ONLINE BOOKINGS
AND CHANNEL MANAGEMENT

Customers are booking their own accommodation, experiences and admission tickets online more than ever before. Often the requirement to complete an online form, send an email enquiry, or make a phone call can deter the customer. Customers want, and often expect, instant booking functionality.

ONLINE BOOKING FUNCTIONALITY

The tourism distribution system continues to evolve along with the rapid increase of online functionality. Customers can now book their holiday online in real time, 24/7, through online booking systems. You can add online booking functionality to your own website or use a booking 'microsite' through a third-party, which may increase direct bookings for your product. The simpler it is to book (e.g. limiting the number of 'click-throughs' or requirement of sending an email), the more likely you are to receive bookings. In addition, the more sites that offer online bookings for your product, the more visible your business is likely to be when customers search online.

Online booking systems can vary widely in their functionality and services. It is important to ensure you choose one that specialises in your sector of the tourism industry, as most tend to focus on accommodation or tours/attractions/experiences – not often do they feature functionality for both types of inventory.

While there are countless options for you to choose from, some online booking systems you might have heard of before include:

- Accommodation: RezExpert, Front Desk, Resonline, RMS, Little Hotelier, Guestpoint

- Attractions & Tours: Rezdy, Bookeo, Rezgo, Booking Boss, ResPax, Fareharbor, reZBox, Gateway Galaxy, Trekksoft

As part of your research into which system to select, it might be worth asking likeminded businesses which system they use and ask for their feedback on the positives and negatives of that particular system. This practical feedback can be very useful.
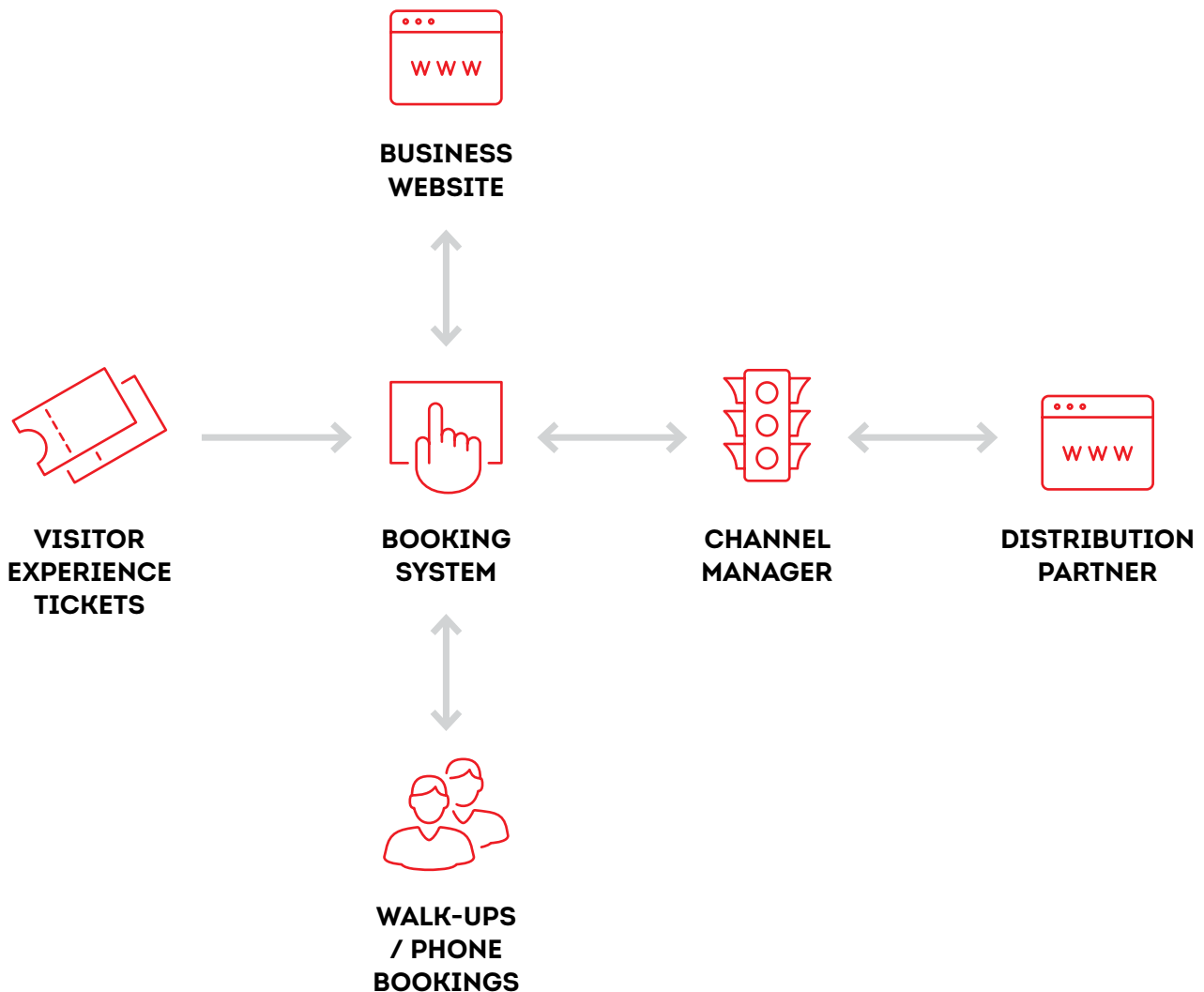
Top Tip

