
EyeforTravel Smart Travel Data Summit 2016 Round-up





About EyeForTravel

We bring together everyone in the travel industry, from small tech start-ups to international hotel brands, to form a community working towards a smarter and more connected travel industry.

Our mission is to be the place our industry goes to share knowledge and data so that travel and tech brands can work collaboratively to create the perfect experience for the modern traveler.

We do this through our network of global events, our digital content, and our knowledge hub - EyeForTravel On Demand.

Our Values

We believe the industry must focus on a business and distribution model that always puts the customer at the center and produces great products. However, to deliver an outstanding travel experience, the strength, skills, and resources of all partners in the value chain must be respected and understood.

At EyeForTravel we believe the industry can achieve this goal by focusing on a business model that combines customer insight with great product and, most importantly, places the traveler experience at its core.

At our core we aim to enable the above by valuing impartiality, independent thought, openness and cooperation. We hope that these qualities allow us to foster dialogue, guide business decisions, build partnerships and conduct thorough research directly with the industry.

These principles have guided us since 1997 and will continue to keep us at the forefront of the industry as a vibrant travel community for many more years to come.

Our Services

Our events are the heart of EyeForTravel. These draw in experts from every part of the travel

industry to give thought provoking presentations and engage in discussions. It is our aim that every attendee takes back something new that can help their business to improve. This might be in the fields of consumer research, data insights, technological trends, or marketing and revenue management techniques.

Alongside this we provide our community with commentary, reports, white papers, webinars and other valuable expert-driven content. All of this can be accessed through one place - the On Demand subscription service.

We are always expanding the content we create, so please get in touch if you want to write an article for us, create a white paper or webinar, or feature in our podcast.

EyeForTravel by the Numbers

70,000+
database
contacts

2,500+
annual event
attendees

100,000+
monthly online
reach

1,000+
online conference
presentations

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Foreword

Foreword by Mark Shilton – Principal Data Scientist at Skyscanner

I've been going to data, tech and travel conferences for a while now and it's become a cliché to talk about how we're drowning in ever more data and it's becoming ever harder to identify the signal from the noise and create value. The funny thing about clichés though, is that they often become so because there's an element of truth in them. What was really great about this conference, however, was the proliferation of talks and conversation around the ways we can harness that data to make better decisions and provide better experiences for travellers and customers.

At Skyscanner we have worked hard to put data at the centre of everything we do and it was great to be able to come and talk about how we've done that at the Eyefortravel Smart Travel Analytics conference, but it was even more exciting to speak to so many other attendees who were grappling with the same issues and be inspired by how others are harnessing data to build better products, make better decisions, and ultimately give their customers a more satisfying experience.

There were two key themes that shone through as the hot topics: The benefits and challenges of embedding data and data-informed thinking across the whole of an organisation and, secondly, using data to provide a more personalised experience.

It was heartening to hear many of the success stories across the two days included putting data front and centre in the thinking of the whole organisation. In my presentation, I spoke about how we've gone about raising the analytical bar across the company but it was really interesting to hear this as a key plank in so many of the speakers' stories. As the volume and ubiquity of data increases, it's becoming more and more

important that everyone can make use of this and make better decisions by using data properly.

From a product point of view, personalization is an issue that is becoming more and more relevant, and not just in travel. While big players like Google and Facebook are pushing into many sectors there is a huge opportunity for those of us in the travel sector to improve the experiences of travellers right across the planning, booking and travelling cycle. Data is of course central to doing this right. Personalization presents some big challenges but I also heard some great examples. While there are many companies using complex models to build recommendations and personalize search results, the good news for many is that by asking the right questions, and using the right data you can start to understand your users with some relatively simple data science and machine learning techniques.

As we look forward to 2017, I can only see both of these areas becoming more rather than less important for successful travel companies and I'll certainly be thinking back to the talks I saw and conversations I had as we continue to work on these problems at Skyscanner in the future.

Introduction

People might talk big about data – but the message from EyeforTravel's Smart Data Summit was all about focus. Increasing numbers of travel businesses are investing time, energy, and money in collecting and analyzing figures, but some believe the key is in finding small, relevant, and reliable gems of information.

