FROM DREAMING TO BOOKING:
HOW TO CAPITALIZE ON THE FULL TRAVEL PLANNING JOURNEY

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Travel planning. We all know from experience that a lot goes into planning the perfect vacation, and with so many devices and planning resources, the journey is complex. According to a leisure travel study conducted by Phocuswright, 60% of respondents reported that a vacation was their largest discretionary purchase. In light of this, before making this large investment, travelers are thoughtfully taking time to research all the possibilities. In fact, according to Google, in just a little over a 60-day booking window, the average person encounters over 38,983 digital micro-moments and interactions.

As travel planners encounter more digital distractions and more research happens throughout the traveler’s customer journey, being there for the most important digital micro-moments—during which preferences are shaped and decisions are made—is crucial to capturing the attention of potential guests and nurturing them through the path to a direct booking.

Take advantage of the full travel planning journey.

While reaching potential guests lower in the purchase funnel is a key strategy to winning the direct booking, not being there to influence and shape decisions made earlier in the travel planning journey is a serious missed opportunity that results in lost bookings. Travel micro-moments start when people begin daydreaming about their next vacation, and they continue all the way through the long-awaited trip itself. Google defines four major stages of the travel planning journey in which hotel brands must be present: Dreaming, Planning, Booking, and Experiencing.

With over 40% of travelers stating they bounce back and forth between dreaming about and planning their next vacation—zooming in on the details for one destination and then zooming out to reconsider all the options again—it’s becoming just as important for hotel brands to be present in the dreaming phase as it is the planning phase of the journey.
Key advantages of being present throughout the entire planning journey:

- Your hotel brand can shape and influence important vacation planning decisions early on in the process to nurture potential guests further down the booking funnel.

- Seventy-two percent of travelers agree that they look for the most relevant information regardless of the travel company providing it; therefore, if you are not present early in the planning process to offer the information customers need when they need it, a competitor or an OTA might ultimately win the booking.

- You can take advantage of the full booking window to capitalize on 100% of demand for your destination, and even increase demand by influencing travelers in the dreaming phase when they are choosing between multiple destinations.

- You can better reach your "best guest" by capturing the attention of the right audience early on in the travel planning process.

- You will be there for every step of the journey for your most loyal customers and ultimately deepen their brand connection.

It’s not just the journey—device matters too.

According to Google, 40% of US travel site visits come from mobile devices, revealing that a comprehensive cross-device strategy to influence the travel planning journey is simply a must. However, many travel brands claim that they struggle to make a lasting impression within these mobile micro-moments, and Google reported that mobile session length has decreased by 5%.

So, does this mean that the mobile channel is failing to make an impact? According to the same study, the truth is quite the opposite: Conversion rates have grown by nearly 10% on mobile travel sites.

Let’s connect the dots. If the length of mobile sessions is decreasing while mobile conversions are increasing, this means travel planners are turning to mobile research in shorter spurts and making faster decisions. This simply means we need to reshape the way we think about the travel planning journey and how hotel brands can make a fast, effective impact in these key moments.
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DREAMING
“Dreaming moments” that happen when people are exploring destination options and ideas with no firm plans. At this stage, people are looking for inspiration.

PLANNING
“Planning moments” that happen when people have chosen a destination. They’re looking for the right dates, the right flight, the right place to stay, and all the things they’ll do while they’re there.

BOOKING
“Booking moments” that happen when the research is done, and people are ready to book their accommodations.

EXPERIENCING
“Experiencing moments” that happen when the trip is underway. Travelers are ready to live the vacation they’ve been dreaming about and share it with others.

Understand and be present for each phase of the planning journey.
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Map the travel journey of your target audience, and build a strategy around key micro-moments.

Once you understand the key phases of the travel planning journey, it’s important to uncover the key digital touchpoints and micro-moments that are influencing and shaping the decisions of your target segment. The journey and path to booking varies depending on demographics, income level, location and more. Understanding the online behaviors as well as the wants and needs of your target segment in important digital moments throughout each phase of the journey is your blueprint to success and building impactful multi-channel campaigns.

The bottom line? Be there and be helpful. Simply ask yourself: What need or problem are you solving for the traveler, what is their current situation or context, and how can your hotel brand help?
Once you build your strategy, it’s important to properly measure success to continually optimize campaign performance and understand how your marketing initiatives work together. Different phases of the travel planning journey have different key performance indicators. For instance, the dreaming phase focuses more on upper-funnel initiatives such as content, video, and social media that are measured by KPIs like reach, engagement, and click-through rate. On the other hand, the booking phase focuses more on lower-funnel initiatives such as SEM and Dynamic Rate Marketing that hone in on KPIs like bookings, revenue, and so on. Also, many marketing initiatives can play a different role with different focus KPIs throughout each phase. Focusing on the right KPIs in each phase is vital to ensure that all marketing plays the right role at the right time in nurturing the potential guest through the booking funnel.
Taking advantage of the entire travel planning journey doesn’t happen overnight. Launching a successful strategy takes a thoughtful, holistic approach that truly answers the wants and needs of potential guests throughout each phase.

