White Paper

Overcoming Three Points of Friction in the Traveler Journey

In just ten short years, the travel landscape has evolved beyond recognition and today’s travelers have a world of choice at their feet. For global travel companies hoping to stand out from the crowd and really capture attention, they must address the points of friction slowing down a customer’s journey with their brand.
Create a hospitable environment and make yourself easy to do business with and travelers will come.

That means different, multichannel interactions must morph into a cohesive, omnichannel brand experience. The explosion of content, operators and services offered online is also making it both challenging for travel companies to prove their worth and difficult for travelers to find what they want. To succeed, travel companies must harmonize their marketing approaches, reduce friction in the research and purchase process, and unite digital and destination experiences.

The Three Points of Friction in the Traveler Journey are:

1. **Friction point 1:**
   Information is everywhere. Who creates it, where it’s stored and how it’s used in the buyer’s journey is critical.

2. **Friction point 2:**
   Travel moves fast. Deliver what guests want, when and where they want it – or lose relevancy.

3. **Friction point 3:**
   Omnichannel means everything. Global travel brands can’t afford to ignore cross-channel, marketing integration.
A unique industry presents unique challenges

Travelers planning a trip to a foreign country without the help of a travel agent frequently agonize over the complexities of cultures and languages when booking.

Purchasing plane tickets, making hotel reservations, renting a car and even choosing entertainment options can require the use of different reservation systems, often in multiple languages. But that's not all – social media-savvy travelers consult user-generated content for opinions of the best places to stay, eat and be entertained. In fact, TripAdvisor reports that nearly half of those surveyed say travel reviews are the “most useful” source of information when researching or planning a trip.¹ Combine this with trying to figure out loyalty programs and navigating cultural faux pas, and the level of complexity facing travel brands becomes clear.

¹ http://www.tripadvisor.com/PressCenter-c7-Survey_Insights.html#tech

An airline flying to Mexico wanted to promote new leather seats with the tagline “Fly in Leather.” In Spanish this translates to “Vuela en Cuero,” which worked throughout most of Latin America, except in Mexico where out of context the slogan meant “Fly Naked.”

Travel brands need to speak the language of travelers at every step of the journey

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1. http://www.tripadvisor.com/PressCenter-c7-Survey_Insights.html#tech
1 Friction point 1: information is everywhere

Our information-rich environment has changed how customers book travel. They now need to consider volumes of travel listings consisting of promotions, descriptions, imagery, availability, pricing, reviews and offers.

Expedia Media Solutions and Millward Brown analyzed the 45-day path to purchasing a UK vacation package. Looking at the typical traveler who had visited both an online travel agency (OTA) and a destination marketing organization (DMO), they found that on average, they made 35 visits to travel sites before booking. Depicted below is how disjointed those visits are. And as consumers approached their date of booking, travel content consumption increased. During the booking process, travel site visits steadily increased, starting with 4.3 visits at three and four weeks out, 6 visits one week out and more than 13 visits during the week of booking.²

In the past, localization played a minor role. No longer can global travel companies translate a static message from one market to the next. Now, user-generated reviews, social media imagery and the next greatest ‘deal’ must be translated dynamically in context, across channels and devices. Your ability to do so is essential for influencing travelers’ brand choice.

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Audience movement in the travel market before purchase

Adapted from Google’s clickstream research – Beyond last click: Understanding your consumers’ online path to purchase. http://services.google.com/fh/files/blogs/google_clickstream_whitepaper.pdf
Today’s consumers are persuaded by information and opinions coming at them from numerous sources. Travelers select brands, sales channels and destinations based on user-generated content (UGC), social media, blogs, reviews, brand-sponsored pages, discount offers and mobile notifications. This ecosystem is ubiquitous and global – and travel brands are part of it whether they want to be or not. More likely than not, your brand will appear on Yelp and TripAdvisor without your approval or notification.

At the same time, DMOs like the Australian, Canadian or Ireland Departments of Tourism still wield the most influence in swaying travelers to purchase. OTAs such as Expedia, Hotwire, Orbitz, and Travelocity also drive social influence and provide for UGC creation, but lead the pack in what really matters: bookings.

Travelers aren’t just talking about their experience of a lifetime or even their vacation from hell. Global travelers from every country are showing every adventure in living color and HD video. When 80% of all YouTube content is reported to come from outside the US, you get a true sense of the vastness of the global information ecosystem. The question is: how do travel brands manage and deliver a localized experience in light of this volume of information spanning both traditional and rich media?