At EyeforTravel's Smart Data Summit in Amsterdam, from 23rd to 24th November 2016, about two hundred experts from world-leading businesses talked about how adding this "science" to their companies can equal better business and happier customers. They discussed using data in overall strategy and developing products, learning lessons about customers and making sure prices reap the maximum possible profit.

The travel industry has been visibly transformed by digitalization, with waves of disruption brought on by low-cost, online air carriers, travel agents like Booking.com and now the "sharing economy" firms, such as Airbnb and Uber, challenging traditional hotels and taxi operators.

In each of these waves, the companies that rose to dominant positions have been the ones able to effectively utilize the huge amounts of data available to them. However, what is clear from the industry is that now it is not the mass of information that is critical but bringing this down to a micro level to create a human touch that appeals directly to customers.

At EyeforTravel's Smart Data Summit, the firms facing up to this challenge included established businesses such as Hilton, AccorHotels, Carlson Wagonlit Travel, NH Hotel Group, Choice Hotels, Europcar, and TUI. Alongside them were people

from so-called "digital native" firms, born in the internet era, including Expedia, Lastminute Group, and Skyscanner.

Speakers analyzed how you should train your specialists and general teams to deal with data, drawing useful conclusions and avoiding false results or rabbit holes. Some businesses such as AccorHotels explained how their analysis is helping them work out how to incentivize their most valuable customers – and not those who end up costing them money. New firms YOTEL and Hoteltonight shared how they use social media and fast testing to improve their marketing reach and products.

Meanwhile, revenue managers discussed a shift from thinking about revenue to thinking about profit per customer and not per room. Their challenge is to factor in the costs of advertising and online travel agents' commissions, work out demand, and maximize their takings in their busiest periods.

At the same time, though, travel businesses want to use their own data and details available from third party sites to create the best customer experience, because if they are not trying to be the cheapest, they need to be the best to justify their fees. There's an element of democracy here: the smallest hotel can compete with the largest chain by providing a personal service that customers will pay for, and making the most of bookings through its own, smart website – even if people found it via Google.

From working out what figures to look for, to deciding which to trust and how to use them, this summit unpacked the issues that will help businesses get kitted out for a sunny, data-lit future.

1

STRATEGY: Smart Travel Analytics and Products

1.1 Make Your Business Like an Onion

Just like an onion, information should be layered throughout an organization – and no-one should be crying about it.

That was the message of Joerg Esser, group director for complementary business at Thomas Cook, who has been working on helping people throughout the package holiday, hotel, and flights business to understand how and when to use numbers. “A physicist’s desire to find simplicity, peel away the layers of the onion to the core, is like business,” he said. “It’s about getting data flowing inside an organization. Make your organization more like an onion.”

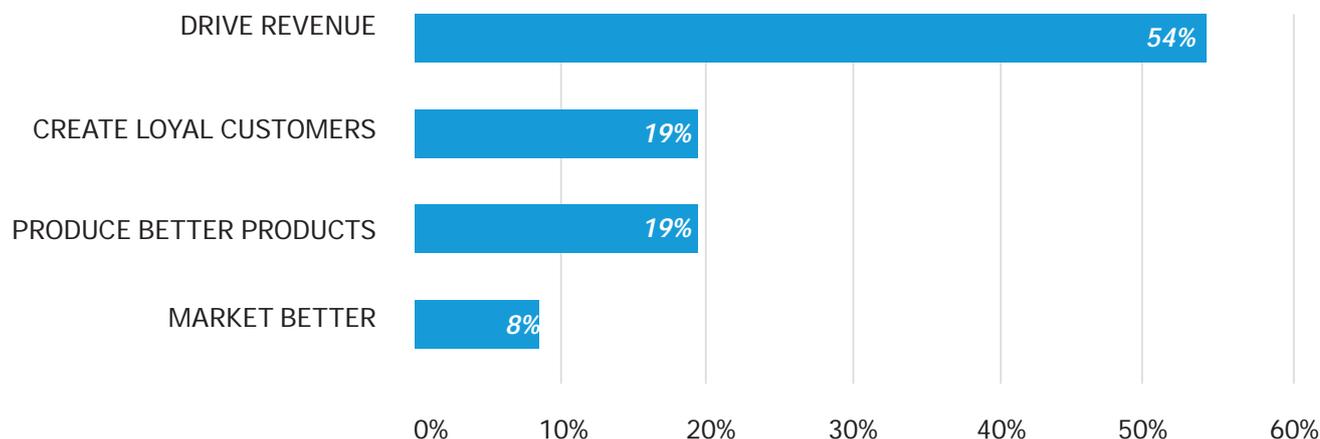
Many data experts at the summit argued that a company’s data strategy means training everyone to look at figures, using results that are relevant to improve their part of the business. Bas Lemmens, founder of the ROOMLR holiday homes app, said he learned one lesson in the