In our five-part series, HEBS Digital will help you navigate building a successful full-funnel marketing strategy including:

- The most important micro-moments and common online behaviors in each phase of the travel planning journey
- The most effective marketing initiatives and channels for each phase of the travel planning journey
- The most important KPIs and optimization considerations for each phase of the travel planning journey
- How your full-funnel marketing plan can achieve the optimal marketing mix on a cost-effective budget to lower cost of sale and increase returns

By the end of our five-part series, you will have all the right tools to capture your “best guest” and be there for meaningful moments throughout every step of the online travel planning journey.
Let’s face it.

We all understand the need for our next vacation, and some of us may even be counting down the days. But as hotel marketers, how do we reach potential guests at the very beginning stage of the travel planning journey? Is reaching travelers early in the process important? And even more significantly, how can hotel marketers make a lasting impression?

Read on for part two of our five-part series, “How to Capitalize on the Full Travel Planning Journey to Drive Direct Bookings,” to understand how hotel marketers can reach potential guests in the first stage of the travel planning process: the dreaming phase. We will uncover what online behaviors are most common in this stage, what marketing channels are most effective, and how to measure success.
What exactly is the dreaming phase?

The first stage of travel planning is the dreaming phase, when consumers first start thinking about their next vacation. Google refers to the micro-moments throughout this phase as “I-want-to-get-away” moments. At this point travelers are just beginning to explore destination options and day-dreaming about what their next getaway could look like.

According to Google, in this stage, travelers are not committed to any one brand. The search engine giant has found that 78% of leisure travelers are undecided on what airline they will travel with, while 82% are undecided on the accommodation they will book. So, what does this phase mean for hotels? Endless opportunity to grab the attention of potential guests and ignite interest in a hotel’s destination, location, and accommodations. Before we can understand which marketing channels are best for reaching these potential guests, we have to understand what these key micro-moments look like throughout the dreaming phase.
A study conducted by Think with Google shows where the majority of time is spent throughout the dreaming phase:

- OTAs – 51%
- MAPS – 21%
- METASEARCH – 13%
- SEARCH – 8%
- TRANSPORTATION – 3%
- ACCOMMODATION – 2%
- SOCIAL – 2%

With travelers spending almost half of the dreaming phase on OTA websites, having an effective strategy to shift consumer attention to the direct hotel website is simply a must. By combining the power of non-OTA channels and touchpoints with the right content, hotels can greatly influence the travel planning journey and fuel potential guests through the direct booking funnel.
What type of content are travelers looking for in this phase?

At this early stage in the travel decision-making process, people want brands to provide content to inspire and narrow down their destination choices. In fact, 67% of travelers are more likely to book with a travel brand that provides relevant information for the destinations they’re interested in.

For these broader, destination-level keyword search terms, it may surprise you that, according to Google, 60% of these searches were conducted on a smart phone. Travelers are day-dreaming on-the-go, and your hotel needs to find creative and meaningful ways to be present in these moments.

Finally, no matter the device, 64% of people who watch travel-related videos do so when thinking about taking a trip, making video a crucial component in reaching travelers in a compelling way.

The most common searches in this phase are keywords surrounding the type of trip travelers plan to take, such as:

- HONEYMOON DESTINATIONS
- EUROPE DESTINATIONS
- BEST TIME TO VISIT [DESTINATION]
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the dreaming phase:

**SEO Destination Content:**
Featuring destination and neighborhood guides on the hotel website is one of the best ways to reach potential guests throughout the Dreaming Phase and ensure your hotel brand is present from the very beginning of the travel planning journey. HEBS Digital recently worked with an independent hotel to create comprehensive neighborhood guides. After just 30 days live, 57% of visitors came to the guide from search engines, showcasing how well-optimized destination content can successfully capitalize on search interest in destination keywords.

**Lifestyle and Editorial Blog:**
With travel consumers bouncing back and forth between the dreaming and planning phase as they consider their vacation destination options, valuable editorial content surrounding the hotel destination, property location, and unique property features play a crucial role in influencing travel planners as they narrow down their destination choices. Editorial destination content like “Why [Destination] Should be Number One on Your Travel To-Do List” or “Top 5 Gram-worthy Hidden Gems in [Destination],” is a great way to influence the traveler’s ultimate destination. Property-specific content that positions the hotel as the hero of the destination is also a great way to influence the dreaming phase. Content highlighting on-property cultural programming, unique attractions near the hotel, and any unique amenities that play up your destination, such as featuring artwork from local artists, is also an effective strategy.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the dreaming phase:

- **Destination Video:**
  With 64% of travel planners watching video in the dreaming phase, creating rich, interesting video content that provides useful information for travel planners is one of the most effective strategies to influence potential guests. Travel planners are turning to video to make the travel experience come to life and help paint a picture of what their vacation might be like. They want to get a better sense of the scenery of the destination, things they can do, where they should stay, and, ultimately, how their vacation will take shape. Creating videos that feature the most sought-after information, combined with the power of YouTube advertising and retargeting strategies, will tell a compelling story and help nurture potential guests through the booking funnel.

