

How Search Is Key To Booking Travel Plans

Laurie Sullivan, July 21, 2009 03:59 PM



Knowing how consumers research and gather information as they make plans to travel for business and pleasure can help marketers plan campaigns better. The study, "The Traveler's Road to Decision," released Tuesday from Google and OTX reveals consumer research and buying habits across the Internet.

Business travelers are more likely to seek out money-saving packages, access travel sites from their mobile phone, and become a rewards travel program member. In fact, 25% of business travelers are more likely to access information on their phone, and 83% of business travelers belong to a rewards program.

"Search advertisers don't share the message of specific rewards programs," says Jessica Hoenes, account planner at Google. "They might have a great deal, such as buy two nights one free, but what does that mean when it comes to their rewards program."

The study, conducted between April 10 and 27, looks at general travel, hotel, car, air, cruise and destinations. The survey consists of responses from 5,002 consumers who have traveled at least once for personal or business in the past six months.

The majority of personal travelers still plan on traveling just as much or more throughout 2009, compared with 2008. Booking behavior has changed, however. Travelers will shop around more and wait for the best deal before they book.

Marketers shouldn't get discouraged if campaigns lag on producing results until days before consumers embark on their travel plans. Year over year, the research to booking window gets much longer, but the booking to travel has begun to shrink. Many consumers are holding out, but it doesn't mean campaigns aren't working, according to Google's Insight for Search tool.

In an unrelated study, Google found research to booking could stretch as far as 18.1 weeks on average. That's when more generic phrases are searched on.

Finding the best deals, consumers will search the Internet for information more often than any other source. So, it would make sense that reviews influence the purchase decision, with 41% revealing they made personal plans vs. 50% for business based on reviews of others. An increasing number of travelers contribute to these reviews, too. In a similar study conducted in April 2008, only 9% of travelers surveyed had posted a review, 5% commented on a review, and 3% participated in a travel-related blog.

Consumers rely on search engines throughout the trip-planning process more so than travel search sites, though online travel agencies remain strong with 55% looking for business accommodations vs. 52% for personal. The study suggests 64% depend on search engines to plan personal trips vs. 56% for business. When it comes to searching for information on hotel, 81% rely on search engines when looking for business overnight accommodations vs. 67% personal; 74% business air

travel vs. 59%; 60% destinations vs. 59% personal; and 51% vacation activities vs. 55% personal.

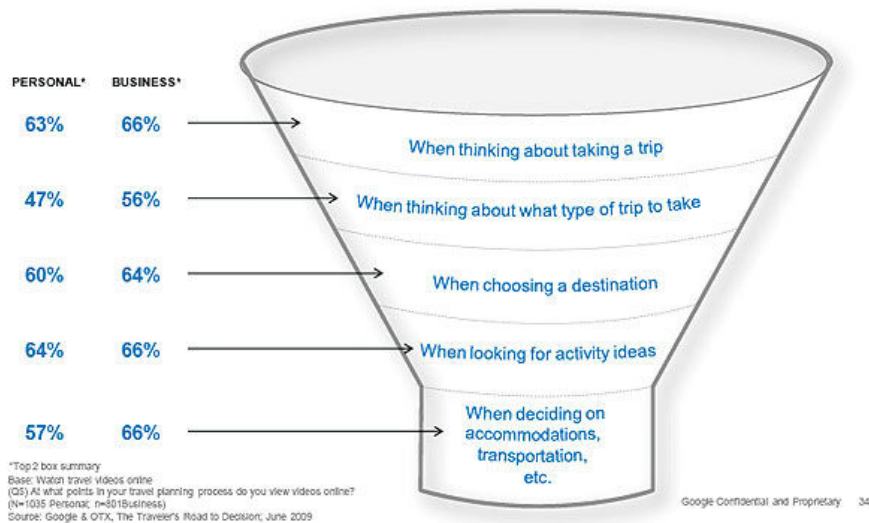
Perhaps that's why Microsoft rolled out Bing Travel, a vertical search query focusing on finding the best airfare and hotel reservations. Bing Travel is one initiative that Microsoft launched to differentiate Bing from traditional search engines, such as Google or Yahoo.

Travel videos have become an important, too, as people plan trips. It helps them visualize the surroundings and make better choices on where to stay and what to do. Videos created by peers are looked upon as being more trusted, compared with the videos that companies create to peddle goods and services. The study points to YouTube as the most popular site for videos on both business and leisure travel. In fact, 81% and 79% sought out videos to view on YouTube; followed by Yahoo, 44% and 32%; Facebook, 41% and 30%; Hulu, 29% and 25%; MySpace, 29% and 21%; MSN, 31% and 18%; AOL, 24% and 14%; and Joost, 7% and 2%; respectively.

Online video is used through the entire planning process. When thinking about taking a trip, 63% of people turn toward videos for personal travel vs. 66% for business; 47% and 56% when thinking about what type of trip to take; 60% and 64% when choosing a destination; 64% and 66% when looking for activity ideas; and 57% and 66% when decision on accommodation and transportation, respectively.

It's also become common for people to uploading their experiences onto video sites, with 6% sharing personal videos vs. 16% business related. Compare this with a study done in April 2008, where only 4% of travelers surveyed had uploaded their own travel video in the previous 6 months.

Online Video is Used Throughout the Planning Process & More Often by Business Travelers



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