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Outsmarting OTA's

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A Complete Guide to Online Marketing & Advertising for Hotels in the Age of OTA's, Meta Search and Deal Sites.

Written by John McElborough & Daniel Pelling from Inbound360

A quick sales pitch

This guide was written by Inbound360 and made available for free on our website at www.inbound360.com/hotels/.

We hope it helps hoteliers better understand and utilise online advertising and marketing techniques which will make them more money.

Inbound360 provide expert consultancy and management of online advertising campaigns. And we especially love working with hotels.

If you're interested in speaking to us about how we can help promote your hotel or chain online please email us at talk@inbound360.com or find out more about our services at www.inbound360.com.

Pitch over, onto the guide...

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Preface

Hotel marketing is the Internet age is tough. Online travel agents, meta search engines, deal sites, review sites, opaque inventory sites– they've revolutionised travel for guests, but for hotels, especially independents and small chains the choice of marketing channels is a minefield.

To stay competitive you need to be selling online and harnessing these channels but managing inventory across so many platforms is a job in itself. And that's before you've even thought about your own marketing.

Over the past decade I've talked to marketers at all levels, in a lot of hotels and the same patterns crop up again and again.

- ✓ We want to increase direct bookings through our site but don't know how to get traffic to come to us directly
- ✓ OTA's are stealing our traffic, advertising on our brand name and selling bookings back to us with crippling commissions
- ✓ A few bad reviews are killing us on TripAdvisor
- ✓ Meta search sites are promoting agency rates above our own

Sound familiar? You're not alone in feeling the pinch. According to HSAMI research [1] only 24% of room nights at independent hotels booked online were made via the hotels own websites. Larger chains fare a little better, presumably due to loyalty programs and corporate business where discounts are already applied by proxy.

[1] http://www.hebsdigital.com/blog/a-call-to-arms-how-to-shift-market-share-from-the-otas-to-the-hotel-website/

In this guide we will attempt to decipher some of the biggest opportunities for hotels to fight back against the resellers and provide some practical steps hoteliers and hotel marketers of all sizes of can take to increase occupancy via profitable direct bookings which grow your own business rather than that of Expedia or Booking.com.

This isn't an attack on the OTA's. I speak to many hoteliers who see online agents as parasites – I believe this mentality needs to change. OTA's and their downstream referrers (meta search/ comparison sites, deal sites, affiliates, Google hotel finder etc) are a demand driven entity. Guests enjoy the convenience and savings they offer. Guests have a choice (in fact probably too many choices) and they choose to book with the OTA's. Its up to hoteliers to step up to the plate and earn those direct bookings.

Hopefully this guide will give you some direction on how you can do just that.

Increasing Occupancy & Revenue Via Direct Sales - Its Not Just A Question of Traffic

One of the biggest misconceptions most marketers seem to have when it comes to the online-Direct channel is that increasing bookings is simply a case of increasing website traffic.

This is OTA mentality but it's a fundamentally flawed concept for hotels themselves. This may seem strange given that we at Inbound360 are in the business of online advertising but allow me to explain.

The biggest single issue with virtually every hotel I work with is not the volume of visits they're getting, but rather the % value of those visitors which the hotel website is successfully converting into direct bookings.

The conversion rate.

Lets illustrate with a hypothetical example (they'll be a few of these as the guide goes on) and imagine a *unique visit to booking* conversion rate of 1%.

Honestly this is probably optimistic, while I've seen industry wide averages of 2% suggested[2] I believe this is artificially inflated by repeat and loyalty bookings which independents don't benefit from.

At a 1% conversion rate, 100 visitors would drive 1 booking.

Double traffic to 200 visits and you get 2 bookings.

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2 http://blogs.adobe.com/digitalmarketing/analytics/recovering-reservations-from-visitors-who-abandon-the-hotel-reservation-process/

But how much will 100 extra visits cost you? Well you can get some idea via Google Adwords. Most "hotel in [location]" keywords are going to cost you between £1-£2 per click on Google Adwords.

Search Terms	Avg. monthly searches	Competition	Avg. CPC
hotel in brighton	1,900	High	£1.90

So those extra 100 visits could cost £200 (or more depending on your location). I know some hotels can still turn a profit on a booking which costs £200 to bring in but the majority can't.

Advertising prices are dictated by the highest bidder - literally in the case of Google Adwords, which works like an auction for the top ad slot but even with offline advertising a placement basically costs as much as your competitor is willing to pay for it.

In online travel the OTA's will always have the deepest pockets for advertising. Contrary to popular belief this isn't because of the commissions they're taking from hotels. Actually even at 15-20% per booking profits are pretty low given the massive outlay these sites make on advertising, but rather because an OTA can convert their visitors at a far better rate than a hotel site.

By their nature OTA's will always convert better – if you're looking for a hotel in London on an OTA you have a choice of thousands of hotels. If you're looking on the website of a single property London hotel you usually have just 1 choice.

As a hotel there's little you can do to redress that balance but there's certainly elements of the OTA's strategy you can learn from, for example:

- Major OTA's have refined their booking process based on data from millions of customers. Study it, learn from it, copy it!

- An OTA knows that a new customer has residual value after their first booking, whether that's in terms of repeat bookings, word of mouth or contributing a review. OTA's understand the true value of website visitors and customers – so should hotels.
- OTA's aren't exclusively reliant on the most expensive sources of website traffic. They use search marketing extensively but also receive downstream traffic from affiliates, meta search sites and Tripadvisor which converts at a better rate and they pay for only on a performance basis.
- OTA's invest millions in search marketing, giving them a huge pool of data that lets them optimise their campaigns for the best converting keywords and adverts. Hotels can unlock at least some of this data.

So the first thing to understand is that **traffic is probably not your problem or your answer**.

I would almost always recommend a hotel look at their conversion rate before they start signing over cheques to Google or any other advertising platform. Making a relatively small investment in improving your conversion rate, if only by a half a percent will have a significant, compound effect on your bottom line when it comes to advertising.

We'll talk more about the specifics of "conversion rate optimisation" for hotel websites in the next section.

Conversion Rate Optimisation

Conversion Rate Optimisation (or "CRO") is probably one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented of all online marketing disciplines. For many people who have come across it, and even for many who profess to be experts at it, CRO means split-testing- the practice of testing how well one version of a page converts against another. The hope being that by tweaking the look or content of a page it can be made more appealing to visitors and encourage them to convert.

Split testing can produce very good results. It can also produce no results or even negative results. For most hotels my first bit on conversion rate optimisation advice would be to forget about split testing. It's the sort of thing you worry about when you're already getting relatively good conversion rates and want to squeeze another 0.1% out of it. The truth is that most hotels I look at are achieving such poor conversion rates to begin with that you'd be running split tests for the next 20 years to push the conversion rate needle by half a percent.

Luckily there are some very simple things hotels can do right now to improve their website conversion rates.

Look at the OTA's

As we've already discussed OTA's are masters of conversion. Some sites are better than others, Booking.com and Agoda probably being the best examples I usually recommend studying.

If you've never done it before (and most hoteliers I talk to haven't) try booking a night at your own hotel on Booking.com. Then try and book the same room on your own site. Better still watch a friend as they try the same thing. Notice how Booking.com lets you find and

select a room with just a couple of clicks and reserve the room with just a few details? That's because the fewer steps between an enquiry and a confirmed reservation the faster the booking process and the less likelihood of the user making a mistake and becoming frustrated.

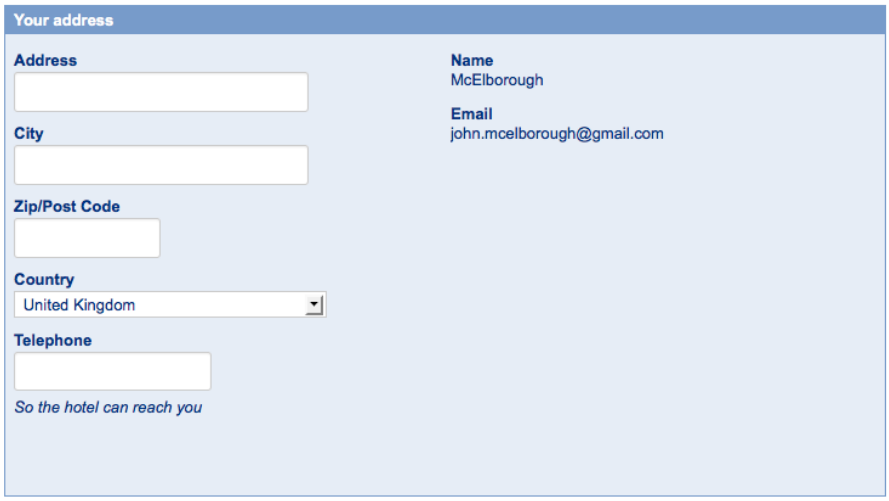


Figure 1 Booking.com only ask for the most essential details to confirm a reservation

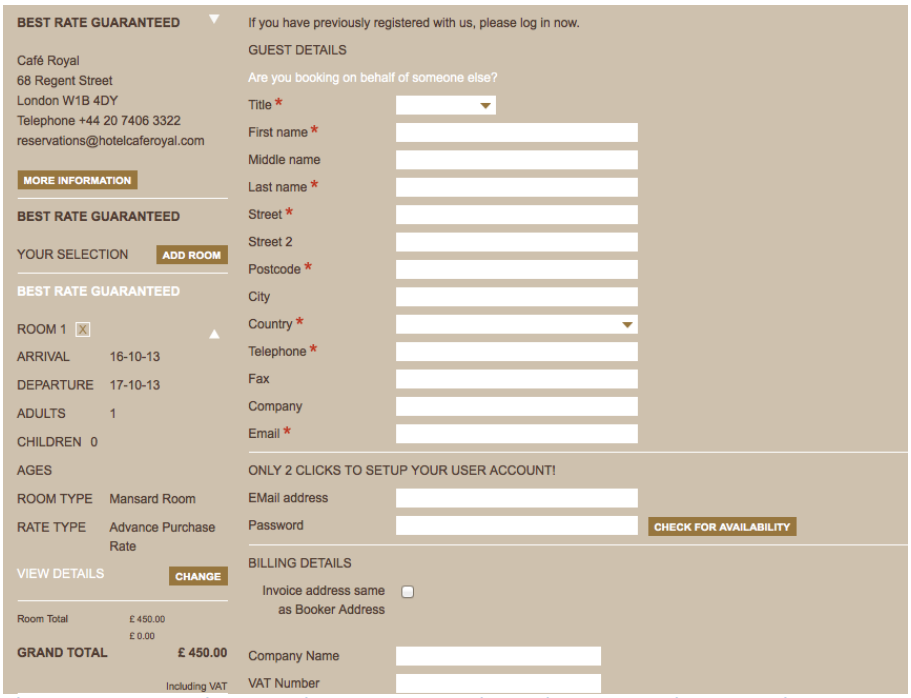
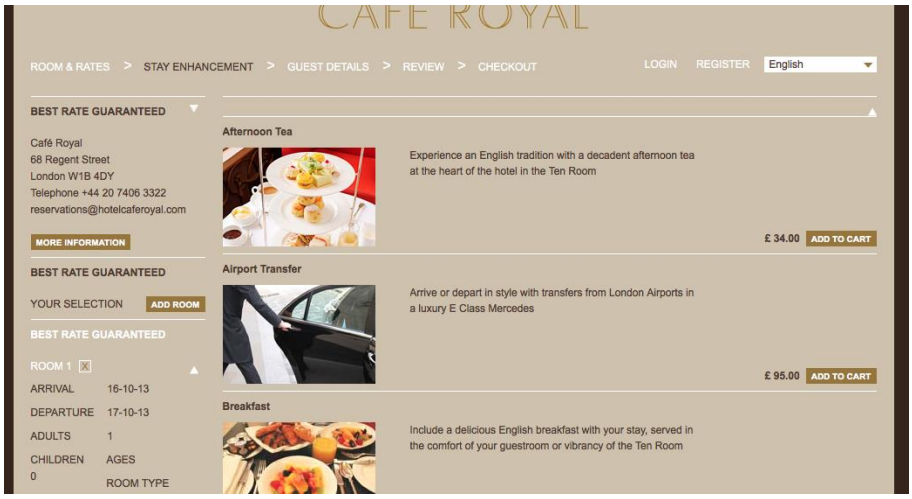


Figure 2 A daunting looking set of required fields on this hotel site

Notice they don't try and upsell bottles of champagne, afternoon tea or spa treatments before they've even got the customers email address? That's because these extra steps confuse visitors and lead to higher abandonment rates.