early days of online travel giant Booking.com: “We didn’t make one decision without data.”

Greater democracy in an organization is key, said Esser, giving the example of a bee hive deciding a new location. “The scout is always at the table,” he said. “Picture that in an organization. Egos and hierarchy forbid this but this is the single most significant action to drive change.”

In an audience poll, 54% of attendees said the main goal of their own firm’s data strategy was to drive revenue. Fabrice Otaño, chief data officer at AccorHotels, demonstrated that it is doing just this, with a data science team of more than 100 people. Analysis from its 2,000 plus hotels using the Dataiku tool revealed something astonishing: some of its “heavy” customers were not valuable, but actually costing the firm around EUR13 million a year because they were spending so many points on free stays.

What’s the main goal of your data strategy?



"Your "Best" Customers Could Be Your Worst"

Fabrice Otaño,
Chief Data Officer at AccorHotels

Our "best" customers fit into two groups: our very best customers and our very worst. In the big data journey, this was the first quick win I presented to Sébastien Bazin, our CEO. When you say that some customers cost EUR13 million in net margin [because they spend so many points], the CEO can understand that, and I got the budget to go further.

There are dangers. The first is to have bad data or missing data, which can introduce bias into your insight and recommendations. The second is that artificial intelligence can replace some existing jobs, so we have to reinvent the place of the man in the system.

As we develop tactics to gather more data, it's easy to detect behavior in the future. The next step is, are we allowed to do that? We have to comply with European laws and communicate about our ethics.

