online consumer as the proliferation of competition encourages travel customers to shop around.

Generic search terms play a significant role in the consumer journey to purchase

Many travel businesses could be missing out on the opportunity for additional bookings and branding opportunities by overlooking the value of advertising against generic search terms (e.g. 'package holiday', 'Italy travel').

Fifty-four per cent of online travel buyers started the shopping process with a generic product or destination search term, and 10 per cent did not use branded terms (such as 'Thompson holiday' or 'EasyJet flights') at all during their online travel shopping experience. Importantly, over a third of travel buyers use a generic term as the last search before they purchase, giving advertisers a key window to influence their purchase right up until the last minute.

Consumers change the type of keywords used as they move along the path to purchase. Of all consumers sampled that made a final purchase, 29 per cent start with a non-branded search term but end with a brand search term.

Google U.K.'s Robin Frewer, Industry Leader, Travel said, "This research proves travel searchers are becoming more brand fickle -- spending a large amount of time researching their desired purchase, and considering offers from competing brands. The fact that users are using more generic search queries gives ample opportunity for brands to attract new customers -- and brands that are not present during these searches are missing out on sales."

"Online research and more specifically search has become a critical first step for consumers considering purchases," said Bob Ivins, EVP of European Markets for comScore. "By studying the entire online purchase path from first search to actual transaction we are able to quantify the importance of that first search and subsequent searches, and help marketers impact purchase decision. We are delighted to have had the opportunity to leverage comScore's global Internet usage and e-commerce tracking systems to help Google better understand how customers behave during the purchase cycle."

Methodology

Sample: UK consumers using search engines to research travel (99 per cent of all travel website unique visitors). Analysis focused on Q1 2007, with the first search captured in January 2007 and individuals tracked for up to 12 weeks. Tracking more than 20,000 searchers from the comScore Media Metrix panel.

Time alignment: Each individual's activity was time-aligned to a "common" start point based on their initial query, in order to understand activity from a user perspective in the 12 weeks from the start of the process.

Search engines tracked: All major search engines in the UK, including but not limited to Google, Yahoo, MSN, AOL, Ask.

Search term categorization: Developed jointly by Google and comScore with tens of thousands of queries categorized. comScore, in conjunction with Google, categorized the search terms captured into three main categories -- brand searches, product searches and destination searches. The search terms that were categorized allowed the study to track 99% of all travel searchers in the period. The high level categorization is hierarchical: "brand" terms include any search term that contains a brand keyword, even if there are product or destination terms (e.g. easyjet to Nice), product terms include search terms that contain product keywords but not brand terms (e.g. cheap flights to Nice), and destination terms are terms that only included destinations and no product or brand keywords (e.g. Nice).

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