***Website**: "Would you like to add airport transfers to the booking?"*

***Visitor**: "I better check with the wife, I'll come back and finish this later!"*



See how the checkout pages look exactly the same as the rest of the website and the visitor stays on the www.booking.com domain throughout the process? Sending your visitors off to a third party site with your logo and colours may be the simplest solution but it confuses visitors and makes them uneasy about handing over their credit card details.

Study the booking processes of the OTA's who send you the most bookings – these are the sites which your potential guests are most likely to have visited before and be familiar with. Make your own reservation process as similar as you can to the OTA's and your visitors will jump the learning curve and feel more at home booking on your site.

User testing

Using OTA's yourself is a great way to get a feel for the comparative weaknesses on your own site but if you're familiar with your own website you're going to find it easier to place a booking than a real guest would. You need objective feedback from members of your target demographic.

I always rave about a service called usertesting.com to the point my customers probably think I'm earning a kickback from them (I'm not).

This service, and there are others like it, lets you watch real website users trying to complete tasks on your site. So for example ask them to try and book a double room with single occupancy on 15th October with breakfast included starting from your homepage.

You'll find yourself screaming at the screen while you watch the footage back "the button is there, just click that button. No not that one!"

If you're trying to get management buy-in to upgrade your website booking system there is no better way to do it than to show the owners footage of 5 guests trying and failing to complete a simple reservation on your current system. You'll have sign off by the end of the meeting.

User testing is also great for uncovering qualitive assessments of your website which you could never gain from crunching data in Google Analytics like "this photo makes the rooms look cramped". Its details like this which are too easy to miss for a busy hotel marketer but which can make a profound difference to how well your site converts.

Is your analytics package showing you the full picture?

Website analytics packages like Google Analytics are powerful tools in the hands of marketers who understand them but too often I see hotels making decisions based on their web stats without fully understanding them or in many cases even having the software setup correctly.

If you're selling rooms online you need your web stats to tell you;

- ✓ How many bookings you've had
- ✓ What rooms they booked
- ✓ How much they spent

Google Analytics can do this, even if you're using a third party reservation system where the booking is completed on another site. If the software vendor you're using for your booking system tells you its not possible, or that its going to cost you extra to set it up, its time to change vendor.

Without this information you're in the dark about where your bookings actually originated from and what ROI you're getting on different direct marketing channels.

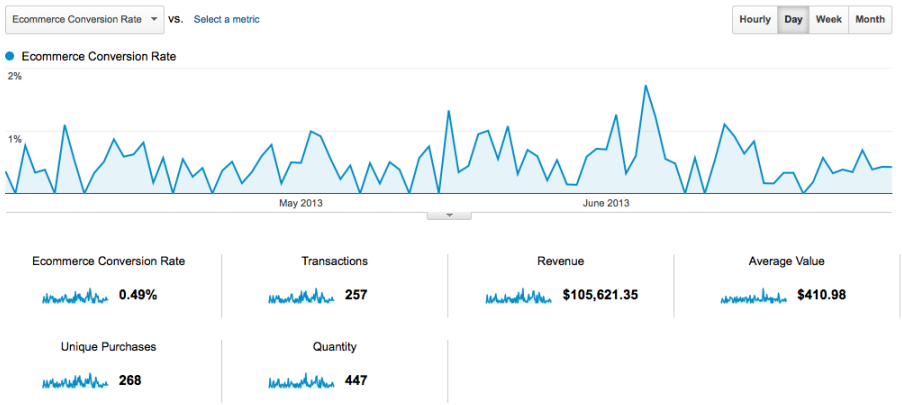


Figure 3 Transactional data is essential if you want to make decisions based on your analytics

What channels and keywords are sending you bookings?

Assuming you're able to track reservations in your web stats software you should be able to see exactly where the guests who did book direct on your site actually found you. Like a digital version of the old "how did you hear about us" survey question.

Armed with this report you should be able to establish which channels and referrers are sending you actual paying guests. So lets say you're paying £50 a month for a business listing on Tripadvisor and its sent you £2000 worth of bookings in a month, then you'll probably want to keep paying for it, if its sent none in the past 2 years then that's something you might want to review.

These reports are even more powerful when it comes to looking at your search engine marketing performance because you can uncover the exact keyword variations which are sending you bookings and any keywords which send traffic but which don't convert into bookings.

As we said at the top, traffic isn't the answer to your direct booking woes. To illustrate;

- ⦸ Keyword A sends 100 visits a month at a cost of £100
- ✓ Keyword B sends 20 visits a month at a cost of £20

Keyword B sends 2 bookings a month, keyword A sends none.

Take your budget from keyword A and use it to increase your position on keyword B and you'll be spending less, getting less traffic but getting more bookings.

This isn't anything revolutionary, in fact it seems blindingly obvious, yet it's something that we still see in Google Adwords campaigns on a regular basis. Companies throwing money at keywords which have never and more than likely will never lead to a booking. Like a luxury hotel that has its adverts showing against keywords like "cheap hotels in…" or a hostel which lets its ads show against "luxury hotels in…".

Conversion rate optimisation is only in part about what happens on your website. If the people who arrive at your site are the *wrong people* you can have the shiniest site and most seamless reservation system in the world and you'll never convert those visitors into guests.

Search Engine Marketing (aka Paid Search)

At Inbound360 paid search engine marketing particularly on Google Adwords is our bread and butter. We've worked in some competitive spaces but in terms of volume and sophistication of the competition there is no market tougher than hotels.

Despite this the fact remains, search engine advertising works for hotels when implemented correctly.

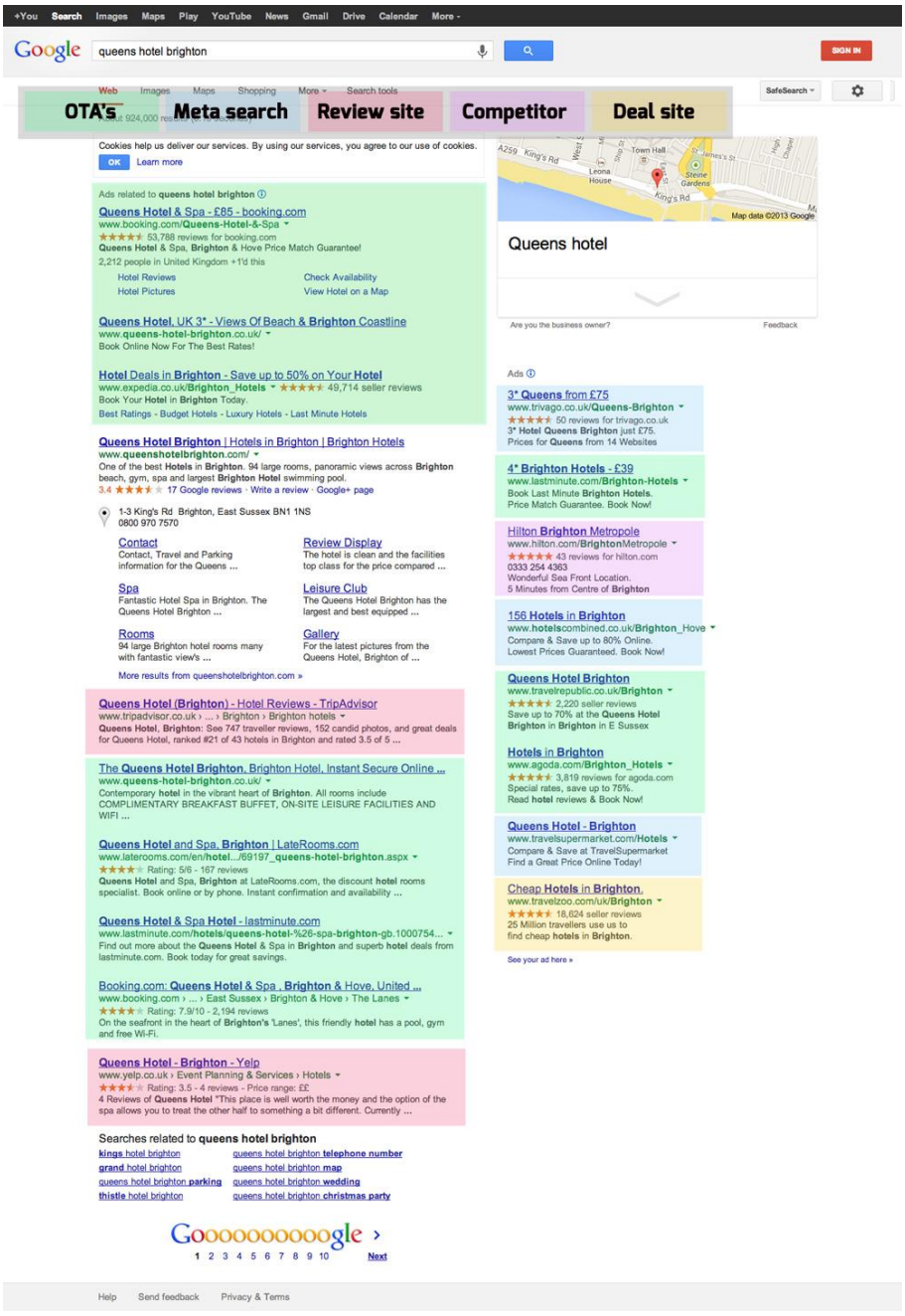
If you're interested in starting a Paid search campaign or would like an impartial review of your current campaign performance, email talk@inbound360.com or visit:

http://inbound360.com/ppc/

Where many hotels go wrong is that they expect Adwords to provide instant gratification. 5 years ago it might of but in this day and age it takes time and refinement to get a campaign to produce positive results. Most new accounts we setup produce negative ROI in the first months. It takes time to gather data and a big enough sample of visitors to draw accurate conclusions about which adverts and keywords are doing the business and which are failing to deliver.

How does your brand look in Google results?

If you're a hotelier, how do you feel when you see a search results page like the one on the next page?



That's your brand. A name you've spent years developing. People are searching for it and companies who you are paying commission to are all over the page. In affect you are paying for an entire page of results in Google when really you only want one.

Of course the real winners here are Google, they've created an eco-system whereby they can earn money

every time anyone, anywhere types the name of a hotel into their search box.

But can you do anything about this?

Well yes there are steps you can take to protect your brand in search results and maximise the amount of traffic that's ends up on your website but they do cost money. So first you need to make a business decision about how much of a problem you actually think scenarios like the above are.

At the end of the day if someone's searching for your hotel there's a good chance you'll get that booking. Whether it comes via an OTA, a meta search site or direct. If you're spending more money getting that traffic to your website rather than the OTA's, you need to be sure that cost is justified by increased revenue because bidding on your own brand is pretty much a zero sum game. It doesn't increase the total number of bookings (occupancy), it just changes the place where the booking is made.

So yes you can increase revenue here by poaching direct bookings, which would otherwise end up coming from in through an OTA but its unlikely to increase your occupancy at the end of the day.

Brand bidding

Some hotels are loathed to spend money bidding on their own brand name. Particularly as they should hold the top position in Google's organic results for their hotel name. We tend to find however that brand bidding not only lifts the conversion rate of an Adwords campaign (as you'd expect) but also helps bite back at the booking share which goes to OTA's. Again to reiterate, this strategy will not increase occupancy so if this is your goal above and beyond revenue (usually for internal political reasons rather

than sound business one's in my experience) then bidding on your own brand might not make sense.

The goal with brand bidding is to bid for the number 1 position, even though this is likely to result in higher costs. This has 3 effects;

- It increases your likelihood of getting ad extensions showing, which minimise the likelihood of visitors ever seeing an OTA ad
- It drives up costs for the OTA's to bid on your brand, thus increasing the likelihood that they will stop advertising on your keywords altogether*
- Improves your account quality score in Google Adwords, which may help your average cost per click to fall.

**This is an interesting nuance of the way large OTA's manage their campaigns. Most will be using bid management software with bidding rules which prevent them overpaying to bid on any particular keyword*

If you're aggressive about brand bidding you may want to look into running multiple adverts on your brand keywords, directed at different sites. For example you could advertise your listing on your local tourist board where you don't pay a commission on bookings.