- **Destination-focused SEM, Gmail Ads, and YouTube TrueView:**
  With 8% of travel planning in the dreaming phase happening through search, it’s important to have a comprehensive strategy across search channels. Targeted keywords promoting your destination content, as well as utilizing upper-funnel ad formats such as Gmail Ads and YouTube TrueView, are highly effective in increasing awareness and getting in front of potential guests in moments of influence throughout this phase. With Gmail Ads, you can target subscribers of top OTA websites, as well as email lists of your top competitors, to capture interest and demand early on in the travel planning journey. On the other hand, YouTube TrueView allows you to feature video content on relevant destination videos that travelers are already watching so you can capture the attention of potential guests and make an impact.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the dreaming phase:

**Native Advertising:**
Native advertising allows your hotel to reach potential guests with relevant content on the editorial websites where they are browsing articles and spending time. Native advertising allows marketers to promote content that appears to be from the online publisher where your content is featured. Most importantly, content is blended seamlessly into the user experience and featured among similar, relevant topics from the publisher. Native advertising has high engagement rates, with HEBS Digital clients achieving an average click-through rate of 1.8% and higher. By generating interest and demand, this advertising format drives traffic to the hotel website, which grows the remarketing pool and reaches potential guests with display ads lower in the booking funnel.

**Social Media:**
Many potential guests ask for travel advice from friends and family on social media throughout the dreaming phase. Travelers typically ask for destination recommendations based on category, such as family-friendly or romantic getaways. They will also ask for advice on accommodations once they narrow down their destination and turn to social media for user-generated content (UGC) and original content from the brand. With consumers encountering an average of 1,400 images throughout this phase, having a strong presence on visually-compelling social media platforms such as Instagram is vital to making an impact. Aside from a strong organic presence, ad formats such as Instagram ads, Facebook promoted posts, and Facebook Dynamic Ads for Travel are great tactics to drive awareness and reach potential guests throughout many touchpoints on the travel planning journey.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the dreaming phase:

**Metasearch:**

With 12% of travel planners using metasearch as a planning resource in the dreaming phase, a presence on Google Hotel Ads and TripAdvisor Metasearch is low-hanging fruit to ensure your direct website is discovered during the early phases of travel planning. Keep in mind that this initiative plays an important role in the dreaming and research phases. Because potential guests are price-shopping and utilizing Google Maps to view hotel locations, direct returns from this channel might not be comparable to lower-funnel initiatives. While Metasearch can serve as a lower-funnel marketing initiative as the last touch before a booking, it predominately serves as a research tool where users might click to explore a hotel, but not yet convert.
Each stage of the travel planning journey has focus KPIs that are important when measuring marketing effectiveness. In the dreaming phase, top KPIs should include:

- Impressions/Awareness
- Engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares)
- Click-through rate
- Overall website traffic
- Unique website visitors
- Time spent on site

Focus metrics vary depending on the marketing initiative and campaign budget. Establishing goal KPIs before launching a campaign is important for gauging success and optimizing campaigns to achieve your goals.

Reaching potential guests in the dreaming phase plays an important role in capturing the majority of travel demand to your market and owning the attention of your best guest against your comp set and the OTAs. Consumer engagement in this phase increases reach and awareness of your hotel brand and fuels the booking funnel. Just like the beginning of any good vacation, being present in the moments that matter goes a long way.
The moment you decide to plunge on planning a vacation can be just as exciting as the vacation itself.

Once someone chooses a travel destination, the dreaming phase starts to become a reality, setting the travel planning phase in motion.

Read on for part two of our five-part series, “How to Capitalize on the Full Travel Planning Journey to Drive Direct Bookings,” to understand how hotel marketers can reach potential guests in the second stage of the travel planning process: the planning phase. We will uncover what online behaviors are most common in this stage, what marketing channels are most effective, and how to measure success.
What exactly is the planning phase?

The second stage of travel planning is the planning phase when consumers have decided on a destination and start planning the details of their trip. Google refers to the micro-moments throughout this phase as “Time-to-Make-a-Plan” moments, where consumers begin researching transportation, flights, hotel accommodations, and vacation activities.

According to Google, in this stage, mobile devices are playing a critical role with more than one in three travelers agreeing that when researching on their smartphones, they’ve discovered a new travel company.

Millenials are Mobile in the Planning Phase.

The statistics are even greater among millennial travelers with 50% reporting they discovered a new travel company while researching on mobile. Today, travel planning across devices is becoming second nature with leisure travelers now being just as likely to plan travel on their smartphone as they are to shop for music. This shift to mobile in the planning process means marketers need to rethink how they are delivering content and engaging with potential guests throughout this phase.

What digital touchpoints are making an impact throughout the planning phase?

By now you should have already reached potential guests throughout the dreaming phase to influence important travel planning decisions. But, if you aren’t already in the consideration set at this point in the journey, reaching travel consumers in key research and planning micro-moments is your chance to make an impact. So, what exactly do these micro-moments look like throughout the planning phase?
A study conducted by Think with Google shows where the majority of time is spent throughout the planning phase:

- **OTAs** – 10%
- **MAPS** – 24%
- **EVENTS & ACTIVITIES** – 13%
- **SEARCH** – 19%
- **TRANSPORTATION** – 9%
- **ACCOMMODATION** – 4%
- **RESTAURANT** – 11%
- **OTHER** – 10%

With almost half of research taking place on search engines and maps, having a strong search strategy throughout the planning phase must be a top priority. While OTAs are still a top resource, according to the Google study results, OTAs played a greater role in the dreaming phase. Now travel planners are simply revisiting OTA websites to price compare the options already on their radar.
What type of content are travelers looking for in the planning phase?

During the planning phase, travelers reported that search is the most common way in which they discovered the brand they ultimately booked. People want brands to provide content to inspire and to help narrow down the area in the destination they wish to stay, accommodation options, and vacation activities.