When promoting your products and experiences, make sure to link directly to your booking page rather than your website home page. This provides a fast and effective way for the customer to book with you directly and removes the chance of them becoming distracted.

CHANNEL MANAGEMENT

If you are working in the travel distribution system, you may have started selling your product through a variety of channels (e.g. direct and indirect through distribution partners), creating a new challenge - keeping your inventory (e.g. available seats/room) up to date across all platforms.

A channel manager (or "booking manager") is a tool that can link your online booking functionality, and live inventory, to your distribution partner's online system.

This centralised software drastically reduces the potential for double-bookings and is easier for you to manage when compared to manually updating each site/partner that your product is listed with. This means that if you receive a booking, the seat/room is instantly removed from your available inventory, and therefore no online customers nor distribution partners will have the option to book that specific seat/room for that day/timeslot. The same occurs when a cancellation is made, and a new seat/room instantly becomes available in your inventory.

BUSINESS WEBSITE

VISITOR EXPERIENCE TICKETS

BOOKING SYSTEM

CHANNEL MANAGER

DISTRIBUTION PARTNER

WALK-UPS / PHONE BOOKINGS

Before deciding on which option is right for you, you will need to undertake research to determine which channel manager/s connect with your preferred distribution partner/s. Channel management software typically connects to hundreds of distribution partner sites, however you may need to ask if there are some specific partners you are wanting to connect with (i.e. RedBalloon, Expedia, Wotif, Visitor Information Centres, Viva Holidays, etc.)

Like online booking systems, channel managers are all set-up differently. Some offer both channel management and online booking functionality. You will need to research which channel managers are best suited to your business.

Some examples include:

- Accommodation: TXA, Siteminder, Resonline, EzyYield, D-Edge, Little Hotelier, My Allocator, Hotellogix

- Attractions & Tours: Rezdy Marketplace, Trekksoft, Rezgo, TXA, Fareharbor, Experience Bank, Galaxy Connect

When looking into a channel manager, don't be afraid to ask questions:

- ☐ Does it enable bookings through my preferred distribution partner/s?

- ☐ Is it compatible with my existing software?

- ☐ What is the pricing structure (e.g. flat monthly rate or percentage fee per reservation)?

- ☐ Does it make it easier for me to manage my inventory?

Again, talk to likeminded operators to see which channel manager they are using and whether they have any useful feedback.