Again this is one area where you an afford to assert a bit of muscle in your advertising because your brand keywords should convert at a good rate assuming your rates are matched to those available on OTA's.

OTA brand bidding

Another way to take a bite back at the OTA's is to capitalise on their own brand loyalty. For example show your adverts for a navigational search like "[hotel name] + booking.com" or "[hotel name] + Expedia"

Show your *book direct for best rates* advert and tempt some of that traffic away from the OTA. Including phone numbers in these ads can work well, for example, *call us for our best rates*.

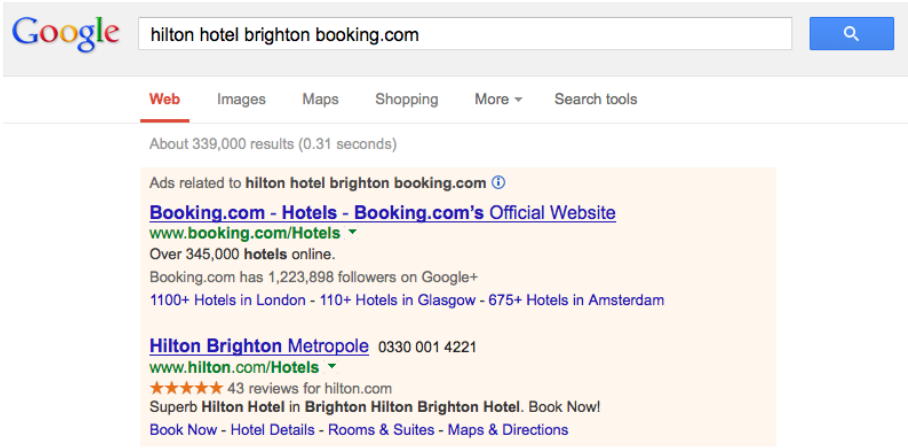


Figure 4 The Hilton show their advert, along with phone number to searchers looking for their listing on booking.com

Competitor brand bidding

Competitor brand bidding for hotels is a real fifty shades of grey area. A lot of hotels like the idea of showing an advert when a visitor searches for their rival down the road. Competitor brand bidding is ok when there's not much competitor on brand terms as this keeps the bid price low. However to advertise on your competitors brand terms you're going to be competition against the OTA's and meta search engines as well as the hotel itself, so the bid price is kept artificially high by the level of interest in the keyword.

What's more because your advert is pointing to a completely different hotel to what the searcher is looking for your conversion rate will be the lowest on that page of results, while your bid price will probably be one of the highest because Google's quality score system looks at the relevance of your landing page to

the searched keyword and a lower quality score means a higher bid for the same position.

With this in mind I would personally recommend actively avoiding your adverts showing against other hotel names. We upload a list of names of other hotels and set them as 'negative keywords' to prevent adverts showing for these competitor brand terms.

The exception to this rule is where your hotel is in a hyper local area and there are maybe only a couple of accommodation options in the town. In these cases it might make sense to advertise on other properties names. This is particularly the case if occupancy is generally high in the town and there's a good chance the competitor won't have availability.

Generic keyword bidding

Of course the real make and break of a search engine advertising campaign comes in appearing against generic searches potential guests are making in Google for a hotel in your area, research terms where there's no intent to book at a certain hotel.

Buying terms like "hotels in [city]" and "[city] hotels" are the golden geese of the OTA search strategy. Because OTA's have such a large selection of hotels they can serve up a good user experience for these searches and convert this traffic well. The bid price on these keywords is high, but then so is the value.

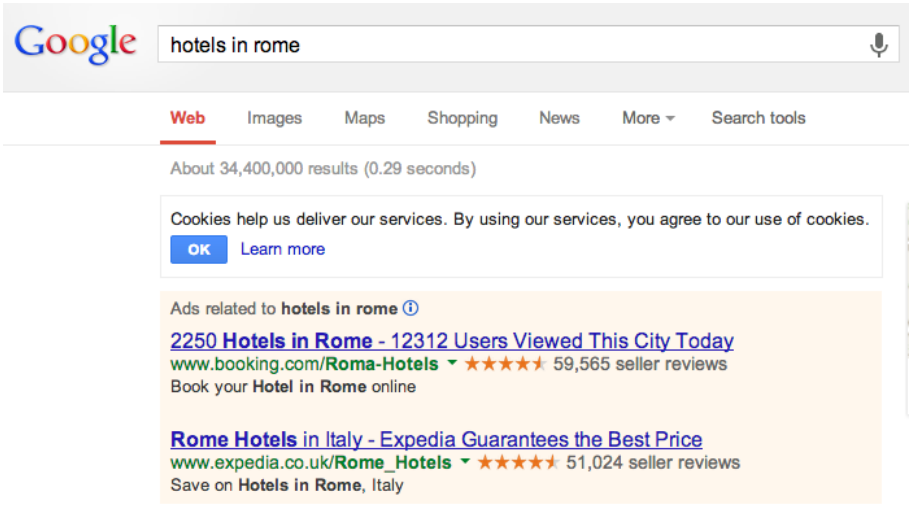


Figure 5 The big OTA's love these "hotels in [city]" keywords

To put this in context booking.com is one of the world's top spenders on Google Adwords, estimated to have spent in excess of $40 million[3] on Google ads in 2011 and probably far more in 2012/13. So they have deep pockets and a sophisticated strategy. The same goes for the other major OTA's and meta search sites are also getting in on the act, Kayak having a huge Adwords budget in the US and Trivago advertising extensively on generic city level keywords for searchers in Europe.

So you can't out muscle the OTA's in Adwords, but can you outsmart them?

The thing we've found with PPC ads for hotels is that there's a click through rate ceiling – only a certain number of searchers will click on and go on to book on a hotel website. Regardless of advert position the % of visitors who will click on hotel adverts vs OTA adverts always seems to be smaller (the click through rate or CTR as its known in Adwords). This is both a good and bad thing for hotels. On the plus side it means that as long as your advert makes it clear you're a hotel, rather than a booking site with multiple hotels on offer you can bid for high positions and usually spend less than an OTA because you'll have a lower CTR.

[3] http://www.wordstream.com/articles/google-earnings

However because your CTR will be lower, your quality score (the score Google gives your adverts and landing pages) will also be lower than an OTA, so you may have to bid more for a higher position in results.

Strategically going after the top keywords in your local market may not be the best starting point for your PPC campaign unless you're a big, well-known chain brand or famous hotel in your location. Its expensive and unless you've really got your website conversion working at a very good rate, you'll struggle to make a positive ROI.

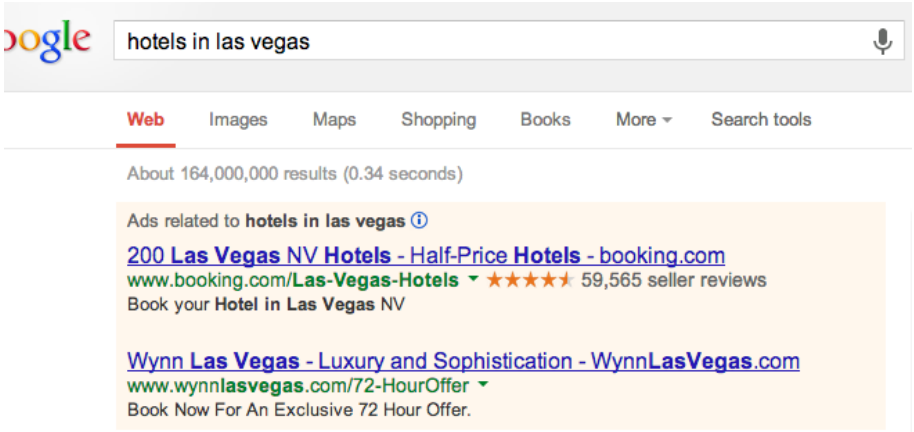


Figure 6 Well known 'destination' hotels like the Wynn in Vegas can get away with bidding competitively on generic terms, but most will struggle to make this protitable.

The reason for this is that very generic "location + hotel" keywords don't give any clues to the guests specific requirements. For example a guest looking for a low end £50 night bed and breakfast may use the same generic keywords as another guest who's actually looking for a top end luxury suite. An OTA can accommodate and convert both these visitors as they have a full spectrum of hotel types, your single hotel website can't.

Therefore my recommendation to hoteliers when starting a PPC campaign in a reasonably popular area is to start by dominating the keywords which spell out exactly what your hotel is offering. So for example,

Instead of advertising on "hotel in Brighton";

- A low end hotel might advertise on "cheap hotel in brighton" or "bed and breakfast brighton"
- A high end hotel on "5 star hotel in brighton" or "luxury hotel in brighton"
- For mid-range hotels its trickier, we try to concentrate on the hotels USP or style so maybe it's a "boutique hotel in brighton" or a "brighton hotel with free parking" or a "hotel on brighton beach"

There's several advantages to this approach over just broadly advertising on anything "hotel + location" related;

- ✓ Bid prices may be lower as there's less competing advertisers, for example if you're advertising on "cheap hotels" you're not going up against luxury hotels. Less advertisers generally means lower bids for top spots.
- ✓ A searcher entering your site on this level of keyword is pre-qualified by their search term, few people search for a luxury hotel if they can't afford it or a hotel on the beach if they actually want to stay up a mountain.
- ✓ OTA's are less sophisticated in their advertising and landing page strategy at this level. They still do a pretty good job but at this level a handcrafted keyword list and advert can trump the formulaic approach OTA's have to use to their ad management (remember they're advertising in thousands of cities, so those adverts aren't written by hand)

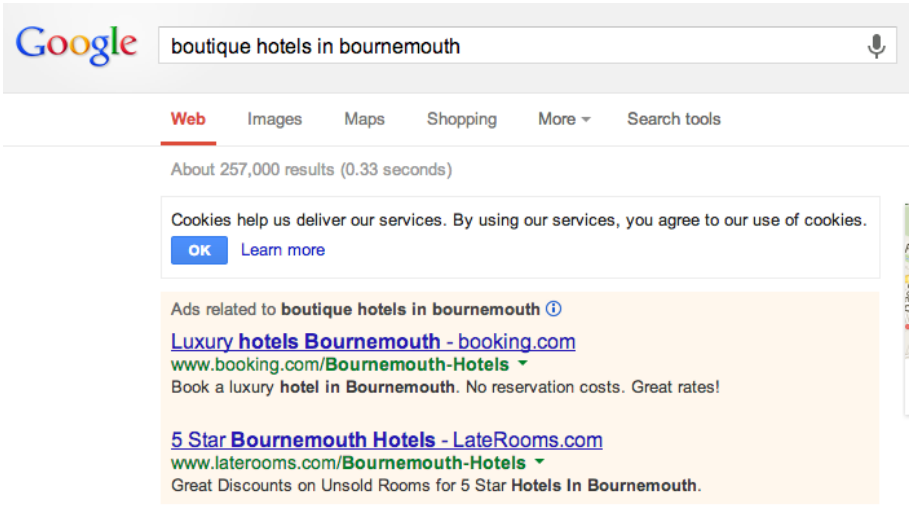


Figure 7 At this level of keyword OTA's aren't serving up precisely relevant adverts, presenting an opportunity for a local hotel to capitalise on

If you're based in a smaller location though, by all means go after these very generic keywords from day one.

Ad extensions

Here's another thing the OTA's are very good at in their search advertising, but most hotels fail to capitalise on. Ad extensions are additional bits of information you can add to your advert to enhance how its displayed in Google search results. They can be used to improve your click through rate in adverts, build trust before the visitor even clicks on your advert and, probably most importantly, make your advert stand out on screen.

There are 4 ad extensions I think all hotels should be using in their PPC campaigns. If you're not using these, ask your PPC manager why;

Location & Call Extensions

Add your address and phone number to your listing making it more visible and encouraging calls. On mobile ads this can be used to show searchers how far they are from your hotel. This is a great extension for

hotels because OTA's can't use it, so your advert will at least look different.

On smartphones your advert will have a click to call button next to the advert so potential guests can ring you direct from the search results with one click, a great value add against OTA's, most of whom don't push phone bookings.

Seller ratings

Seller ratings are what give those little 5 gold stars you see under the adverts of most OTA's.

