ONLINE BOOKINGS

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 quicker and simpler it is to book (e.g. limiting the number of 'click-throughs' required to send an email), the more likely you are to receive bookings.

BENEFITS OF USING AN ONLINE BOOKING PLATFORM

Featuring your bookable tourism products online increases the visibility of your business in a competitive marketplace. In addition to supporting sales conversions through showing live availability and instant confirmations, online booking functionality can also improve efficiencies throughout your customer's journey. You may be able to use your online booking platform to send pre-arrival notifications, make amendments to existing bookings or complete waiver forms. There is also an opportunity to connect in to review sites, such as TripAdvisor, to encourage customers to share feedback about their visit.

Switching to online booking functionality may also result in efficiencies from a business management perspective. Having a centralised up-to-date inventory source for your staff can reduce the potential for double-bookings and makes it easier to keep on top of last minute cancellations/ amendments. Online bookings will also decrease the amount of time your staff need to spend on the phone or writing emails to confirm bookings. You may also be able to use the data captured through your online booking system to automatically track sales by product type, occupancy, lead times, peak and low seasons, as well as where the bookings are coming from (e.g. sales through specific travel distribution partners or websites). You can use this type of data to optimise your marketing and potentially tweak your product offering.

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HOW TO CHOOSE AN ONLINE BOOKING PLATFORM

Online booking systems can vary widely in their functionality, service and pricing structures. It is important to 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. There are also online checkouts and ticketing systems that are not purpose-designed for tourism businesses. Keep this in mind, as generic booking platforms may impact on the visitor's experience, overall booking functionality, and data that is captured.

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

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

- *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 Tips

- 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.

- Once you know what functionality you want from an online booking system, ask providers for a demonstration to determine whether their service can meet your needs.

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