

Developing a Travel and Tourism Website by Greg Klassen

When building a travel and tourism Web site, it is essential to keep in mind the target customer and his or her surfing habits. The value North American customers place on the Internet for travel information has exploded, and users are becoming increasingly sophisticated surfers.

E-Savvy Travellers (ETs) have increased their expectations of the Web sites they visit. As the top e-commerce category on the Internet today, there are thousands of Web sites dedicated to various aspects of travel. A search on hotels or museums for Calgary alone yields thousands of Web sites claiming they've got just what a customer is looking for, but all of varying degrees of quality and value. Clearly, it is more important than ever to ensure your Web site meets the requirements of today's ETs and stands out from the clutter.

Recent Canadian Tourism Commission research on the travel intentions of North American travellers and their use of the Internet has confirmed that ETs

visit more than 10 Web sites to help them make their travel decisions. They go to different types of Web sites for varying purposes and during different stages of the travel decision process. The type of Web site a travel and tourism business should build will depend on the decision stage and the overall objectives of the site.

There are generally three stages a customer will go through to make a travel decision. The first choice is destination. Research indicates 50 percent of all customers visiting a travel Web site have either no destination or between 2 and 4 destinations in mind. A DMO will want its Web site to inspire visitors to choose their destination, with visuals and editorial presenting a cross section of what the destination offers. Research also indicates that a destination Web site is visited by over 70 percent of ETs and is highly valued by consumers as an objective overview of the destination.

After choosing a destination, an ET will enter the "planning" stage, seeking Web sites for things

to see and do at a destination, where to stay, where to eat, how to get around. Customers also want to get a good idea of how much things cost and the availability of discounts or packages. During this stage, ETs will save information in electronic notebooks, print it, or email it to friends. A Web site should include detailed content focused on the value proposition that makes their destination, event, hotel or attraction particularly compelling.

In the final stage, ETs have decided on a destination, know what they want to see and do, and perhaps where they would like to stay. They have a pretty good idea of the cost and what represents reasonable value in this destination, and are ready to book the bigger ticket items of their vacation including transportation, hotel, and rental car. While more than 50 percent of all ETs have actually booked some aspect of travel online, many will continue to book directly through toll-free numbers and travel agents. Some may visit popular booking sites such as Travelocity, Expedia, or Air Canada. Even if

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Even if ETs are not booking their trip online, they certainly are better informed when booking directly themselves or through a travel agent. For many activities at the destination, customers will download pages from the Web site to bring with them on their trip.

When building a Web site, it is important to keep in mind that customers place more value on the Internet as a medium to research, plan and book travel than any other media. The Web site is often the first opportunity a prospective customer may have with a product or destination. In addition to the well-documented do's and don'ts of building a Web site, it is very important the site be reflective of the quality of the product and the type of experience a customer will have.

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