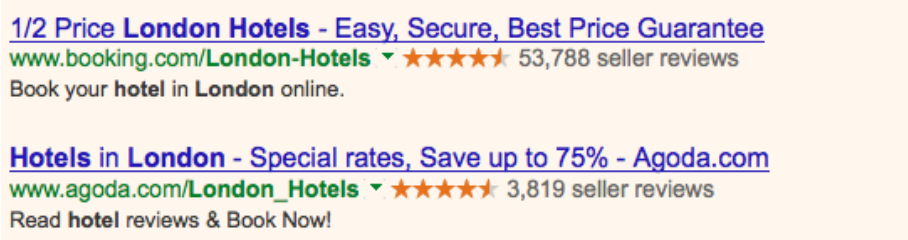


Figure 8 Virtually all OTA's have these ratings on Adwords

I don't think the seller ratings are particularly useful for searchers but they are effective for advertisers.

To clarify these aren't hotel reviews, they're reviews of the website itself, left on various third party review sites.

I would recommend collecting reviews on a site like Trustpilot, Review Centre and Feefo. I know most hoteliers are obsessive about collating positive reviews on TripAdvisor and with good reason but you only need 35 reviews on Trustpilot or one of the other sites which Google shopping use to aggregate their reviews and you can get 5 gold stars under your adverts, just like you see on the OTA's ads. This should improve your adverts click through rate.

Sitelinks

Sitelinks are those extra links you see under an advert when it appears in the top 3 spots in Google ad results, see an example below:

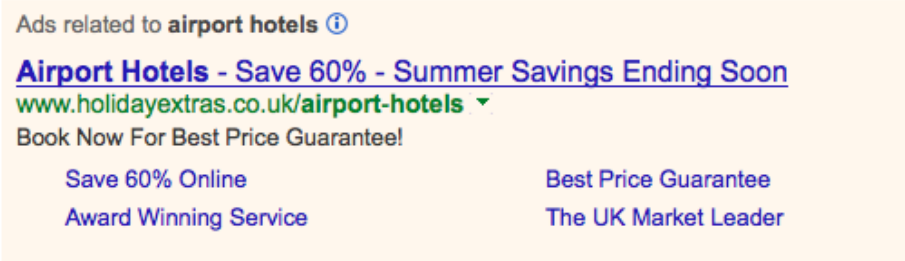


Figure 9 A good use of sitelinks promoting the benefits of booking with holidayextras.co.uk

Sitelinks are only going to show if you're bidding for the top ad spots so if you're bidding low you won't benefit but if you get an ad showing in the top rack with sitelinks you can both increase your click through rate and also help pre-qualify guests before they click. So for example, sitelink messages I might use for a hotel ad would include:

- ✓ Book direct for best price
- ✓ Rooms from £99/ night
- ✓ 5 minutes from airport
- ✓ Free cancellation

The trick with sitelinks is to use them as an extension of your advert to help tell the full story. You can't get much information into the text of the ad itself so use sitelinks to bullet your USP's, reasons to book direct rather than via an OTA and set price expectations.

You definitely want sitelinks setup for your brand bidding campaigns as well where the goal is to bid for the number 1 position and occupy as much screen real estate as possible.

Offer extensions

Offer extensions are another great value ad you can use in your campaigns which OTA's will find it hard to

introduce into their own advertising, thus making your ad stand out from the crowd.

Offer extensions display alongside your advert and provide a discount code or barcode for guests to use on your site or when they check-in to receive a discount. So you could use this to drive walk-ins by advertising within a local radius to mobile devices, or provide a coupon for a 10% discount for visitors who book online. This would allow you to keep your online rates in parity with your OTA rates while subtly under-cutting the OTA rate via the discount code.

Bing Ads

Although yes you absolutely want to spend the bulk of your time, energy and budget on Google, don't overlook Bing advertising entirely. Bing Ads have a few advantages over Google Adwords which mean it might be worth considering;

- ✓ Lower competition for ad space
- ✓ Lower average cost per click
- ✓ Higher % of business users (some businesses will have Bing set as default search engine)
- ✓ No Hotelfinder equivalent and less visible local listings means ads get more attention
- ✓ Ad's are barely distinguishable from organic listings (seriously, its even harder to spot an ad on Bing as it is on Google!)
- ✓ Ad's also appear on Yahoo search
- ✓ Ad's appear inside web search on Facebook (realistically, few people actually use it)
- ✓ Virtually no small chains and independent hotels seem to be doing it at the moment so there may still be some first mover advantage.

If you're managing advertising campaigns manually keeping 2 campaigns running on different platforms

obviously creates additional work/ time/ expense so consider using just your most valuable and successful keywords and adverts from Google on Bing.

As your keyword strategy wants to be as niche as possible, while still maximising potential traffic you're better off taking your best converting keywords from Google Adwords and importing them into Bing ads (where they'll spend 10% or less than what they spend on Google) rather than investing that budget on advertising on boarder and lower converting keywords on Google.

If management time is a factor don't test new keywords and ads on Bing, just test in Google and then copy over.

Non-hotel and long tail keywords

Clearly your highest converting keywords are going to be those which show an expressed interest in booking a hotel so "hotel in X" or better still a brand term where the searcher is looking for your hotel specifically. But bear in mind that the bid price for a keyword is going to go up inline with how much money it can make for a hotel or OTA so clearly you're not alone in wanting visibility for these most lucrative terms.

Therefore its worth exploring other angles with your keyword strategy where conversion rates will be lower but clicks might cost you in the pence rather than the pounds.

Events

If popular events or conferences are held nearby your hotel you can run ads on the event or venue name, anyone who's searching for that event is probably going, and if you set ads to show only to people who are a good distance away from the hotel, you can bet

many of them will need a place to stay. Its speculative but it can work. Especially as these keywords have little or no competition.

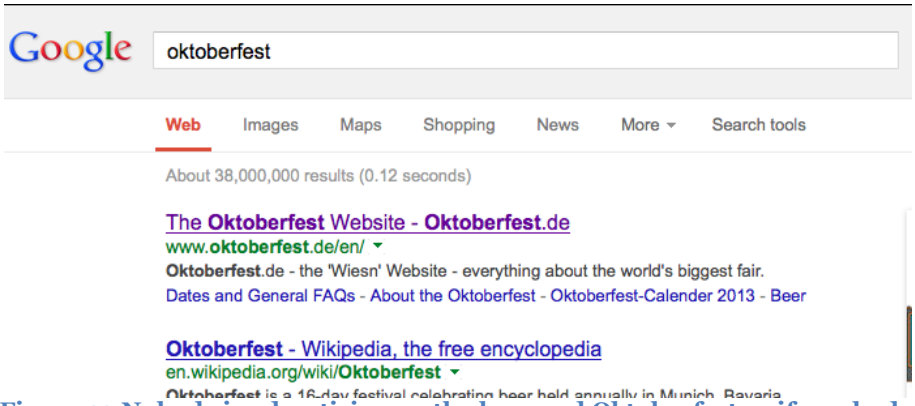


Figure 10 Nobody is advertising on the keyword Oktoberfest so if you had a hotel nearby you could probably get clicks for just a few pence

The really nice thing about events is you know when the searcher is going to be travelling. That means you can serve a very specific ad including exact rates on those dates and pause your campaigns once you're full.

Local attractions

As with events you can piggyback off searches for local attractions or landmarks. If people are visiting, and they're not local, they might need a hotel, so show them an ad.

Destination terms

Figure 11 There's plenty of major cities and towns who have no advertisers on their names at all

If you're happy to speculate and experiment with your advertising there's a lot of potential in advertising on

very board tourist information type keywords. For example if I were a hotel in San Francisco who have a lot of guests from the UK I could create a city guide to San Francisco and advertise on broad terms like "San Francisco" to searchers in the UK. The traffic from this campaign is unlikely to convert well for first time visitors but if you're getting international visitors to your site for a few pence a time then you may well be able to make a strategy like this work.

Retargeting Your Guests To Boost Conversion

Retargeting has been available for a while now but the technology has really picked up steam since Google started offering their 'remarketing' service within Google display network, and now in search result pages.

If you're not familiar with retargeting, here's how it works in a nutshell;

- A user visits a page on your website.
- You set a tracking cookie on that users computer
- When that user goes to visit another site which is displaying adverts from an ad exchange that supports retargeting you can display an advert to that user, encouraging them to come back to the site

The power of this technology is that you're only showing adverts to people who you know are interested in your hotel (because they've already been on your website) so it doesn't matter what website your advert appears on, you know it's only going to reach a relevant audience.

This has a couple of very useful applications for hotels.

Retargeting with display advertising

Conventional wisdom suggests that most hotel guests won't book their room the first time they go online, especially if they're planning a big trip. People research, talk, make plans, research again, check prices and finally book.

That's why we say it's so important for hotels to dominate their brand keywords in search, because most people will make up their mind about a hotel and worry about where they're going to book it right at the end of the process, returning to Google and typing in the hotel name.

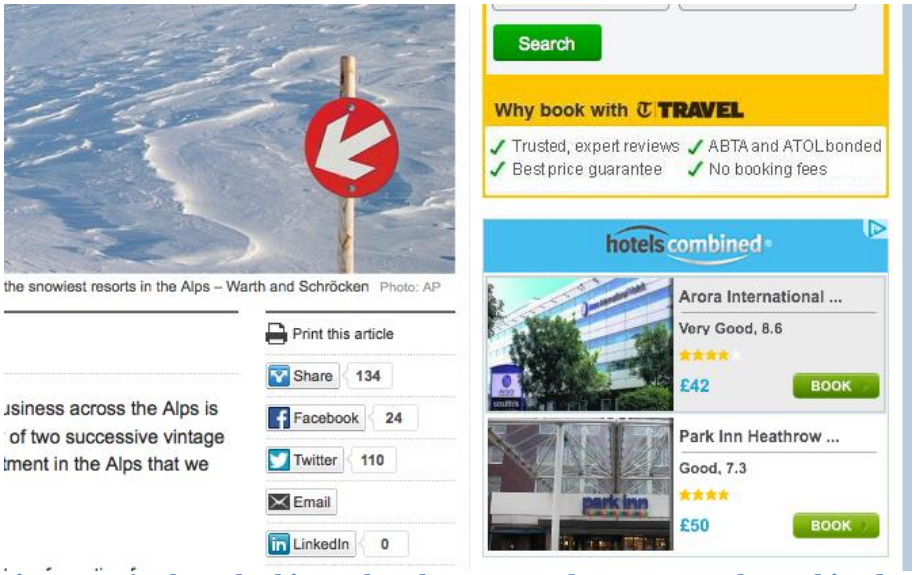


Figure 12 I've been looking at hotels near Heathrow on HotelsCombined so they retarget me which this advert while I'm reading the Telegraph

So although only a small % of guests actually book on your site, you'll probably find a much healthier number of those have visited your site at some point during their research. That might be to;

- Look at photos
- Get the address/ driving directions
- Check your rates
- Get additional info about the hotel, for example the spa or golf course which you mention in your description on the OTA's

It might actually make sense to hold some info/ photos back from your OTA'S so potential guests are more inclined to visit your site? I'm sure your OTA account manager would argue differently but it's something to think about!

Once those visitors have been on your site you can set your retargeting cookie on their machines. You can now show adverts just to these people who have looked, but didn't book.

You can display retargeting adverts on a huge range of websites, including Facebook and many national newspapers. Unlike conventional banner advertising your messages should be relevant for someone who already knows about you so you should use a highly tailored ad designed to return them to the booking process. Incentives work really well for this, here's a few examples:

- You looked at a standard room, book now and we'll upgrade you to a suite for the same price
- Lunch is on us - book a room today and get a free lunch at our restaurant
- We've dropped our prices for the date of your stay, book your room now.
- Our Facebook fans get an extra 10% off, like us and book now.

(The last one you'd want to display on Facebook)

You can use the same technique to display adverts to guests who have completed a booking, driving them to leave you a review.

"We hope you enjoyed your stay at our hotel. Could you spare a minute to leave us a review on tripadvisor?"

You'd have to be careful with this, you don't want the ad showing to guests who haven't stayed yet, but there's lots of interesting possibilities for hotels to use retargeting and right now, virtually nobody is taking advantage of them (except the OTA'S!).