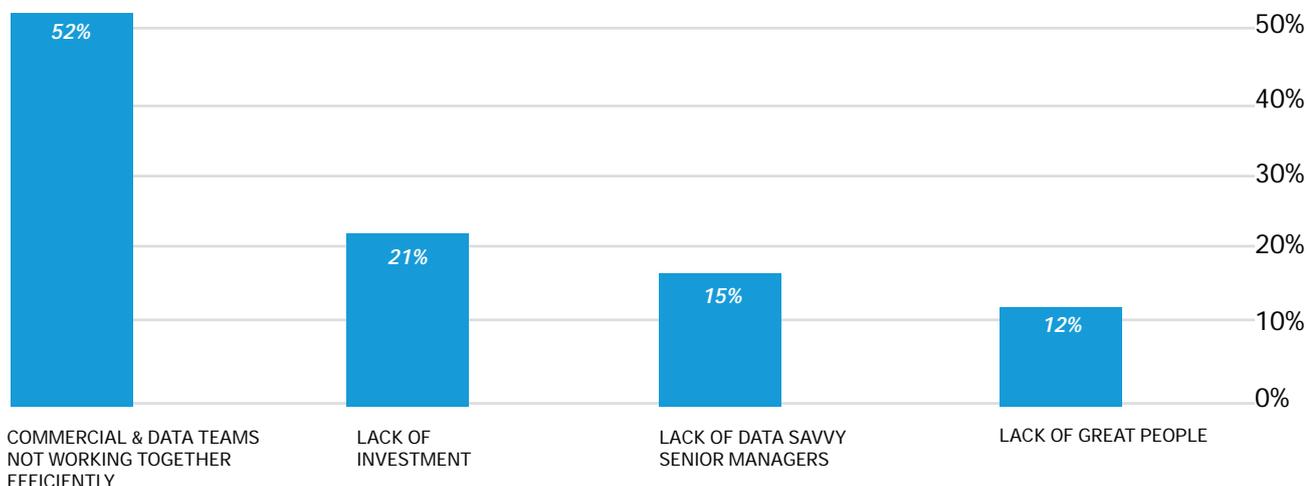
1.2 Demystify Bad Trends

However, some experts warned that you should be careful about what you measure and extrapolate. Ignazio Pisano, group revenue manager at Europcar rental firm said: "Most of the time 'fantastic findings' are just noise, not really a pattern that's worth panic or surprise. A professional data scientist would avoid this. Demystifying bad trends and wrong figures takes a lot of effort."

Joerg Esser added that, especially in travel, you cannot always predict trends, as events like the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey or the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean constantly change the landscape. "The result of analytical work is never just a number – there's always uncertainty and an 'error bar' around it, so a tour operator had better focus on being reactive too," he said.

Letting people play with numbers without understanding them is like giving a child a bazooka, warned Javier Espinosa Navarro, director of forecasting and revenue strategy at NH Hotel Group. "If I train them in how to use the data, you are still giving the keys to a kid – they lack maturity in data management," he said. "When democratizing data, we have to personalize the data we are showing. That's tough, to understand people's needs and produce

What are the main barriers to being a data-driven company?



Attendees were clear that their biggest challenge in dealing with data was coordination within their companies. Finding skilled individuals was also noted as a significant problem, as it is in all industries dealing with tech and data currently.

something just for them." So, at his hotel group, which has 19,000 employees in 375 hotels across 28 countries, they are working to give everyone the piece of the puzzle they need.

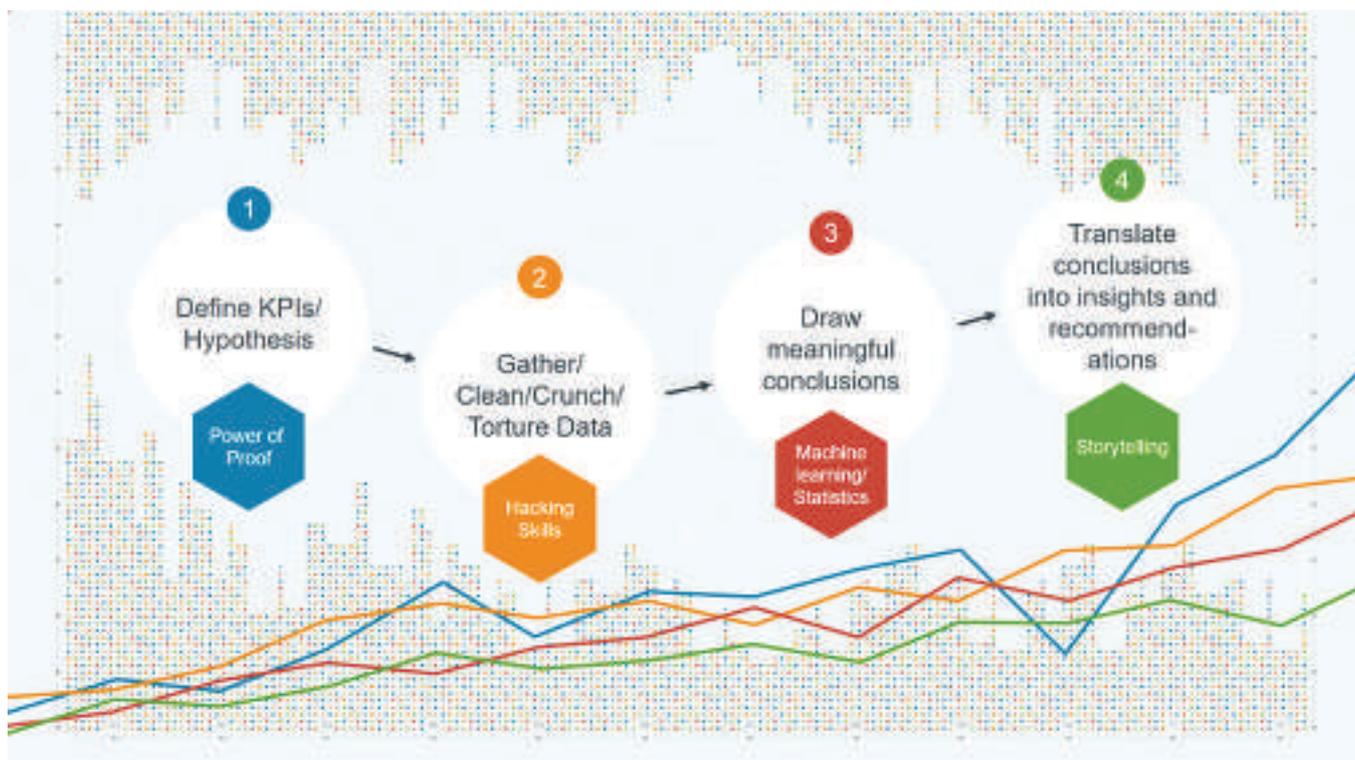
This is clearly a challenge in many firms: 52% of the summit audience thought the main barrier to becoming data-driven was their commercial and data teams not working together efficiently.