Interestingly enough, some searches, like hotels with a specific type of amenity, are primarily happening on smartphones. "Hotel with an indoor pool" and "hotel with jacuzzi in room" are two of the top hotel amenity searches on smartphones. In fact, 70% of these types of hotel accommodation searches are happening on mobile, revealing just how important it is for hotel marketers to make their accommodations come to life across devices and on smaller screens.

The most common searches in this phase are keywords surrounding accommodations and transportation:

- HOTELS IN [DESTINATION]
- CAR RENTALS IN [DESTINATION]
- FLIGHTS TO [DESTINATION]
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the planning phase:

**SEO with a Focus on Accommodations:**
Be sure to feature well-optimized accommodation pages on your hotel website including hotel schema and rich descriptions of your room types and amenities. Each room type should ideally have its own dedicated landing page within your accommodations section with a visually engaging fully-responsive way to aggregate room types to be prominently displayed on your website or homepage. HEBS Digital offers a Rooms Showcase Module that allows hotels to display room types in a highly-visual, engaging way that puts a spotlight on room amenities, room size, views, and more. Each room type also has its own dedicated image gallery to better aid travelers in the planning process.

**Hotel Location-Focused SEM:**
With 19% of travel research in the planning phase happening through search engines, it’s important to have a comprehensive SEM strategy across search channels. Hotel location-focused keywords such as “Hotel in [Destination]” or “Hotel in [Neighborhood]” are some of the top searches in this phase. Be sure that search ads for these top keywords are linking to highly relevant landing pages to ensure a high Google Quality Score which will achieve more cost-effective CPCs. Implementing Remarketing Lists for Search Ads (RLSA) is also an effective strategy to reach potential guests who have already been to your hotel website and have shown interest with more relevant messaging throughout search results. Utilizing this targeting strategy, you can also bid more for a higher position in search results since you know this qualified audience is potentially more likely to book.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the planning phase:

- SEO with a focus on accommodations
- Hotel & accommodation videos
- Travel Ad Networks
- Google Display Network & Remarketing
- SEO local content & travel guides
- Hotel location-focused SEM

**Google Display Network & Remarketing:**
With millions of websites, news pages, blogs, and Google websites like Gmail and YouTube, the Google Display Network reaches 90% of Internet users worldwide and plays an influential role in the planning phase of the path to booking. With an effective targeting, keyword, demographic, and remarketing strategy you can reach more potential guests in relevant micro-moments throughout the planning phase that inspire them to take action.

**Travel Ad Networks:**
Travel Ad Networks that utilize first-party data from travel planning websites such as airlines, OTAs, and other travel planning resources are a great way to reach potential guests during the planning phase. These display networks allow you to reach users during the travel planning process to your destination with personalized messaging and targeting based on the dates, destination, and price points travel planners are researching. This is one of the best ways to reach potential guests in the most important planning moments on top travel planning websites with the most useful and relevant information.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the planning phase:

SEO Local Content and Travel Guides:
Similar to the dreaming phase, featuring destination and neighborhood guides on the hotel website is one of the best ways to reach potential guests throughout the planning phase as travel consumers are searching for restaurants, activities, and things to do. As mentioned in the previous article in this series, HEBS Digital worked with an independent hotel to create comprehensive neighborhood guides surrounding the hotel, and after just 30 days live, 57% of visitors came to the guide from search engines. But these neighborhood guides played an even greater role in the planning phase by inspiring travel planners to consider booking the accommodations. In fact, there were 60 bookings initiated in the same timeframe.

Hotel and Accommodation Videos:
Accommodation videos are a great way to make your hotel experience come to life. While destination-focused videos play a major role in the dreaming phase, hotel and accommodation videos help narrow down accommodation choices in the planning phase. 360-degree video is also a great way to allow potential guests to explore rooms. Videos should be no longer than 60 seconds and highlight the overall guest experience, rooms, amenities, and local experiences nearby.
In our last article of this series, we covered the top KPIs to focus on in the dreaming phase. Since potential guests engaged in the planning phase of the travel journey have not yet moved into the booking phase, KPIs still remain focused on awareness, traffic, and engagement:

- Impressions/Awareness
- Engagement Metrics (Likes, Comments, Shares)
- Click-Through Rate
- Overall Website Traffic
- Unique Website Visitors
- Time Spent on Site

Overall, reaching travel consumers in the planning phase ensures that you nurture as many potential guests into the booking phase as possible. Your hotel brand should be present throughout at least two to three digital micro-moments with meaningful, relevant messaging within the planning phase to make a significant impact and ultimately win the booking.
Finally, after the daydreaming, advice-seeking, and travel planning comes to an end, the long-awaited moment arrives where travelers are ready to book. This is the moment of truth where your hotel brand must not only be present, but compelling enough to win the direct booking.

Below we explore the booking phase of our five-part series, “How to Capitalize on the Full Travel Planning Journey to Drive Direct Bookings,” to understand how hotel marketers can win the booking during this stage of the online travel journey. We will uncover what online behaviors are most common in this phase, what marketing channels are most effective, and how to measure success.
How does the booking phase take shape?

The booking phase is when consumers have narrowed down their accommodation options and are ready to commit to one. Google refers to the micro-moments throughout this phase as “Lets-Book-It” moments, where consumers have decided on the location as well as the brand they want to book with.

