

Welcome Travelers Back with an Improved Digital Lobby

By **Estella Hale** - February 1, 2021



A hotel's digital presence has never been more important. While call centers and traditional travel agents still remain relevant for some, in general, travelers have moved their dreaming, research, and booking experiences online.

This trend has only accelerated due to the coronavirus pandemic. Out of safety concerns, it is very rare that a guest will walk in seeking accommodations. Visiting a brick-and-mortar travel agent presents the same challenges. Therefore, hotels must ensure they're welcoming guests online just the same as they would welcome them in the lobby—with warm hospitality, a smile, the right offers, and upsell opportunities; basically, any tool that increases the chances of converting that traveler into a guest.

The industry today has a better understanding of traveler preferences and what ultimately leads them to book—it might be a hotel's branding they're familiar with, it might be that they've stayed there before, it might be that a property offers the best rate, or it might be the hotel's proximity to an attraction they're hoping to visit. Websites and booking engines alone cannot capture or respond to these factors. Instead, conversion strategies require a much more holistic view of the guest and a much broader strategy to capture their attention and ultimately their booking.

Below are four ways hoteliers should prepare and manage their digital lobby to ensure travelers choose their property over their competitors.

1 Focus on direct business

There are obvious benefits to working with third-party distribution partners and placing inventory on all of the available channels. Research shows that consumers like to shop around and ensure they're getting the best deal. Oftentimes, particularly for independent properties, travelers may not even know a hotel exists before visiting dozens of sites to research their ultimate destination. It's important to ensure that inventory is available on sites where travelers tend to research and book.

At the same time, however, there's no denying that direct channels will result in the highest profitability. When travelers book directly, hotels are avoiding third-party commissions and driving more revenue to the bottom line. Direct bookings also help hotels build better connections and relationships with guests because they are afforded more information on the guest, their preferences, and the type of experiences they are looking for.

By not focusing attention on welcoming guests directly, you're likely missing out on providing an exceptional welcoming experience. Imagine having Expedia present in your lobby, and when a guest walks in, you direct them to the Expedia booth for check-in. It's a hotelier's job to want to take care of the guest—to welcome them with open arms, yearn to satisfy their needs, and provide them with exceptional experiences. This process should start online with a genuine and hospitable website and booking engine.

2 Pay attention to important cues from the guest

A sleek website with quality content, accurate inventory, and attractive rates is the beginning, but it's not enough. Even online, it's important that hotels are able to pick up on cues from the guest, understand more about what they are seeking, and serve them the right information. A booking engine needs to be able to respond to these cues.

In the past, this would happen over the phone. Call-center agents would be trained to ask questions and then serve the appropriate offers. Today, this must translate to a hotel's online experience. Your website and booking engine must be able to "ask questions" and respond in real-time. At its most basic, your booking engine should gather information on where the traveler is headed (i.e., destination), what dates they're looking to travel, and how many people will be traveling with them. But there are many ways to expand the information you collect before serving the right offer.

For example, perhaps the traveler spent considerably more time looking at the suite page on your website as opposed to the page showing a king room. As he or she moves over to the booking engine to book, the availability response should prioritize a suite over the king option.

3 Simplify the transition from website to booking engine

This is where technology often gets it wrong. Traditionally, booking engine providers and website designers have been separate entities with separate focuses. Websites are created with beautiful content, imagery, and descriptions, and then once the guest selects an offer and moves over into the booking engine—where real-time rates and inventory are served—the experience is clunky, or at least very different.

Today, much of this information can be passed between the two systems in a seamless manner. When a booking engine knows more about the guest, including their website activity, it can serve a more relevant

offer.

This data flow should also expand beyond the booking engine and website. When the CRM is integrated, hotels can recognize known and unknown travelers and use past stay history and preference to serve up even more relevant offers. When the RMS is integrated, real-time data analysis can help hoteliers tailor rates based on individual preferences and value. Also consider implementing data from amenity services—should your guest regularly book spa appointments or make golf reservations, ensure this is available on the same booking engine as the room options. Take it one step further by packaging these options into a tailored rate. Finally, ensure this data is available to staff on property after the reservation is made. The last thing you want is for a guest to show up and have a front-desk agent who is unaware of the spa appointment that has already been booked online.

The hospitality technology industry would be well served by implementing more rigorous standards around how this data is shared among systems. Today, completing this circuit of data requires deep integrations and hoteliers are most successful when each of these systems come from one provider. However, as APIs and file sharing become standardized, this information can be passed among systems from various providers. In the end, systems should share information about the path the guest took to eventually land on the booking engine, and the booking engine should be able to use that information to serve up the most relevant offer.

4 Measure conversion and tweak offerings

Measuring the effectiveness of a booking engine most often comes down to conversion rate. This still holds true today. But it's important that hoteliers get more granular in their measurements and ensure they're comparing the right metrics.

For example, you can't compare the conversion on a discounted rate offered by an OTA to the BAR rate on your own site. Should hoteliers spend marketing dollars to promote a campaign, that particular campaign should convert better than a standard offer. And when the website is able to collect information from the traveler and pass that information to the booking engine in order to provide more relevant offers, hoteliers should expect significant increases in conversion. Ensure you're segmenting your conversion metrics and comparing apples to apples.

Also, consider that conversion rate is not the be-all-end-all. An increasing number of travelers shop around and check rates and availability on multiple sites before booking. Depending on how much information is served on your website, some travelers may just be visiting your booking engine to check price. If you are able to bring pricing information throughout your site in real-time via APIs, you increase the probability that someone will land on the booking engine with booking intentions.

Improving your digital presence—welcoming guests online just as you would if they entered your lobby—requires a data-driven strategy and solid connections between many systems. But there are real-world tactics that can improve conversion as well. Pay close attention to guest feedback. If a guest tells you they didn't know you offered yoga classes or that they couldn't find your hotel on Google, document the feedback and bring it to the attention of a team member who can make the right adjustments.

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Estella Hale brings a rich hospitality background—having managed client service departments and held several guest services positions at major hotel chains—to her role as Chief Product Evangelist for SHR. At SHR, she sets vision and direction for all products, including Windsurfer CRS, Wave RMS, and Maverick CRM. She and her team have designed and launched several booking engine initiatives.