1.3 Data Pollution

There's also a danger of ending up stuck in a marsh of numbers, according to Espinosa. "We are in an era of data pollution," he said. "We are constantly talking about big data but it's

extremely challenging to select the data you are looking for. The future is to have tools and people to dig into it."

You shouldn't look to prove things, but rather to disprove them, added Dr Philipp Monreal, global head of marketplace at online travel agency Trivago. "You try to understand the data and see what it means, establish patterns, trends or, for example, in the case of an algorithm, predict a conversion rate," he said. "Lastly, you need to translate it all into recommendations. It's a form of art to capture the essence of complex situations, and say: we should do A or alternatively B, but it has these drawbacks. For that we need storytelling skills."



Dr Philipp Monreal, global head of marketplace at online travel agency Trivago, emphasized that at the end of analyzing data, professionals would need storytelling skills to get across their findings.

Credit to Trivago GmbH

“Don’t Treat Data as God”

Daniel Hill, Director of Competitive Intelligence at Expedia, Inc.

You shouldn’t kid yourself that data science can solve everything. There are probably 10 stories you could tell from a set of data, so you probably tell the story that makes sense to you. Data science disproves hypotheses – it doesn’t prove them. You can do a bad job of projecting your own subjective interpretation.

You need to have multiple people reviewing the piece of work because there are multiple plausible interpretations, and we need to spend time communicating that uncertainty. I don’t want a model to replace an executive decision-making function. You shouldn’t treat analytical calculations with the same trust as a double blind test – you treat them with caution. If you have a good relationship with decision makers, you can say: “This is the data. I think it shows this, but be aware of this.” It is definitely a skill, and not everybody will be receptive to it.

Amir Segall, VP international of Hoteltonight, a last-minute booking agency that operates via a mobile app and site, said geolocation data is massively important to its business. “Geo rate is our most successful product,” he commented. “We provide hotels the opportunity to target customers based on their location – giving a better price for customers close to their hotel. You can also target regions or airports. We take advantage of the fact we know where people that enable geolocation services are and hotels can pull in customers with a high chance of booking.”

It also analyzes data to tell its B2B hotel customers – 17,300 of them, in 2,100 cities – the things they can do to make the most impact on bookings. It began, for instance, with bookings from noon on the day itself only, but thanks to demand it has moved to a seven-days-in-advance booking window. Just like its mobile site, which gives just 15 results and aims for as quick a service as possible, Hoteltonight tries to put data analysis into action. “You suppose something is going to be impactful – you might find, looking at the data, it isn’t, and you kill it,” said Segall. “We do that a lot. But we’re saving a lot of time.”

1.4 Developing Products

New travel businesses are using data in a focused way to develop their products. Will Ogden, chief technology officer at Trusted Housesitters – a British start-up that will find you a home and pet sitter so that you can go on holiday – said it helps to be in a new industry.