According to Google, in this stage, 94% of leisure travelers switch between devices as they plan or book a trip. In these cross-device moments, people often search for “[brand name] + [location].” And, in fact, almost half of these searches happen on mobile.

Mobile bookings are on the rise.

Google also reports that travelers aren’t just researching on mobile, mobile bookings are also increasing. 31% of leisure travelers say they’ve booked travel on a mobile device, while an even higher percentage of these mobile bookings came from business travelers at 53%. Yet, while mobile bookings are steadily growing, the question remains: while living our lives on a mobile device has become second nature, why are a majority of hotel bookings still happening on desktop?

Mobile may rise, but desktop still wins.

As much as mobile research and bookings have grown, the majority of travelers, especially those traveling for leisure, still book on desktop. Yet, we can’t ignore the role mobile plays throughout the journey. 46% of travelers state that they make their hotel decision on mobile but then move to another device to book.

So, why the hesitation? Fear of not finding the best rate on mobile, and overall mobile booking limitations. 69% of leisure travelers worry that they’re not finding the best price or making the best decision, while more than half of consumers switch to desktop to double-check hotel prices.

Not only do hotel brands face travelers switching devices, they also risk losing customers to competitors or OTAs. According to a study with Ipsos Connect, 88% of travelers with smartphones would switch to another site or app if yours doesn’t satisfy their needs—that’s a tough statistic to swallow after being there throughout every phase of their journey. In light of this, it cannot be stressed enough that a fully-responsive website with a seamless booking experience across devices is not only a must, it can be a serious deal-breaker.

What digital touchpoints are making an impact throughout the booking phase?

It’s no secret that reaching potential guests in crucial micro-moments throughout the booking phase is the final step in winning the direct booking. In the booking phase alone, a travel consumer can encounter up to 700 digital travel touchpoints, conduct over 52 searches, and consider up to 8 accommodation brands prior to booking. But, throughout these digital touchpoints where exactly are these crucial “lets-book-it” micro-moments?
A study conducted by Think with Google shows where the majority of time is spent throughout the booking phase:

- **MAPS** – 41%
- **FLIGHT PROVIDER** – 14%
- **HOTEL PROVIDER** – 14%
- **CAR PROVIDER** – 10%
- **GOOGLE SEARCH** – 7%
- **OTA** – 6%
- **CREDIT CARD REWARDS** – 2%
- **LIFESTYLE** – 2%
- **SOCIAL** – 1%

With almost half of research taking place on search engines and maps, having a strong search strategy throughout the booking phase should be a top priority. Utilizing top travel ad networks that capitalize on first-party travel planning data from flight providers and OTAs (a combined total of 24% of time spent) is also crucial in this phase. Time spent on OTAs can seem misleading as we know that OTAs typically make up a large portion of a hotel's distribution strategy. This breakdown of time spent can simply reveal that while a majority of time goes to the official hotel website, search, and maps, due to loyalty, user-experience, and lack of rate parity, the OTAs can still ultimately win the booking.
What type of content are travelers looking for in the booking phase?

During the booking phase, travel planners are typically searching for websites and resources they have already visited in the planning phase to follow through on their booking decision.

The most common searches in this phase are keywords surrounding the hotel brand in both search and Google images:

[HOTEL BRAND] [DESTINATION]
IMAGES OF [HOTEL BRAND]
[HOTEL BRAND] [NEIGHBORHOOD]

It's important to own your branded keyword terms in the booking phase to not only accommodate these top searches as potential guests attempt to revisit your website but to ensure you are present in the top position against OTAs.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the booking phase:

SEO with a Focus on Accommodations:
While accommodations pages play a key role in the planning phase and narrowing down the hotel decision, it’s even more important to feature well-optimized accommodation pages on your hotel website in the booking phase. Be sure to include hotel schema and rich descriptions of your room types and amenities, and ideally, each room type should have its own dedicated landing page within your accommodations section. To ensure your room types are prominently displayed as soon as potential guests visit your site, showcase room types on your homepage. HEBS Digital offers a Rooms Showcase Module that allows hotels to display room types in a highly-visual, engaging way that puts a spotlight on room amenities, room size, views, and more. Each room type also has its own dedicated image gallery to better aid travelers in finalizing the booking decision. Branded and location keyword terms should also be an SEO focus to ensure you are dominating SERPs for common searches regarding your hotel brand.

SEM with a Focus on Branded Keyword Terms, RLSA, and In-Market Audiences for Search:
With 19% of travel research in the planning phase happening through search engines, it’s important to have a comprehensive SEM strategy across search channels. Hotel location-focused keywords such as “Hotel in [Destination]” or “Hotel in [Neighborhood]” are some of the top searches in this phase. Be sure that search ads for these top keywords are linking to highly relevant landing pages to ensure a high Google Quality Score which will achieve more cost-effective CPCs. Implementing Remarketing Lists for Search Ads (RLSA) is also an effective strategy to reach potential guests who have already been to...
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the booking phase:

- **SEO with a focus on accommodations**
- **Email marketing**
- **Google Display Network & Remarketing**
- **Travel ad networks & dynamic rate marketing**
- **Facebook dynamic ads for travel**
- **Multichannel campaigns**
- **Reservation abandonment**

your hotel website and have shown interest with more relevant and tailored messaging throughout search results. Consider implementing this on branded search terms so your ad copy can be personalized to acknowledge that the potential guest has already been to your website and welcome them back. By utilizing this targeting strategy, you can also bid more for a higher position in search results since you know this qualified audience is potentially more likely to book.