Retargeting in search

In addition to displaying adverts using retargeting on publisher sites (sites displaying adverts) you can now also use retargeting in Google's search results pages.

This is relatively new and some advertisers are misusing it at the moment however hotels should definitely be looking into it, for 2 very good reasons;

- ✓ It allows you to show an advert to people who looked at your site then searched in google for a competitor (I.e they're researching local alternatives)
- ✓ It allows you to advertise on generic search terms like "hotels in [location]" or even "hotels" and bid aggressively, but just advertising to past visitors who have already shown an interest in the site.

So you're probably thinking something along the lines of '*that sounds great, but aren't I just showing ads to a lot of people who didn't like my site enough to book the first time'*. In some cases this will be true, but there's plenty of reasons a visitor to your site might not of converted the first time around and if they're not interested, they're unlikely to click on your ads and cost you money.

I'd advise segmenting your retargeting lists rather than applying the same retargeting settings to everyone who hits your site ever, for example you might want to segment your website visitors into 4 retargeting lists;

Browsers – they've viewed the site but haven't done an availability search or showed any obvious signs of being close to booking. They're your lowest value prospects for retargeting, but still better than a cold lead.

Price checkers – they've done an availability search on your booking system and seen prices, but haven't gone any further. They're at the research phase so you'll want to entice them back with an offer.
Abandoned bookers – they've entered your reservation funnel but haven't completed their booking. These are your highest priority targets to get back to the site as they're the closest to booking.
Successful bookers – they've completed a booking and hit your success page so put them in a separate list, you might want to run a re-engagement campaign with them but don't show them sales messages.

With this segmentation you can produce different advert creative to target potential guests at different stages of the buying cycle and also, crucially adjust your advert bids dependant on how likely they are to convert.

For example I might bid 25% more for an advert to be shown to my 'browsers' list than to someone who hadn't ever visited my site before but I'd happily bid 100% more to get one of the 'abandoned bookers' back to my site because I know they have the highest probability of booking.

Meta search strategy

In 2009 I spoke to a large hotel group in the UK and asked them what their meta search strategy was. I got blank looks from the online marketing guys and proceeded to explain what meta search was…

Actually not much has changed since then despite meta search becoming much, much bigger in the past few years.

When 2 of the biggest meta search engines get brought out by OTA's (Kayak selling to Priceline, Trivago sold to Expedia) as well as Google and Tripadvisor entering the meta search arena you should really start to take notice of it as a channel.

Meta search engines for hotels, if you haven't come across them, are sites, which search for prices on multiple hotel booking sites simultaneously returning multiple prices for the same hotel from different agents. They may also be known as comparison sites.

They present an attractive proposition for guests as they offer a wider choice of hotels than you would get on a single OTA site and they can help you find the cheapest rooms by returning live rates and availability from the major OTA's rather than searching around all the OTA's looking for deals.

However because meta search relies primarily on rates and availability delivered via feeds from OTA's and they earn commission based on confirmed bookings at OTA sites, they don't usual show prices available direct with the hotel, even if that rate is cheaper.

With more guests starting their searches on meta search websites instead of on Google or by going directly to an OTA site, having visibility on meta search could become as or more important than your visibility on Google search or the OTA's themselves.

Although most meta search traffic is driven directly to agents rather than to your own site, meta search websites only take a small commission from the OTA's (typically around 5%) and don't increase your costs. So, gaining visibility on meta search sites may be a way to increase your OTA visibility without sacrificing a larger % to the OTA's or dropping your prices.

Below we'll introduce some of the most prominent meta search sites in the English speaking markets and look at how their rankings work.

Hotelscombined (www.hotelscombined.com)

HotelsCombined is one of the most sophisticated and user friendly meta search sites and their technology also powers the hotel search you see on lots of other travel sites across the web including travelsupermarket, Skyscanner and Ryanair.

Results are sorted by "recommended" by default. This score appears to be a combination of aggregated reviews from OTA sites and the level of discount available (calculated by the difference between the highest and lowest prices available on OTA sites they work with).

Listing a broad range of rooms on OTA's will help your listing appear to offer a bigger discount, for example list your most basic rooms with a no-frills, no cancellation package and also your very best, most expensive room with everything included to create the bigger possible low to high price gap. Where the meta search engine finds an expensive room at one OTA and a cheap room at another it will assume its found a good deal to show the searcher, although in reality they're not comparing like for like packages. This approach can work with a number of the meta search sites we're looking at here.

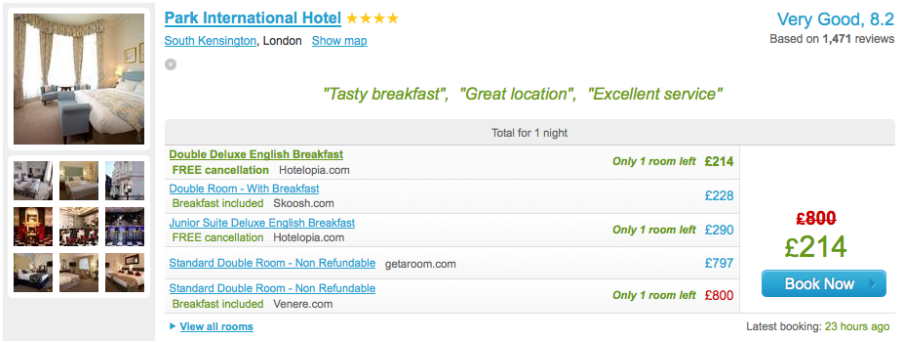


Figure 13 A large difference between the cheapest and most expensive rooms available through OTA's make deals stand out on hotelscombined.com

You can get a link added to your official website on your listing page by emailing hotelier@hotelscombined.com - they may ask you to link back to hotelcombined from your own website.

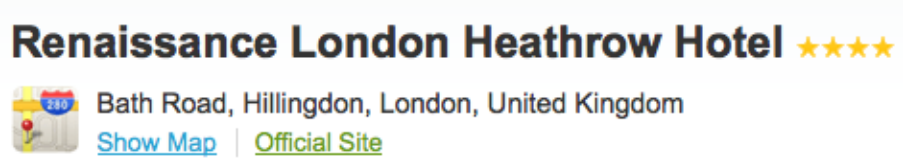


Figure 14 You can add an official site link to your hotelscombined listing, although this may drive little traffic

Trivago (www.trivago.com)

Trivago is the leading hotel meta search site in Europe and has been investing very heavily in TV advertising for the past couple of years. They also advertise extensively on Google Adwords and have an aggressive SEO strategy.

By default results are sorted by "popularity". This formula isn't disclosed but it appears to be a combination of review scores, price and conversion rate so as with hotelscombined, having low and high rates listed on OTA's will make your Trivago listings appear as good 'deals', which may improve your visibility in their results.

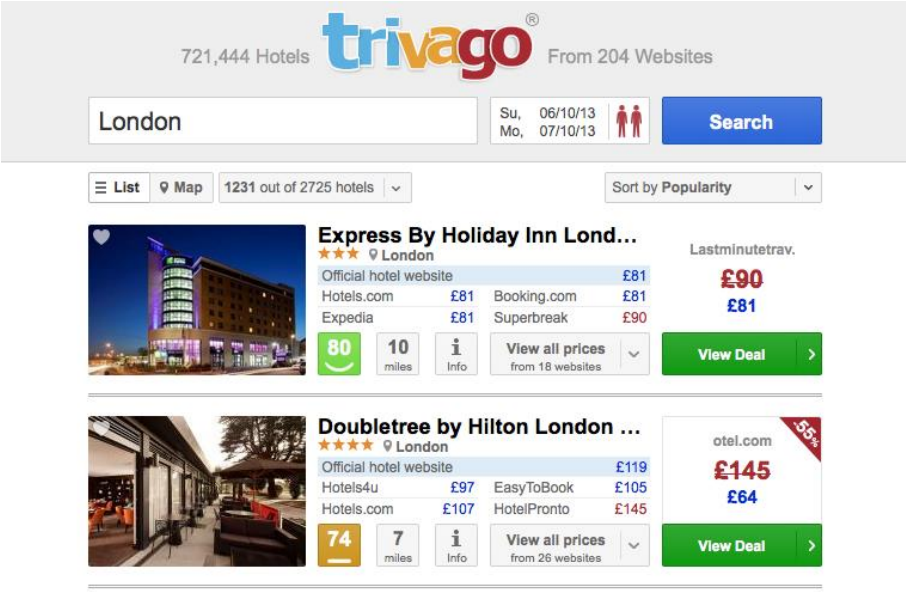


Figure 15 High and low price is calculated from the highest and lowest available rate at any given time so hotels with wider price ranges may fare better

Trivago do list hotel contact information (website and phone number) however this is well hidden under the hotel information area. You should however ensure details are kept up to date.

Kayak (www.kayak.com)

Kayak is the market leading meta search site in the US, they've got less traction in Europe but are set to become more aggressive in these markets. Unlike Hotelscombined and Trivago they offer flight, car rental and package deal search as well as hotels.

Hotels are ranked in Kayak by the somewhat ambiguous 'relevance', for which you can read 'likely conversion rate' on OTA sites.

Review scores come into this so soliciting guests for reviews on the OTA's they booked with rather than Tripadvisor may be worthwhile. As with the other meta search sites, Kayak highlight deals which look to be below market rate by measuring rates available across OTA's for similar rooms. Theoretically therefore

keeping your rates higher on one OTA (one which doesn't send you many bookings) would increase your aggregate "market rate" and make your rates on other OTA's look like better deals.

Kayak also push bookings on sites where they have direct relationships with the OTA's, for example they offer direct bookings on the kayak.com domain for Expedia (through EAN), Booking.com and GetaRoom. This is far better for the meta search sites than pushing traffic directly onto the OTA's to complete bookings because it means they can retain customer details. Therefore make sure your best OTA rates are pushed via either booking.com or Expedia for a better chance of bookings via Kayak.

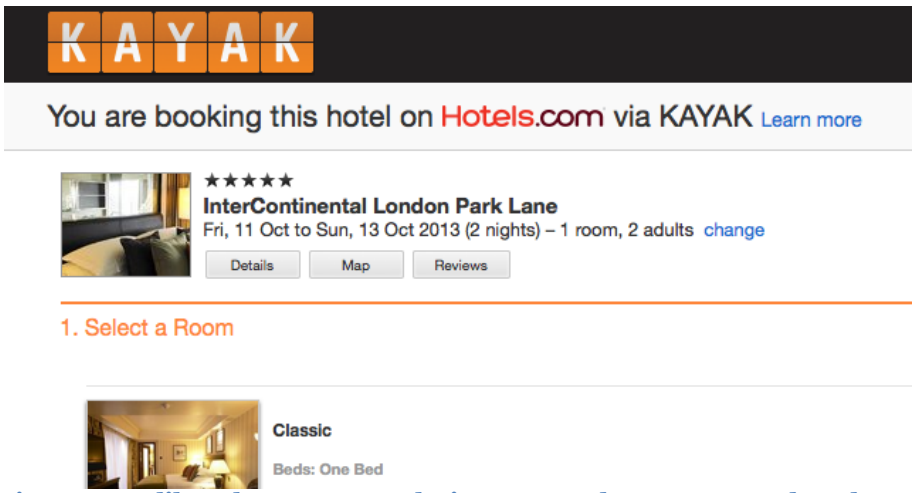
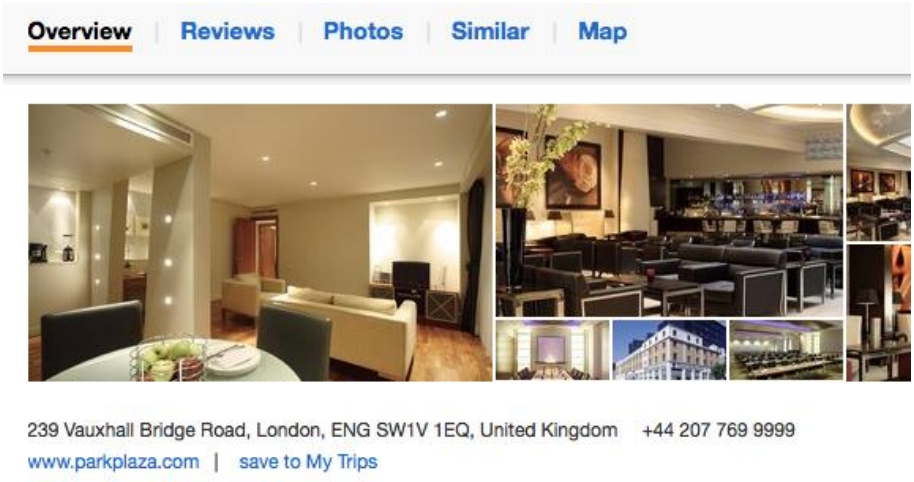


Figure 16 Unlike other meta search sites on Kayak you can complete the booking process without leaving the Kayak.com website, although the actual reservation is still with the OTA, in this case Expedia ~ Hotels.com

Hotel website and phone numbers are listed more prominently on Kayak so check your details are listed correctly.



