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SINGLE-SCREEN BOOKING ENGINES

The Times Are Changing

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Single-screen booking engines are revolutionizing online shopping, transforming the Web from a static textual medium to a dynamic, highly interactive platform. And now, driven by the requirements of Web 2.0/Travel 2.0, the rich multimedia technology gives hoteliers a competitive advantage by allowing them to offer guests a personalized and intuitive shopping experience that keeps them engaged and stimulates buying. The result is more effective merchandizing, optimized conversion, an increase in online revenue and enhanced customer satisfaction.

Hoteliers are finding out what retailers have known for years: A single-screen approach featuring Flash or Flash-like interactive technology boosts transaction size and revenue. A recent Forrester Research report notes that Flash technology converts shoppers to a sale up to 50 percent more often than an HTML-based multistep approach—a primary reason Flash-based shopping carts are used by retail giants Ikea, Timberland and Williams-Sonoma. Indeed, Flash has gone mainstream according to Adobe, with 98 percent of Internet-enabled PCs having Flash Player installed.

Designed for the way online consumers prefer to shop and buy, single-screen interactive booking engines outpace their multistep counterparts in every major area. Leading-edge hoteliers already are leveraging the technology's ability to:

- Enhance online merchandizing. A well-designed single-screen booking engine integrates shopping and booking, making it easy to add options and make changes with instant screen updates. Unlike systems that present add-ons at the end of the transaction, if at all, single-screen technology enables flexible merchandizing throughout the shopping process. Hotels can present standard packages or market-driven specials along with room upgrades and enhancements continuously during the shopping experience—prompting customers not only to make a reservation but also to book during target periods or purchase high-margin options.

- Give control to the customer. Usability studies indicate that guests prefer the ease and convenience of an all-inclusive, one-page shopping and booking process. Moreover, guests who define the shopping experience are more likely to complete the transaction. Single-screen technology is guest-friendly, allowing users to make changes without redoing selections, unlike clunky HTML booking engines that frustrate customers with predefined steps, repetitive loops and multiple page loads. The result is increased online bookings and happier guests.

- Improve guest satisfaction. Flash-like interactive technology provides rich digital content and flexible navigation, enabling customers to shop based on their own personal preferences. Guest confidence-building features, such as large photos, detailed room descriptions and dynamic video not only make the shopping and booking process more engaging but also set appropriate expectations and enhance customer satisfaction.

Flash Performs Without Limitation

Despite evidence to the contrary, some industry observers insist that multistep shopping is superior, if for no other reason than it's more familiar to shoppers than the single-screen approach. Yet with that line of logic, innovations that redefine their markets—such as microwave ovens, digital cameras and iPods—would never have gained a foothold in modern culture.

The misconception also persists that single-screen technology is limited. In fact, there are no limitations that affect online booking performance, only advantages:

- Single-screen booking engines do not affect download speed. Like all Internet applications, connection speed is the great equalizer. That holds true for both single-screen and multistep technologies; but less so today because of the proliferation of broadband. According to eMarketer, 40.1 million U.S. households have broadband connections (about 3 million more than use dial-up). The difference appears beyond the initial download. With the multistep approach, shoppers are forced to wait for each page as they click through the selections. With optimized single-screen booking, there is no waiting. All the data is preloaded.

- Single-screen booking engines do not affect Web site reporting. Hoteliers who continually monitor their Web site traffic, and the path consumers take to book a reservation, will not be hampered by single-screen technology. In fact, consumers can be tracked all the way through the booking process. Hoteliers can see the booking path, as well as if, and where, the consumer abandoned the booking.

- Single-screen booking engines do not affect Web site search engine rankings. In all situations, hoteliers should focus search engine optimization (SEO) on the hotel Web site, not on the booking engine, to ensure the stage is set for customers before they start shopping. Keep in mind that SEO is effective only in the first page of an HTML booking engine implementation—typically, the calendar—since visitors can only enter the transaction process at the first step.

Dynamic Experience, Astounding Results

Today's travelers are time-starved and Internet-savvy. They want instant results and are quickly annoyed with booking engines that are slow and inflexible. With an optimized application, single-screen booking engines provide a continuously engaging shopping experience. All information is presented at the opening of the booking engine, and clicking on different room types or add-ons populates the screen almost instantaneously. For hotels that step up to an interactive booking experience, the results are nothing short of astounding—a marked increase in conversion rates and revenue-per-stay and highly satisfied guests. It's no wonder single-screen booking is rapidly becoming the preferred choice for hotels that want to capture a larger share of the lucrative online travel market.