In-Market Audiences for Search, which is currently available for the Google Display Network and YouTube campaigns, will soon be available for search campaigns. In-Market Audiences will allow your search campaign strategy to target users based on intent signals such as recent search queries and website browsing activity. This targeting option for search ads will make it even easier and cost-effective for hotels to reach potential guests with intent to book.

**Google Display Network & Remarketing:**

With millions of websites, news pages, blogs, and Google websites like Gmail and YouTube, the Google Display Network reaches 90% of Internet users worldwide, and similar to the planning phase, GDN continues to play an influential role in the booking phase. With an effective remarketing strategy, your hotel brand can continue to be present at key touchpoints throughout the booking phase that inspires potential guests to take action and help you win the direct booking.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the booking phase:

**Travel Ad Networks & Dynamic Rate Marketing:**
Travel Ad Networks that utilize first-party data from travel planning websites such as airlines, OTAs, and other travel planning resources are a great way to reach potential guests during the booking phase in key moments of intent. These display networks allow you to reach users during the travel planning process to your destination with personalized messaging and targeting based on the dates, destination, and price points travel planners are researching.

Dynamic Rate Marketing display ads take this first-party travel intent data to the next level by allowing your hotel brand to display the best available rate in real-time for the exact arrival date a user searched for in your hotel’s destination. This is one of the best ways to reach potential guests with useful rates and information at the exact moment they exhibit travel intent to your hotel’s destination.

**Email Marketing:**
Email marketing is your brand’s opportunity to make potential guests an offer they can’t refuse. What better time than the booking phase to send an email? Email marketing is one of the best ways to reach potential guests that have already established a relationship with your brand and to reach guests that may have already stayed and enjoyed your hotel. Email segmentation and personalized offers are key to success, as well as combining email with other marketing strategies. For instance, many top display and travel ad networks can provide an email remarketing pixel that allows you to retarget people who opened your email campaign but have yet to book. These display ads will keep your brand present throughout the travel planning journey long after email engagement to help win the booking.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the booking phase:

Facebook Dynamic Ads for Travel:
Facebook Dynamic Ads for Travel allow hotels to retarget people on Facebook and Instagram who have displayed intent by visiting the hotel website and initiating a booking. The ads are highly relevant and personalized and can feature dynamic copy and room rates that automatically populate based on the traveler’s dates searched, destination, and other details of their trip. With the average person spending up to 50 minutes a day on Facebook, this is a great place to reach potential guests directly in their social newsfeeds to better influence the booking decision.

Multichannel Campaigns:
While a well-planned multichannel campaign will reach potential guests throughout every phase of the travel planning journey with one cohesive message, the power of these marketing initiatives and phases combined are critical in the booking phase to win the direct booking. A successful multichannel campaign answers the five W’s of any great narrative: Who, What, Where, When, and Why.

Reservation Abandonment:
Once you’ve invested in key marketing initiatives and multichannel campaigns to nurture potential guests through the booking funnel, you have one mission: don’t lose the booking. With less than 3% of website visitors ever committing to a booking, reservation abandonment technology plays an important role in winning back the booking if a visitor decides to abandon the booking process. Compelling messaging that ensures a best rate guarantee or even a perk or offer to “sweeten the deal” if they book direct can be a highly effective way to win back your customer.
MEASURING THE BOOKING PHASE: GETTING TO THE BOTTOM LINE

In the booking phase, it should be no surprise that KPIs are revenue-driven metrics with a focus on impacting your bottom line. Top metrics include:

- Click-Through Rate
- Bookings Initiated
- Bookings
- Cost of Sale (COS)
- Return on Ad Spend (ROAS)
- Conversion Rate
- Incremental Revenue

Overall, making an impact on travel consumers in the booking phase is your last chance to win the booking. No pressure. Your hotel brand should be present throughout as many meaningful moments of intent in the booking phase as possible, and there’s no better time to be there, be useful, and be compelling.
So, you’ve won the booking. What’s next?

Travelers are filled with anticipation and excitement for their upcoming trip, and now your hotel brand must deliver the best experience possible. While winning the booking may seem like the end of the customer journey, guiding the guest experience through meaningful digital touchpoints, and ultimately building a meaningful relationship to retain and increase the lifetime value of guests is the ultimate goal.

Below we explore the experiencing phase of our five-part series, “How to Capitalize on the Full Travel Planning Journey to Drive Direct Bookings,” to understand how hotel marketers can provide useful information and digital content to build your brand relationship, create brand advocates, and increase guest loyalty. We will uncover the online behaviors that are most common in this phase, the marketing and communication channels that are most effective, and how to measure success.
How does the experiencing phase take shape?

The experiencing phase begins the moment travelers start to look forward to their planned vacation, it continues when they arrive at your hotel’s destination, and with a well-executed strategy, the experiencing phase lives on long after their stay. Google refers to the micro-moments throughout this phase as “Can’t-Wait-To-Explore” moments that occur after a traveler has booked his or her accommodations.