TravelSupermarket (www.travelsupermarket.com)

TravelSupermarket use HotelCombined technology for their hotel search so rankings on here are the same as hotelcombined above.

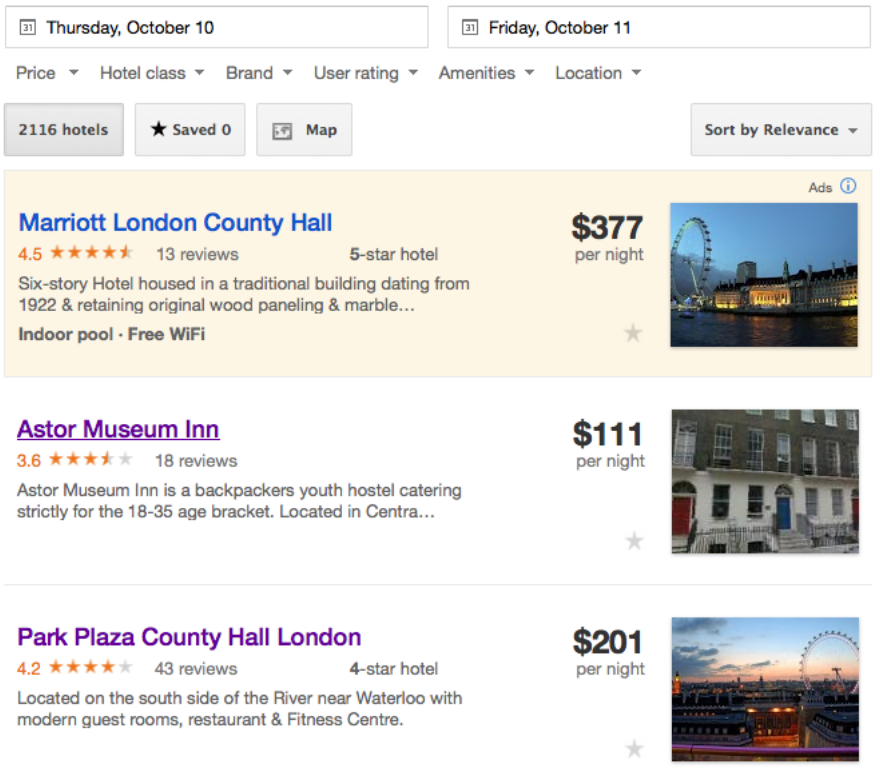
Google Hotel Finder (www.google.com/hotelfinder/)

Google's own hotel meta search technology is in its infancy but given it's a Google product its likely to become much better and more popular in the coming years.

The rankings here are a bit mysterious at the moment and I would expect likely to change. Core hotel information is taken from Google Places listings so make sure your local business information in Google is kept up to date. Central locations from city centre's (as defined by Google maps) seem to play a large role in the 'relevance' sorting and results may also be weighted in part by your Google places rankings which

are influenced by local business citations on third party sites and by reviews from Google users.

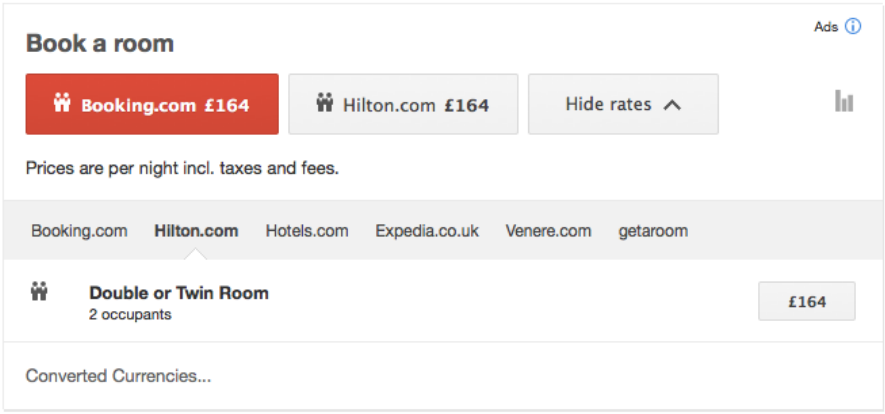
Clearly you can do little about your location but if you're fairly central it may be worth encouraging some guest reviews on Google. Most hotels don't have many (if any) Google reviews so this will at the very least make your listing more prominent in hotel finder results.



You would assume Google will eventually go down the same route as other meta search engines in harvesting guest reviews from OTA's rather than relying on their own review system, but for the time being if you invest some energy in collecting a good number of Google reviews, this could be a quick win.

Despite Google using your Google Places listings for their hotel finder results your actual hotel contact information is right at the bottom of the hotel listing page

Instead Google are trying to push affiliate links with the OTA's. Chain's like Hilton have supplied their prices directly to Google (these are affiliate links still, with Google earning a commission).



TripAdvisor (www.tripadvisor.com)

A lot of hoteliers haven't heard of this site, but apparently they're quite big in the hotel reviews game!

TripAdvisor until recently had monetized their hotel listings/ review pages with a combination of display advertising and pop-ups which opened multiple OTA sites at the same time. They've now rolled out their own meta search system which displays live prices on your reviews page. As with other meta search sites they're sucking their prices live from OTA feeds, but hotels can also get their direct booking links featured

in Tripadvisor booking options by using an internet booking engine which supports TripAdvisor TripConnect.

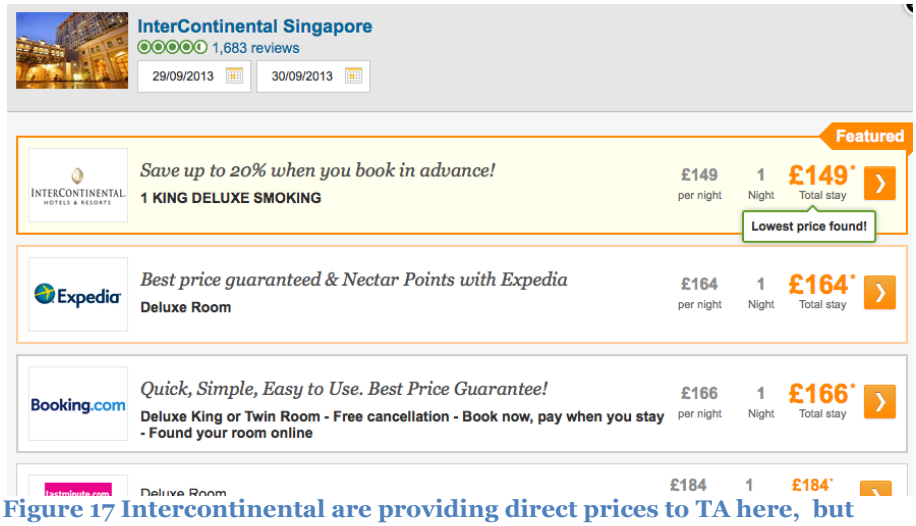


Figure 17 Intercontinental are providing direct prices to TA here, but most hotels won't have access to this technology yet

Unlike other meta search sites price doesn't factor into rankings on TripAdvisor though so the usual rules of winning at TA apply here – good reviews, and lots of them.

We've included more information about how hotels can benefit from TripConnect in the nect section.

Hipmunk (www.hipmunk.com)

Hipmunk is a fast growing meta search mobile app and website for both flights and hotels. Its quickly building up a strong following in the US and major investment in the business means they'll be pushing harder outside the US soon.

Hotels are ranked in Hipmunk by their own "ecstasy" score;

"... we recognize that price isn't the only factor that goes into buying hotels. We sort by "Ecstasy," which is a combination of price, amenities, and reviews."

Hipmunk uses Tripadvisor for its reviews data so improving your TA ranking will likely help your Hipmunk position. The amenities you list in your OTA descriptions could also help, free parking and free wifi seem to be the most desirable features so if you offer those make sure they're listed on Expedia, booking.com etc so Hipmunk can pick them up.

TripAdvisor "TripConnect"

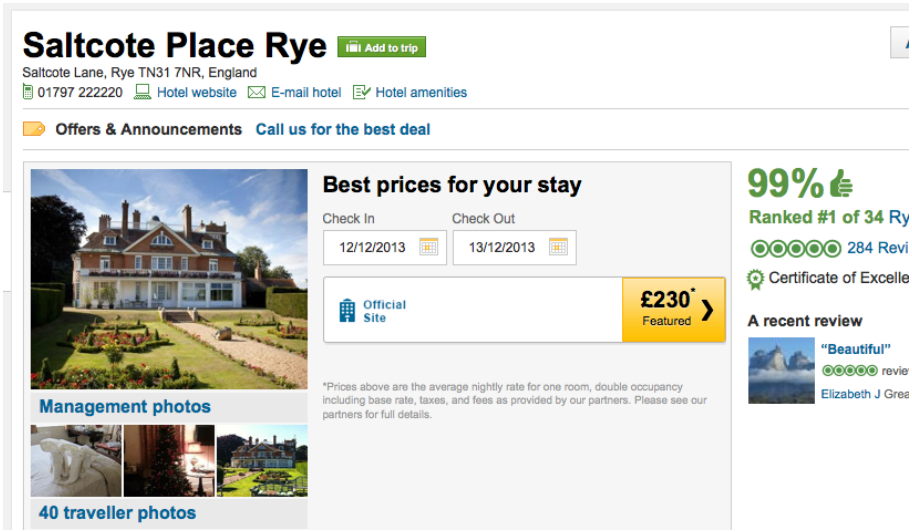


Figure 18 An example of the official hotel site links served via TripConnect

TripConnect is TripAdvisor's solution for allowing hotels to bid against OTA's for positions in their hotel meta search results.

TripAdvisor have a useful webinar introducing the system for hoteliers which you can watch here - http://www.brainshark.com/tripadvisor/TCUS

The main requirements for listing your rates on TripAdvisor via TripConnect are:

- ✓ The internet booking engine system you're using supports TripConnect (see the list of providers who do at http://www.tripadvisor.com/ConnectPartners)
- ✓ You subscribe to TripAdvisor business listings

Because as with Google Adwords you bid for positions on TripConnect you can stay in control of your costs and measure your ROI from the service. As with any form of advertising though, just make sure you're able

to analyse the bookings which originated from TripConnect ads before you start advertising.

For most hotels we would expect TripConnect to provide a good return on investment, particularly compared to other bid based advertising like Adwords. As with any form of advertising we talk about in this guide however the critical factor is likely to be how well your booking engine converts visitors into bookings. If your site doesn't convert well, or your direct prices are higher than your OTA prices you're likely to spend money on clicks which don't convert.

For me the main potential risks and issues to look out for with TripConnect would be:

- The cost of the TripAdvisor business listing in the first place – you'll need to factor this into your ROI calculations, along with the price you're paying per click on your adverts.
- The effect of guests using the "Hotel website" links which you're paying for as a navigational link to your hotel site and clicking with no intention of booking with you (this is speculative and you might find it doesn't happen)
- The issue of going head to head with trusted OTA brands in search results. Will guests choose your booking links when they have the option of an OTA they know and trust like booking.com? Although the pay per click model really offsets any risk associated with this.
- Your ability to convert this traffic into bookings profitably – keep an eye on conversion rates.

If your booking engine supports TripConnect I would recommend running a trial of it at the very least and test the ROI you're able to get from it. If you're in the

process of switching booking engines I would definitely advise you go with an engine which supports TripConnect – although its too early to say just how effective this platform will be for hotels, early signs suggest this is a channel hoteliers definitely want to have the option of using, even if they don't choose to run advertising on it all day every day.