His business, for example, used A/B testing to run two versions of its website to see whether more people would click on a button saying “Join now, get travel freedom!” or “For the love of all that is good please join now!” While the business found they could certainly make micro-improvements using this approach, he warned: “Changing traffic patterns and user journeys higher up the funnel can impact engagement further down ... potentially wiping out previous gains.”



2

REVENUES: Developments in Revenue Management

2.1 Think About Profit Management

How can you deliver a service that makes a customer feel supremely well served – while encouraging them to hand over the most money possible?

This was the crux of a series of debates looking at how revenue management is changing, with the ability to analyze ever more sources of data about what customers do, think and spend. Travel companies are increasingly thinking about profit management – taking into account the

costs of acquiring customers in advertising and commission – rather than revenue management. And the new buzz word is RevPAC (Revenue Per Available Customer) not RevPAR (Revenue Per Available Room).

Paul van Meerendonk, director of global advisory services at IDEaS, software that helps price more than a million hotel rooms a day, said numerous points of contact between travel firms and customers, not just the availability of rooms, all affect revenues today.



Paul van Meerendonk, director of global advisory services at IDEaS, stressed that as data sources have multiplied it is critical to link up the different sources coherently to create useful consumer profiles.

“Distribution channels have changed how we connect with our customers over 50 years,” he said. “Customers can see what they want and compare different products and there is ultimately more data for us to analyze. But don’t micro-manage every single data point. Focus on what is going to drive revenues and profitability.”

It’s all about the customer journey. “As we get to know more about our customers, we can make better decisions in marketing,” said Meerendonk. “Are they planning a trip to your hotel or to take that flight? What are their preferences? Maybe they are on the loyalty program or you know their Facebook profile. Then, you can monitor behavior, like how far in advance they book and how. This is a whole new way of customer segmentation.”

By meeting the needs of the customer more precisely, the experts agreed, you are able to charge more. Dr Henrik Imhof, head of yield management and pricing at Sixt car rental firm, argued that a customer-centric approach to pricing will accelerate profits. “Offering the right car to the right customer creates customer excitement and drives ancillary sales,” he concluded.

2.2 Drive the Customer Journey: the High-Tech and Low-Tech Way

One big investor in this data-driven approach to raising profits is the NH Hotel Group. Neville Isaac, director of revenue management development and training, said that from June it had changed its system in more than 400 hotels across the world.

Thanks to a champion in NH’s chief executive, Federico Gonzalez Tejera, along with a program of T-shirts, promotions, and competitions to get people “desperate to see the new system”, and a big reorganization and training program, the new approach - costing more than EUR1 million - is up and running.

But Shay Raz, vice president of revenue management and business development at

Leonardo Hotels–Fattal Hotels Group, argued that just one smart lady with an Excel sheet and a bit of time can make sure prices are maximized when stock is low.

“We have hotels that make 60-70% of their annual income in 12 days of the year, so we need to focus on this,” he said. “On all of the festival days in the city of Munich, more than 60% of reservations more than 30 days in advance were for a three-night stay. The longer the stay, the more the advance. So I don’t care about a one-night cost as long as the three-night stays are for 900 euros. You want to fill in the shorter nights.”

A simple look at data using Microsoft Excel and Access databases, he said, showed a quarter of income for Leonardo Hotels was booked at the weekend. “So we introduced weekend duty and opened offices on a Saturday,” he said. “This was the work of one lady who put in the data once a month, combining lead time analysis, CRM [customer relationship management] and market data – that’s enough to take key decisions.” However, he added the crucial caveat that “five-star luxury is not a commoditized product.”

“Raise the Analytical Bar for Everyone”

Mark Shilton, Principal Data Scientist at Skyscanner

A typing pool in the 1950s looks really old fashioned. There’s no reason you’d expect to have someone to do your typing nowadays. If data is a part of more jobs and more decisions being made on data instead of opinion, the traditional business intelligence department might look like that typing pool of the 1950s.