Customer experience strategists can use this onslaught of user-generated content to their advantage to create a detailed map of the buyer journey. From awareness, evaluation to commitment and all the customer experience stages in-between, airlines, hotels and cruise lines need to listen to the high volume of conversations occurring online and track them using customer journey analytics tools. Modern technology not only makes it simple to do so, it also provides actionable insight across markets and languages in real time, allowing brands to course correct and reap greater profits. Without a precise analysis of the customer journey, your messages and promotions are likely to be too vague to be effective. That means your carefully crafted information risks being irrelevant or unread.

80% of travelers are most interested in recent reviews that provide the freshest feedback, while 76% share travel experiences on social networks

– PhoCusWright
But that’s not all: this barrage of information is expected to be delivered at an incredible pace.

In the same way that people loathe being on hold to your call center, they despise waiting for webpages to load and get frustrated when content is not translated in their language in a timely manner. Who can blame them for hanging up if the reservation agent doesn’t speak their language or for booking with a competitor because a mobile app isn’t translated, doesn’t load quickly or fails to serve up their reservation information?

You also have to get the timing right. Interrupting prospective travelers with irrelevant messages about what the travel company wants to sell creates a negative brand association that prevents a looker from becoming a booker. ‘For the last time, I do not want offers to travel to Antarctica.’ Delivering the right message to the right person on their device of choice is the key to appropriate personalization. By choosing the right engine to perform this, travel brands can automate personalization, delivering the right message to the right person at the right time on the right device.

Finally, travelers will not wait patiently to discuss a problem, no matter how compassionate and well-trained the staff. Nowadays guests take pictures and share their complaints in the moment, using their mobiles to get the word out to their social feeds. Even if a travel brand resolves the crisis offline and quickly, this negative word-of-mouth now lives on in perpetuity in the digital ecosystem. In social media, there truly is no time like the present to respond to customer complaints. But doing so means that brands must be tracking and monitoring those complaints, wherever they originate from.

Delivering the right message to the right person on their device of choice is the key to appropriate personalization.
Friction point 3: omnichannel means everything

The last point of friction is ensuring that the customer experience is consistent on every channel.

Travelers are resourceful and use a range of channels to research and interact with brands like yours. For instance, they might look at online reviews from their smartphone on Yelp, compare prices on Travelocity using their tablet and book their trip through Expedia using their laptop. They might then check their itinerary at a kiosk with United Airlines, talk to a reservation clerk at the desk, and watch in-flight movies using their tablet. They could even check into their Starwood hotel using their Apple iWatch.4

In the “always-connected” global economy, brands need to ensure translation consistency across platforms, whether owned or third party and not forgetting social media where content can be proprietary or user-generated. In today’s omnichannel world, consumers cross between these channels with ease and expect messages, offers, translation strategy and branding to do the same.

Seeing potential instead of problems

Companies that sell to, host and transport a global audience must stand out in crowded markets. Global travel brands can do this by cutting down the points of friction found in customer experiences.

Because information is everywhere, whoever provides it and uses it to their advantage will keep buyers on their journey with their brand. This now happens so fast that high execution expectations are the norm. First and foremost is delivering on omnichannel and the amplification that marketing integration delivers.

Owned versus third-party channels

Owned channels consist of company websites, social pages, apps and kiosks. Third-party channels include booking aggregators like OTAs, review websites and tourism promoters such as DMOs.

4 http://www.hotelchatter.com/story/2014/9/9/15130/42392/hotels/See_Ya_Smartphones%3A_Apple_Watch_Will_Let_You_Unlock_Your_Hotel_Room_Door_
In today’s omnichannel environment, travelers expect the same experience from one device to the next, from one medium to the next, from a website to a mobile app and from a brochure to the destination. With that in mind, it’s critical for brands to engage travelers with a unified message and all the information they expect, delivered in a timely fashion.

These points of friction are underscored by the need for travel brands to speak to guests in their native language at all times. This requires travel companies to address the huge volume of information involved throughout the entire buyer’s journey. In the global travel marketplace, a frictionless experience is a localized, contextually relevant experience. The brands that deliver this will be the ones to drive bookings and brand loyalty. Truly customer-centric organizations can design and create these experiences by using advanced data-driven analytics, digital experience management and language platforms that enable them to deliver a frictionless experience at every point of the traveler’s journey.

Overcome friction in your traveler journey and transform your customer experience by scheduling a complimentary discovery day with SDL’s Travel Industry experts today.