According to Google, in this stage 85% of leisure travelers decide on activities only after having arrived at the destination. More importantly, now that your hotel brand has provided useful information to help travelers plan and book their trip, guests also expect you to help curate their experience. In fact, according to Ipsos Connect, nearly nine out of ten travelers expect their travel provider to share relevant information while they are on their trip, and 67% of travelers feel more loyal toward a travel company that shares information during their trip that improves their travel experience.

Guiding the guest experience on mobile.

According to Google, travelers increasingly rely on mobile to start exploring when they arrive in a new destination. Smartphone searches at hotels increased about 30% year over year, and since smartphones are location aware, travelers conduct simple mobile searches like “things to do near me” or “places to eat near me.” This begs the question: If travelers are mobile connected while exploring your hotel’s destination, is a mobile app the best way to guide the experience? According to further research from Ipsos Connect, only 23% of travelers say they have downloaded the app for travel brands they use the most. This reveals that your hotel website and digital content must be fully responsive and easily accessible on the mobile web.

What digital touchpoints are making an impact throughout the experiencing phase?

The average traveler encounters just over 40 digital travel touchpoints over two weeks leading up to and during the vacation. Of these 40 digital interactions, 17 were digital touchpoints across Google, and 100% of these touchpoints occurred on mobile.
A study conducted by Think with Google shows where the majority of time is spent throughout the experiencing phase:

With a little over half of mobile touchpoints taking place on search engines and maps, having a strong organic search presence throughout the experiencing phase is a great way to guide and shape guests’ vacation. With 16% of time in this phase spent on lifestyle content, editorial blog content is also a great way to reach travelers and curate the trip experience, thus allowing your guests to explore your destination and local neighborhood through the lens of your hotel.

- **Google Search** – 30%
- **Maps & Navigation** – 23%
- **Lifestyle Content** – 16%
- **Flight Provider** – 11%
- **YouTube** – 9%
- **Restaurant & Reviews** – 7%
- **Weather** – 4%
What type of content are travelers looking for in the experiencing phase?

During the experiencing phase, travelers are typically searching for things to do and unique experiences during their trip.

The most common searches in this phase are keywords surrounding the local destination on mobile:

- THINGS TO DO NEAR ME
- PLACES TO EAT NEAR ME
- BEST THINGS TO DO IN [DESTINATION]

Similar to the dreaming phase, it’s important to own top searches regarding your destination and your hotel’s local neighborhood in order to be present throughout meaningful digital micro-moments in the experiencing phase. To narrow down dining and local attraction options during their trip, travelers often visit Yelp, Google My Business, and similar websites to read reviews from locals. With dining and things to do in such high demand, a strong organic presence and rich website content for your hotel dining and spa options are essential in driving awareness and ancillary revenue. CRM is also an important strategy in this phase to bring top in-demand content directly to guests’ inbox.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the experiencing phase:

Google My Business Published Posts:
A new feature of Google My Business allows you to publish posts promoting your events, products, and services directly to Google Search and Maps. By creating these posts, you can place your timely content in front of customers when they find the Google business listing for your restaurant or spa during the experiencing phase. With 30% of time in the experiencing phase spent on Google Search and 23% of time spent on Maps and Navigation, this is a great way to drive awareness of your latest spa and restaurant specials. It is important to note this feature is not yet available for hotel Google My Business listings, so these updates would need to be posted through a dedicated Google My Business listing for your restaurant or spa.

SEO Destination Content and Travel Guides:
Offering destination and neighborhood guides on the hotel website is a great way to spark the imagination of guests in the dreaming phase, and it’s also one of the best ways to engage and guide guests throughout the experiencing phase. The same content that helped them imagine their stay at your hotel can now help guests live that experience to the fullest.

Lifestyle and Editorial Blog Content:
With 16% of travel consumers spending time with lifestyle content during their trip, valuable editorial content surrounding the hotel destination, local neighborhood, and unique features of a guest’s stay plays a critical role in shaping the guest experience. Destination editorial content, like “Top Five Ways to Explore [Destination] like a Local” or “What to See and What to Skip in [Destination],” is a great way to help guests build their trip itinerary each day.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the experiencing phase:

Rich and Interesting Spa & Dining Content Sections:
With top searches in this phase focused on places to eat and things to do, having rich and optimized content surrounding your hotel’s dining and spa options is crucial to driving ancillary revenue. Consider featuring unique parallax websites within your overall hotel website to highlight everything your property restaurant and spa have to offer. These parallax sections should feature rich imagery, videos, specials, and packages, and offer an easy way for visitors to book a table or spa treatment directly from your website.

Destination Video:
While destination video plays a stronger role in the dreaming phase, the same video content can influence the trip experience itself. With 9% of online time during the experiencing phase spent on YouTube, a destination video focused on attractions and things to do is a great way for your hotel brand to shape and influence the guest experience.

Social Media:
Prompting guests to share their experience via social channels like Instagram and Facebook is a great way to inspire other potential new guests who are in the dreaming phase of the travel planning journey. Having a website Instagram feed with a dedicated hashtag, which someone can monitor and approve guest photos before publishing, is a great way to blend official hotel imagery with consumer-generated content from guests that will ultimately influence the dreaming and planning phase for future guests.
The best marketing mix to reach travelers in the experiencing phase:

**CRM Strategy:**
Communicating with guests before, during, and after their stay is one of the best ways to shape the guest experience and build a customer relationship.