The Rise and Rise of Mobile

If you've read anything about tech or digital marketing in the past years (or have travelled on a bus) you're probably aware that a lot of people now have smart phones. I won't quote too many numbers here as they'll be defunct by the time I finish this chapter but at the time of writing[4] 61% of mobile users in developed countries accessed the internet on their phones.

It's fair to say that most of your guests now have internet enabled smart phones and regularly use them to access the web in one form or another, whether that's full browser searching or accessing social sites and other services via apps.

OTA's have brought into the mobile game in a big way;

- ✓ Booking.com, Expedia, Hotels.com, Priceline, Orbitz and most of the other main players have smart phone optimised mobile sites as well as iPhone apps.
- ✓ Kayak, Trivago, Hotelcombined and other hotel meta search sites also have mobile optimised sites and apps.
- ✓ In April 2013 Booking.com reported[5] that their mobile bookings had tripled to $3 billion in 2012 compared to the previous year.

The rise of mobile has also spawned a new model in the hotel market with the emergence of 'last minute' hotel apps like HotelTonight (www.hoteltonight.com) which offer selected hotels at discounted rates for

4 http://econsultancy.com/uk/reports/mobile-statistics
5 http://news.booking.com/booking-com-mobile-bookings-triple-us/

guests looking for (you guessed it) a hotel room tonight. Not a new concept, but one that is inherently better suited to a mobile application than a traditional desktop site. Its yet to be seen whether this model is a) scalable and b) sustainable but its more evidence, if you needed it, that mobile is going to become harder and harder to ignore.

Mobile optimised websites

The first step to take in getting your hotel mobile ready is to ensure your website is optimised for small screens. The OTA's have led with this so guests are going to expect hotels to follow suit. If a guest can't book on your site on their phone they know they can go to the OTA and have a mobile friendly experience.

A mobile optimised site with navigation designed specifically for touch screen smart phones is ideal but can be expensive so first simply ensure your current website works properly on the most popular devices (iphones, iPads, popular Android phones like the Samsung Galaxy). If your hotel site uses a lot of features like flash and complicated javascript for image galleries or certain video formats the site may not function properly on phones. Get the basics right like;

- Making sure phone numbers and email addresses are written in normal text rather than images and positioned near the top of the page so its easy for guests to contact you with one click on their phones.
- Make sure you have a direct link to Google maps as embedded maps don't tend to work well on phones.
- Make sure your site doesn't rely too heavily on downloads like PDF's. For example restaurant menus should be on normal web pages in text, not a scan or a photo of your actual menu.

- Your booking system works properly on a phone. Things like date pickers can be particularly troublesome to mobile users. If the res system just doesn't work, at least leave a note for mobile visitors to call for reservations, rather than letting them try and fail to book online.

Mobile Advertising

Once your site is optimised for mobile devices there are numerous directions you can take to get mobile traffic to your site.

Mobile search is perhaps the simplest and most effective mobile advertising route.

With Google Adword's new enhanced campaigns you can now target mobile devices only, to searchers in a specific area and at particular times of day. This can be a powerful way for hotels to replicate the last minute booking effect of apps like HotelTonight as you can target visitors looking for hotels in your city, with specific last minute offers, for example;

"25% off a room for tonight"

Given that these adverts are limited to a very specific set of web users the rates you advertise to mobile users can remain semi-opaque.

Extending your adverts with call extensions can also help. Mobile users may find it more convenient to make their reservations over the phone – call extensions let them call straight from a search result screen, giving you an advantage over OTA's, who don't push phone sales.

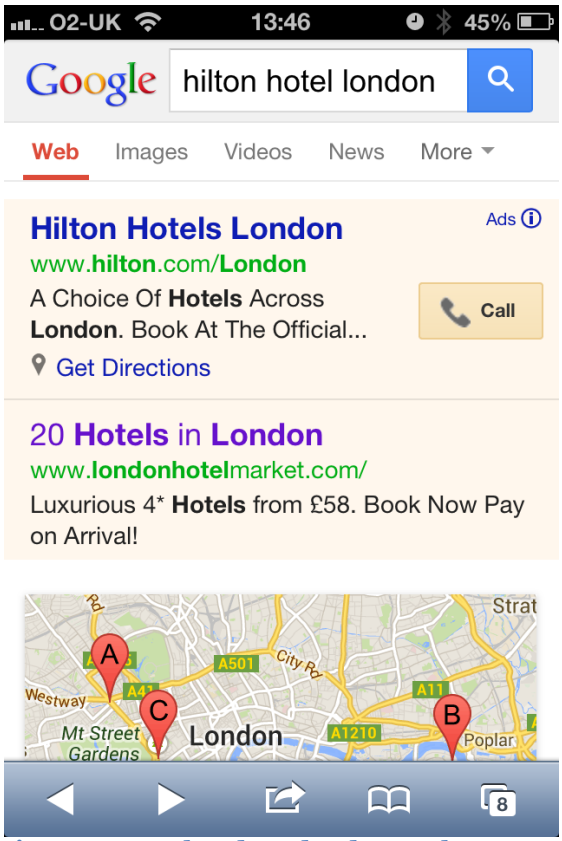


Figure 19 Google Adwords ads can also protect your brand from OTA's on mobile search by encouraging direct call's

Other considerations

- Customers are likely to be reading emails on mobile devices so ensure your email messages work properly in mobile email browsers.

- Google rank sites in organic results in mobile search differently to desktops so mobile optimised sites are likely to rank higher than sites which don't work on phones. Another reason if you needed it to sort out the mobile version of your site ASAP.

- If you push to get mobile numbers from customers when they book online you can use SMS on the day of check-in to upsell additional services like restaurant reservations and room upgrades. This is

more effective than trying to reach customers via email as they're likely to be in transit.

- Sending an SMS after check-out and prompting a review is also a nice touch, use it in addition to email to maximise reviews.

Search Engine Optimisation For Hotels

Search engine optimisation used to be a relatively easy and usually cheap way for hotels to get traffic direct to their websites. Various factors have conspired to make SEO less appealing as a channel however:

- Organic (free) listings for hotels being pushed down the page further below paid ads, local listings and hotel finder results. So a first page SEO result for a good keyword probably sends you less traffic this year than it did last.
- Aggressive competition from OTA's and meta search engines which dominate Google results. Google now wants to rank brands, so the Expedia's of this world are always likely to outrank local hotel websites.
- Links, which have always been at the heart of Google's ranking algorithm, can now harm a sites ranking as easily as they can help it. Many hotels who have paid search engine optimisation companies have been penalised by Google for link spam, putting them in a worse position than when they started.
- Local business listings are taking over hotel search results and replacing hotel websites in the search results.

Despite this, SEO should probably still play a part in your hotels online marketing strategy for 2014 and beyond.

Free listings on Google still send more traffic to websites than any other channel so its hard to ignore, just make sure you're doing it the right way.

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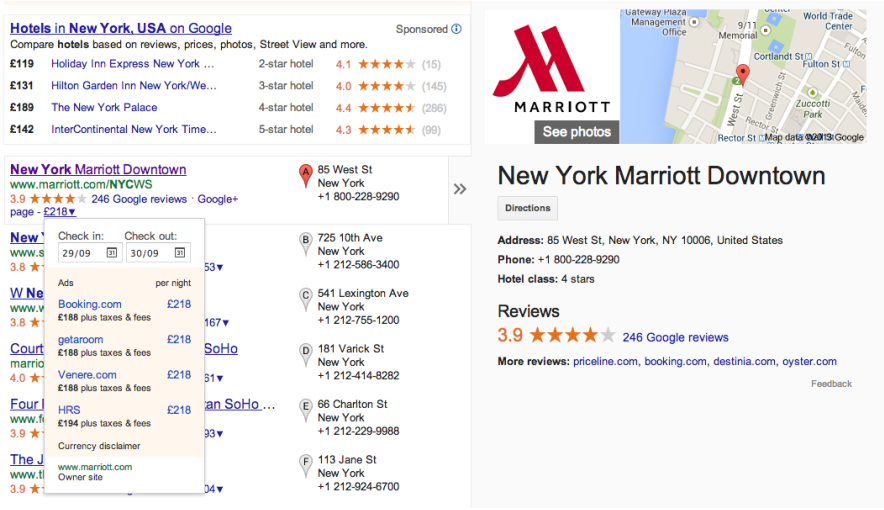
Keyword strategy

What keywords do guests use when searching for your hotel? "hotels in [your city]"? Yep probably. But I bet if you do a search on Google for that keyword, unless you're based in a very small town, you won't see many hotel websites listed in the normal organic search results.

Google have pushed most hotels to their local listings. These listings do still have some visibility, they're near the top of the page at least and they click through to your website directly. However, you don't get a snippet under your listing like a regular organic listing and Google have started showing price links from hotelfinder directly under your places listing, directing more traffic to OTA's rather than your site.



As hotel finder picks up steam realistically Google are going to be more inclined to send more traffic to your hotelfinder page than directly to your website further diminishing the returns on your SEO.

I wouldn't be surprised if links to hotel websites disappear altogether from organic search results over the next few years.

So what can you do with your keyword strategy. Here's a few ideas;

- ✓ Focus on your hotels main features and characteristics, for example 4 star, cheap, luxury, swimming pool, spa hotel, romantic, boutique, parking.
- ✓ Look for opportunities for optimise for peripheral services at your hotel like weddings, conferences, spa day guests and restaurant bookings – these may provide a better return from your SEO budget than going up against OTA's for hotel keywords.
- ✓ Get specific with your location so Knightsbridge hotel rather than London hotel for example.
- ✓ Think about other keywords your guests may be searching for at the same time as booking a hotel. You probably don't want to turn your hotel site into a local travel guide but maybe you can optimise for notable local events.
- ✓ Think internationally. If you're based in a metropolitan area there's a good chance visitors to your city aren't all searching in English so have a properly translated local page for popular languages among your guests. Non-english SEO is generally less competitive than English.

Optimising your site

Ensuring your website is optimised so it can be easily read by search engine crawlers and so that its using the most appropriate keywords for your hotel is a fundamental requirement for every site owner. Even if you're not pursuing an SEO strategy per se, getting your on-page SEO sorted is a worthwhile one-off process.

Your homepage is your priority if you're a single property hotel, if you have multiple properties and

only one site make sure each hotel has its own area of the site.

You want a page for every service you offer, for example weddings, spa, golf course. If you have a restaurant which is open to outside guests I would consider having a standalone site for this as anyone searching for local restaurants is less likely to visit a hotel website than a restaurant site.

The single biggest mistake most hotels make with their SEO? Not having their keywords in their website copy! Its not rocket science people, if your website says "we're a boutique hotel in London" somewhere on your homepage that goes a long way to helping Google figure out that you are indeed a "boutique hotel in London" and ranking you accordingly. You don't need to pay an SEO company to do this for you, just read the copy on your site and make sure it actually describes what you are.

Building links and business citations

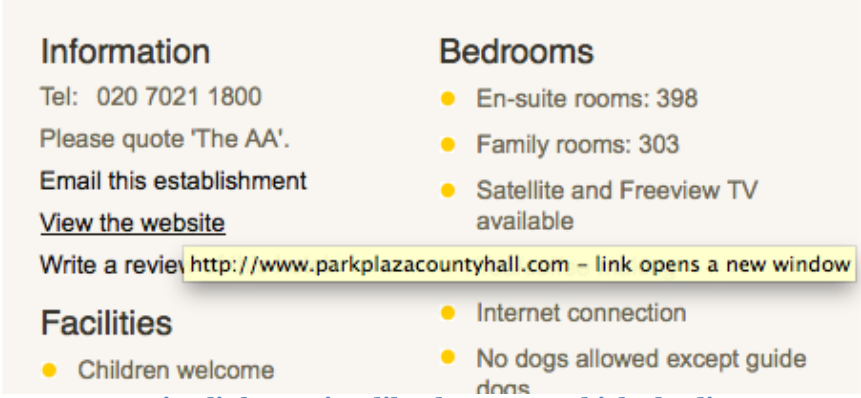


Figure 20 Genuine links on sites like theaa.com which also list your business details and send traffic will help you rank

Google uses a slightly archaic system to work out how to rank websites in its index – they look at the websites which link to your site. The better the sites linking to you, the higher you're likely to rank.

