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How hoteliers strategize for 2019 US calendar shifts

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To eliminate surprises around annual calendar shifts, hoteliers need to implement strategies well ahead of time, especially around group business.



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REPORT FROM THE U.S.—Hoteliers know holidays and certain events happen every year, but when the timing of those events shift, they can be trickier to strategize around.

Calendar shifts, such as the Easter and the Jewish holidays, impact group travel the most, said Jan Freitag, SVP of lodging insights at STR (https://str.com/), parent company of Hotel News Now.

“Group travel is curtailed, and it gets pushed into other weeks,” which not only has an impact on monthly data but also quarterly data, he said.

In the instance of Easter, Freitag noted hoteliers should compare Easter week to Easter week and not pay as much attention to the actual calendar dates and days because “it’s not a fair comparison.”

“Start now ... tell your owners they this data is shifting; it has nothing to do with the underlying strength or weakness of the market comp set. This is purely because of what happens with groups around the Easter or the Jewish holiday shift,” he said.

The other important thing to remember is that one week does not make a trend, he said.

Jim Smith, regional director of revenue management at Driftwood Hospitality Management, said he’s expecting hotels in his portfolio’s destination markets to see significant year-over-year increases during the week of Easter. This year, Easter falls on 21 April, which also marks the end of the spring break season in the U.S.

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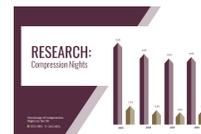
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"We are expecting our destination markets to capitalize on both spring break and long-weekenders," he said in an email interview. "In business travel markets, we expect the extended weekend to act in the opposite fashion with Monday becoming a shoulder night and Tuesday ramping the week back up."

Chris Manley, COO at Stonebridge Companies, said via email that group travel demand on Easter weekend will really have to come through SMERF (social, military, educational, religious and fraternal) groups, though it will be a challenge. He said absent group demand, strategic utilization of all channels and intelligent labor management will be required to preserve operating margins.

How hoteliers strategize around groups

Calendar shifts can be a challenge for many markets, Manley said, and holidays like Easter typically fall during a busy time period for most.

"As a result, our sales team is really focused on building and moving groups around to shoulder dates before and after the holiday to mitigate the impact," he said.

Luckily Easter falls on a weekend, which is typically already soft, "thus preserving the higher-rated business travel demand mid-week," he added.

Manley said this is also an area where a brand's revenue-management algorithms can help.

At Stonebridge (<https://www.sbcos.com/>), systems alert revenue managers if pick-up is extraordinarily strong and will recommend adjusting rates up or yielding some inventory, he said.

Smith said Driftwood (<https://driftwoodhospitality.com/>) reviews holiday calendar shifts and non-repeating events at least a year in advance.

"Each week, our hotels are reviewing ... inventory roll-in and setting sell strategies in place to maximize on demand and opportunity," he said. "Hotels that are group heavy or in convention markets are reviewing shifts sometimes five years in advance as we are layering in our group inventory controls and pricing strategies."

He said Easter is a key date for Driftwood's coastal Florida hotels since it marks the end of peak transient travel season. The shift of Easter this year adds an additional 19 days of transient compression in these markets, he said.

"For many hotels and markets around the U.S., it's not too far from business as usual," Smith said. "Many non-destination markets are business travel heavy and typically have challenges driving transient bookings on weekends."

He said for Easter specifically, the Monday after would be treated as a "second Sunday, and the strategies would reflect that."

That strategy is focused exclusively on group business, he said.

"Being able to look up dates for Easter years in advance with a simple Google search, your first step is to set attractive group strategies so your sales team does not let any opportunity slip through the cracks," he said.

As the transient booking windows approach, Driftwood targets those advance booking customers "with generous discounts for prepaid reservations," he said.

As you progress into the transient booking window, the flood gates should begin to open, Smith said.

"Your revenue manager will need to ensure that all booking channels are open. The brands are a great way to leverage slower periods. They can help you distribute target ads through e-commerce platforms and promotional emails to brand loyal customers," he said.

Lovell Casiero, SVP of sales and marketing at PM Hotel Group, said her team always has a strategy applied at least 13 months out. One focus is on identifying periods which may be soft for transient business because of the holiday or the lack of repeat in-market events, she said.

"Early on, from a long-term perspective, we try to attract any group bookings that we can and support yourself with group bookings," she said.

As the holiday or event nears, she said PM Hotel Group (<http://www.pmhotelgroup.com/>) will make sure its hotels are competitively priced on the brand's websites. From a revenue-management perspective, she said she "would typically not want to be the highest selling hotel in the market on a soft period, nor would I want to be the lowest."

She suggests positioning inventory somewhere between the middle and the top.

Another strategy her company uses is marketing packages on the online travel agencies or even with the brands to offer advanced purchases. It's about getting creative with what they have, knowing the traveler demographic will potentially change during that period.

The last strategy she will fall back on if nothing else is successful is listing inventory on discounted channels like Hotel Tonight or Priceline during the seven- to 10-day booking window.

"Every hotel is different, and every market is different," she said. "You just have to keep that in mind. ... (Your) strategy should be uniquely developed for the type of hotel, for the type of market and for the competitive set that you compete with."

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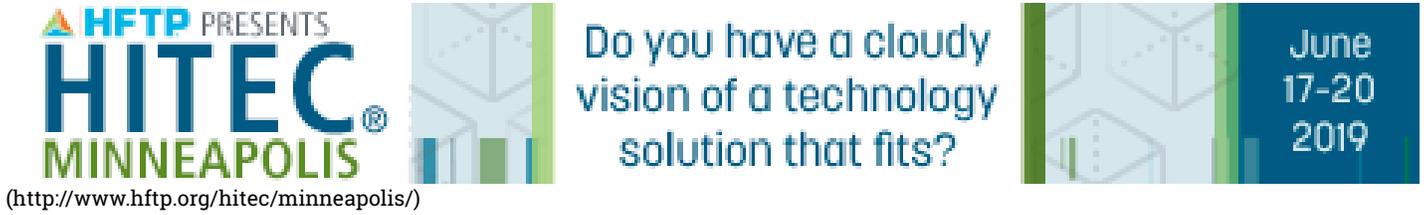
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One unique circumstance this year, she noted, is the wave of bad weather that PM Hotel Group's properties in the northeast region of the U.S. are recovering from.

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(<http://www.hotelnewsnow.com/Articles/293897/The-impact-of-the-Polar-Vortex-on-US-hotel-performance>)

"Just as we're about to start recovering from some of the weather issues, we are now facing a holiday," she said. "For Easter ... it comes on a weekend, so we certainly change our strategies on the weekends to be more competitive."



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