- **Pre-arrival Email:** One week before arrival, be sure to provide the opportunity for guests to upgrade their accommodations, highlight spa and dining options, feature the weather for packing and planning, and any other important information that help guests plan.

- **Arrival Email:** Upon arrival, welcome guests to their stay with important hotel information such as check-in and check-out times, key amenity details, and upcoming events during their stay, and once again highlight any spa, dining, or on-property features that add value to guests’ stay.

- **Post-Stay Email:** Within two days of guest check-out, thank guests for their stay and prompt them to leave a review on TripAdvisor or provide feedback via a guest satisfaction survey. If your hotel has a loyalty program, prompt guests to sign up for future perks.

**Guest Portal:**
By now it’s no secret that during the planning phase website visitors’ number one focus is on accommodations, and in the experiencing phase website visitors’ number one focus is on the property and destination experience. In light of this, serving different content to website visitors while on property is a highly effective strategy to shape the guest experience. HEBS Digital offers a Guest Portal product that serves relevant hotel and destination information based on a website visitor’s geo location and proximity to the hotel. If a guest visits the hotel website while on property, they will receive hotel information such as check-out time, room service details, events during their stay, spa and dining specials, and any other important property information or news.
Stay connected after a check-out.

The experiencing phase doesn’t end when guests check out. To retain customers and turn every new guest into a repeat guest, hotel brands must engage customers long past their stay and add value to their everyday lives. This is where having a comprehensive loyalty program, ongoing CRM communication, and interesting editorial content that adds value to guests’ daily lives comes into play.

**Loyalty Program:**
A loyalty program with valuable rewards and perks helps keep customers connected to your brand and keeps your hotel in the consideration set for future stays. An effective loyalty program includes personalized offers and perks based on members’ likes and interests, exclusive rates for loyalty members, “surprise and delight” perks that go above and beyond standard loyalty rewards, and a community surrounding the loyalty program that keeps guests engaged with both the brand and other members.

**Ongoing CRM Communication:**
Triggered, automated emails are another effective strategy in staying connected to guests. Sending past guests an email and exclusive offer on their birthday, the anniversary of their stay, and other milestones and special occasions is the best way for your hotel brand to be there for the moments that matter most.

More importantly, once you have valuable information about guests’ preferences, demographics, stay history, and more, you can use this information to segment emails and send more personalized messages.

One great way to do this is by capitalizing on recency, frequency, and monetary (RFM) data. Based on how recently a guest stayed, how frequently they stay, and how much they’ve spent with your hotel brand, you can segment past guests into RFM categories and send them offers that are more personalized to their price preferences and stay history. For instance, a premium best guest who stays often at a high ADR is more likely to book a suite, while a frequent smart shopper who stays often but at a lower price point is more likely to book an economy room with a stronger interest in destination and experiential hotel content.

**Value-Add Editorial Content:**
While we’ve already covered the power of hotel and destination-focused editorial content, it’s important for your hotel brand to provide interesting content to keep people engaged even when they aren’t planning a trip to your destination. Editorial content that focuses on guests’ interests and passions is a great way to add value to their everyday lives. For instance, if your guest data reveals that 75% of guests love wine and purchase it frequently throughout their stay, article content such as “Top Five Wines Under $30 That Will Bring Back Vacation Vibes” will entice past guests to read even if they aren’t engaged in the travel planning process.
In the experiencing phase, it should be no surprise that KPIs are mainly engagement focused. Top metrics include:

**IMPRESSIONS/AWARENESS**

**ENGAGEMENT METRICS (LIKES, COMMENTS, SHARES)**

**CLICK-THROUGH RATE**

**OVERALL WEBSITE TRAFFIC**

**UNIQUE WEBSITE VISITORS**

**TIME SPENT ON SITE**

**SPA AND DINING RESERVATIONS**

**ANCILLARY REVENUE**

Overall, shaping the guest experience and building customer loyalty is just as important as winning the booking. Turning new guests into repeat guests is one of the best ways to increase revenue, and building a successful loyalty program results in past guests ultimately skipping the dreaming and planning phase and moving right into the booking phase. Since you’ve already won their heart, you’ll win their dollars more quickly.
The end of the journey, but not the end of the story.

As this five-part series comes to a close, the most important consideration to keep in mind when engaging guests throughout the entire travel planning journey is that all of the touchpoints, insights, and guest data collected fuels future guest acquisition, making your marketing efforts smarter and more cost-efficient. As one guest’s travel planning journey comes to a close, another begins. Be there, be relevant, and your strategy will be successful.
MORE ABOUT US:

Through its Smart Guest Acquisition Suite, including the smartCMS®, Smart Personalization Engine, Smart Data Marketing, and full-stack digital consulting and marketing solutions, HEBS Digital helps hoteliers drastically boost direct bookings, lower distribution costs, and increase lifetime value of guests. Founded in 2001, the firm has won over 400 prestigious industry awards for its digital marketing and website design services.

Part of NextGuest Technologies, HEBS Digital and Serenata CRM, the most comprehensive Hotel CRM Suite today, are the creators of the hospitality industry's first Fully-Integrated Guest Engagement & Acquisition Platform.

Who can benefit from HEBS Digital services:

- Top tier major hotel brands
- Luxury and boutique hotel brands
- Resorts and casinos
- Hotel management companies
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- CVBs
- Restaurants

Contact HEBS Digital's consultants at 1-800-649-5076 or success@hebsdigital.com.