This gets a bit more complicated when you're talking about rankings for Google local listings rather than normal organic listings in Google, there's other factors at play. But still, improving your link profile is a good place to start when trying to improve your rankings.

Be wary of any link building services which you can outsource cheaply offshore, you want links from real websites which your guests are visiting. Here's a few ideas for ways you can build real links to your hotel site;

- If you're running Google Adwords on the display network you can use data from your advertising to see which sites are referring traffic to your site and approach those sites to try and setup links.
- Approach any prominent local travel guides, blogs or tourist information sites to see if there's an opportunity or them to link to your hotel
- Research events happening near your hotel which your typical guests might be interested in and see if they have a page recommending accommodation on their site
- Talk to the organisers of any events or conferences happening at your hotel and get them to link to you.
- Offer discounted rooms to parents of students at the local universities and colleges.
- List all your external suppliers (security, cleaning, web designers, caterers, IT support, reservation software etc) and try and get links from their sites, for example by supplying testimonials.

Link building should be a creative process so treat it as such. Brainstorm ideas and reasons that website owners would link to you and think about content or

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promotions you could run on your site which might attract links.

Avoid any links which come as a result of a direct payment like an advert. Also avoid links on sites which you can go on and submit yourself, like in forums or blog comments – these can get you penalised by Google.

Local Business Listings (aka Google Places)

Google's local business listings are the best free gift Google still give to hotel sites. They allow your site to be found in Google maps searches and also appear at the top of organic search results for hotels in your city. Here are some tips to make the most of your listing and give it the best possible chance of ranking:

- Ensure you have "claimed" your business listing and have control over it. http://www.google.com/local/add/businessCenter
- Ensure your business details are all up to date
- Make use of all the fields Google gives you to add information about your hotel. Upload as many photos and videos of your hotel as you can, fill out extra fields like payment methods. The more complete the profile the better.
- Don't try and add extra keywords into your listing title or description, this is more likely to hurt than help you rank in local search.
- Check your map marker on Google maps is positioned correctly.

- Get guests to complete reviews of your hotel **on Google.** This may be counter intuitive to your instincts to get reviews on TA but just a small handful of reviews (and they don't seem to even need to be good ones!) on Google are likely to help your listing rank.

- Ensure wherever your hotel is listed online with your name, address and phone number, consistent details are being used and the same format and spelling is used everywhere. Google uses these local business citations to verify you are a real business, in much the same way they use links, so you need consistency.

- Wherever your hotel is mentioned online try and ensure they reference the proper name (as it appears on your local business listing), full address and phone number as well as a website link.

Social Media Advertising

As you may have noticed, social media sites have become really rather popular over the past decade! The biggest players, Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin and YouTube all now offer their own advertising platforms. Each has its own set of features which could present an opportunity for your hotel to reach a new audience and drive bookings (or just reach your existing audience in a new way).

My first piece of advice before you do anything with social media in the title. Start by asking ***why?***

Why are we doing this?
What do we hope to achieve?
How do we know if its successful?

Too many companies jump on the social media bandwagon, usually because the CEO has seen a presentation by some business guru who insists the key to successful sales is to have a million followers on Twitter.

Social media sites have a big audience, and levels of data on their users which give them a very interesting advertising proposition but don't forget, nobody ever went on Facebook or Twitter to book a hotel room so approach social media advertising with the same scepticism you would any other form of display advertising.

Facebook ads

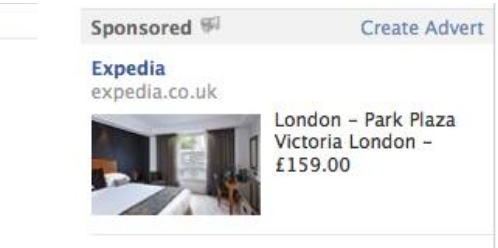

Figure 21 Nice use of Facebook retargeting by Expedia

Facebook is the worlds biggest social network and they now have a fairly sophisticated advertising platform with several different formats of ad. By far the most effective of these are adverts placed in the Newsfeed. These 'in-stream' adverts (which also show on mobile devices) are 49 times[6] more likely to be clicked than those little ads you see on the right hand side when you view Facebook on your desktop.

Standard right-hand-side ads have extremely low click through rates (as does all display advertising) however, Facebook receives a LOT of page impressions so even if you're getting a 0.01% CTR you can get Facebook traffic to work.

My recommendation for hotels is to use Facebook primarily for retargeting visitors who have already visited your site. Show them a deal or extra incentive to get them back to the site and close the deal.

Facebook browsers are not engaged shoppers. They're looking for photos of their friends and sharing the latest top 1000 list from Buzzfeed. They're not looking to book a hotel, however they are online and not busy (they're on Facebook after all!) so a well timed reminder to take advantage of a deal on that hotel room they need to book can and will convert.

LinkedIn Advertising

LinkedIn, the business social networking site offer their own basic, but effective advertising. Unlike any other ad platform LinkedIn lets you target advertisements by job function. Why might you want to do that? Well if MICE business is important to your hotel LinkedIn will let you target potential buyers like

[6] http://blog.adroll.com/facebook-exchange-news-feed-numbers

conference organisers or exec PA's. Want to promote your wedding venue? Then target wedding planners.

Twitter Advertising

Twitter has a relatively new platform for advertising but early results suggest its proving an effective, alternative way to engage customers in a variety of industries. Can it work for hotels?

Its early days for Twitter ads so anything you do at this stage will be experimental, however experience has taught us that being an early adopter of new advertising channels puts you ahead of the curve – the adverts themselves have a certain curiosity in their early days, as time goes on and advertising gets more heavy, users learn to filter out messages they're not interested in.

Some potential applications for Twitter ads;

- Twitter users are a mobile audience and their ad platform offers Geo-location targeting users in a certain geo-graphic area – this could have applications for last minute bookings or promoting F&B deals.
- Keyword targeting lets you promote tweets to anyone who is talking about hotels in your area
- Interest targeting or keyword targeting can also help you reach certain niche audiences who may be interested in your hotel, for example local bloggers or people interested in events running near your hotel.

Analytics & Measurement

We discussed analytics briefly in the Conversion Rate Optimisation section and touched on revenue reporting and how it's essential to making your direct booking strategy a success. However Analytics goes much deeper than just revenue tracking. There is a huge wealth of knowledge you can gleam from your website analytics data to help inform your marketing decisions and improve the performance of your website as a whole. In this section we will touch on some advanced uses of Analytics data which will help give you greater visibility of your websites performance and insights about how it can be improved.

Call tracking

I believe one of the greatest weapons hotels have in their fight against the OTA's (if you choose to see it as a fight) is the phone. None of the major OTA's want you to phone them, their business models after all are based on customers booking online instead of over the phone. So I'd definitely advise encouraging calls at every possible opportunity.

The problem with phone leads historically was always that you never really knew what marketing channels led to the call. If the call handler remembered to ask "how did you hear about us" the customer would rarely know and certainly wouldn't remember all their touch points;

"Well I first read about you in this magazine, then I Googled "hotels in London" and saw you listed on Expedia, searched for your name, visited your website along with a couple of others, read your reviews on tripadvisor and finally got your number from the Yellow pages" [Said nobody, ever]

Now thanks to the miracle of technology and the relatively low price of phone numbers, its possible to track phone calls and associate them with website visits, and its generally very easy to implement. Here's how it works:

- A visitor comes to your website from a Google search an they're shown a unique phone number.
- They visit a few pages or maybe leave and come back later, they're still shown the same number
- Eventually they decide to call and book
- The unique number they ring is forwarded seamlessly through to your usual phone line (or call centre) and the call is attributed back to the website visit in your analytics package.

We recommend all hotels implement this technology and proactively push for phone bookings in your advertising and website messaging. It's a great USP for booking direct rather than via an OTA.

The only problem with this system is it only tracks calls where the guest got your number directly from your website, so if they find your number on TA or Google maps for example they'd ring your usual number and it wouldn't be tracked.

B2B Lead Generation – track the companies visiting your site

For hotels which offer MICE services getting relevant B2B traffic to your website is a constant struggle. There's very little traffic out there in this market, but you know what traffic you get is high value as new MICE accounts could be worth ten's of thousands. One solution we recommend to hotels looking to increase their MICE business is a tracking system which tells

you the names and contact details of companies who have visited your website.

Several solutions such as www.leadforensics.com and www.A1webstats.com make this information available. They rely on mapping the IP address of your visitors to a database of company IP's which is not 100% accurate, but which can work very well (in the UK at least).

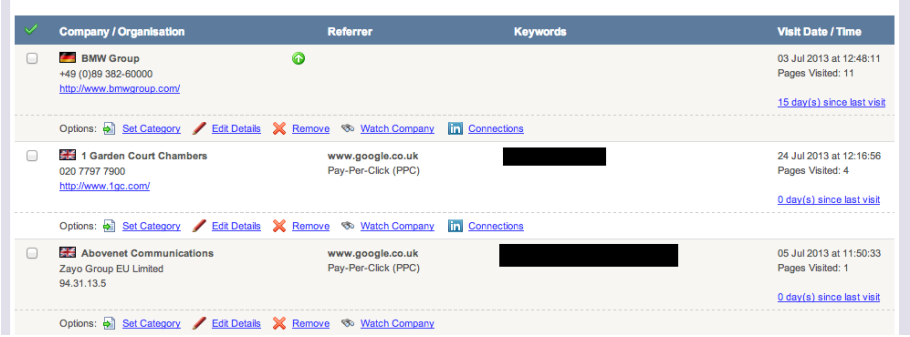

Figure 22 A1WebStats lists all the identifiable companies who have come to your site, along with their website and phone number

This is potentially very powerful information in the hands of an effective and pro-active sales and marketing team. Make it a daily process to go through your website visitors from companies, search linkedIn to find a suitable contact person at the company and give them a call.

One thing you're likely to find is that you get a lot of normal hotel guests on your website from company IP addresses (people researching their travel plans at work) so for this strategy to work you need to look at the landing page and referring keyword reports available in these tools and make a judgement call about whether that visitor is interested in B2B services, or just looking for a hotel room. The main clues are:

- They've entered the site via a MICE related keyword i.e. "meetings rooms in London"

- They've entered from a referring site like a venue directory you're listed in
- They've viewed the MICE information pages on your site

Multi-Channel Attribution

Figure 23 A few examples of MCA paths in Google Analytics

Multi-channel attribution or MCA sounds daunting, and indeed it is a complex area of web analytics, however the basics are important for hotels to grasp.

Under a standard attribution model, like that you find in the conversion and ecommerce reports in your Google Analytics, the "last-click" (the most recent channel the visitor used to find the site) takes the credit for conversions. So if a visitor came to your site 3 times;

- 1st read email and clicked on link
- 2nd clicked on display advert on Facebook
- 3rd Searched for hotel name and clicked on Adword advert – **then booked**

The credit for that booking would go to the Adwords advert because the last click before the booking was on an Adwords ad. However, its fair to say in the example above that your email marketing and Facebook advertising probably also contributed to that booking, but with last click attribution you might think that the Adwords advert is working but the other channels aren't. But without the other channels the Adwords ad wouldn't have worked.

MCA looks at all the channels, which contributed to the booking, helping you to understand how your different advertising and marketing channels are working together, or not.

If you're making marketing decisions based on web analytics, make sure you're looking at the whole journey using MCA. Very few guests who choose to book on your site are going to book on their first visit so last click attribution is fairly useless for hotel marketers.

Google analytics now supports multi-channel attribution meaning you can get this data for free without any additional website tracking so ensure you read up on and use these reports in your marketing measurement.

Conclusions

There's a lot of information in this guide and we've had to skimp on the detail in places but hopefully you've found some insights into the opportunities presented by online advertising and how the OTA's are using it to their advantage.

The good news is that none of the techniques discussed in this guide are beyond the reach or outside the budget of even small hotels.

Despite the title of this guide, I don't believe the end goal for hotel marketers is to beat OTA's, nor is that realistic. But you should be looking to readjust the balance to a point where OTA's are a complimentary channel of bookings, rather than your only lifeline. Ultimately this is going to bring more stability to the hotel business as a whole.

For comments, questions or help with any of the ideas discussed in this guide or for a no-strings-attached discussion about how Inbound360 can help advertise your hotel online email talk@inbound360.com.