Skyscanner has [moved] from a central data department to raising the analytical bar for everyone. We developed “T-shaped individuals” with a range and depth of expertise. [For example,]—a marketer would also be able to look at data after running a campaign, a web guy would understand marketing, and the data

specialists can get on and do the really valuable stuff – build recommendation systems, optimize marketing channels – as they aren't stuck doing grunt work.

There are probably loads of data scientists hidden in your company who, with the right training, will allow you to raise the analytical bar.

2.3 Get Your Numbers From Online Travel Agents

Another key question is who “owns” the customer that books through an Online Travel Agent (OTA)? “What are the challenges for hotels who say that Google knows more about me [the customer] than the hotel I’m staying at?” said Van Meerendonk.

Some businesses argued that you have more power than you might think to negotiate with these channels, and you should certainly find out your precise “distribution costs” per customer gained.

Asa Murphy, chief executive of BizStrat digital strategy advisory firm, worked for Expedia as an online travel broker for a decade – and was struck when a local hotelier said he would go out of business if he carried on paying them 25% commission for primarily local guests. “You need to compare apples with apples and look at profitability,” she said. “The more we learn about our customers, the more we will know how to attract them to our hotels and exceed their expectations – which can only be done by analyzing data. OTAs are sitting on loads of this: you need to negotiate with them to get it, as that is truly valuable for you.”

Georg-Friedrich Gerstenkamp, director of revenue management at Jumeirah Hotels & Resorts is on a mission to find out the price tag for getting each and every customer. “Hotels aren’t managing distribution costs accurately or managing it at all,” he said. “Why don’t we know

our costs of acquisition? In the future, we need to look at how much we are paying per booking, the cost of booking and travel ads.”

2.4 Create Different Bookings Paths Through Your Website

Bas Lemmens, founder of ROOMLR online travel agent and new business Hotelchamp, which helps hotels get direct bookings through their own websites, said identifying business and leisure travelers separately and offering them different routes through the website can help convert surfing into booking. “Fifty percent of people visit your website after Booking.com,” he said. “Be smart and use the same tools to convert to a booking so they don’t leave your website. Facebook, sorry to say, does not convert into booking – really think before you use these channels, and test everything you do. People make it complicated but it’s not complicated. You have to insist the people you work with give you the data!”

2.5 Translate Good Reviews into Higher Room Rates

The next challenge is in how to process “soft data” such as good reviews into higher room rates. This is something that, for instance, AccorHotels is looking at. “Three years ago we were focused on the stay – 150,000 bookings per day,” said Fabrice Otaño, chief data officer. “Now, we focus on the whole journey – 60 million interventions a day – to understand what happens on the customer journey.”



Accor have expanded their data capabilities so that they are now taking in "60 million interventions a day" said Fabrice Otaño, chief data officer at Accor

"Using Social Media for Promotion"

Fergus Boyd, VP of Digital and IT at Hotel Chain Yotel

Using social media is a good way for a small business to punch above our weight: we're seventh on a list of hotels people have heard of in New York. People have more of an appetite to post pictures than words. There's no spelling, grammar, and pictures are multi-lingual by definition. Put mirrors everywhere and people will take a selfie, even if the room is small.

Within our company, social media are legitimate marketing channels and treated in

exactly the same way. You take the risk that people say something negative but hopefully if there's an issue, you go and fix it, so they are valuable data sources.

With a bad review somewhere like TripAdvisor, there's nothing you can do other than promptly respond – a negative comment left will just fester, so it's better to say at least, 'apologies for this'. We also get customers helping customers or pushing back.

3

MARKETING: Don't Be a Commodity – Be a Personal Service

3.1 Make Travel Great Again

Make travel great again. That was the message of Carlos Sanchez, senior manager of big data analytics at business travel management firm Carlson Wagonlit Travel.

“Every product or service is at risk of being a commodity, where there’s no differentiation and competition occurs only on price,” he said. The way for travel companies to remain profitable – and charge higher prices – is to create a personal experience for customers, with the help of data. “Share an experience,” he advised. “If you don’t understand what the customer wants, the data is useless.”

For Carlson Wagonlit Travel’s customers, this is about providing minimum-hassle, quality services for corporate travelers – but at the other end of the scale, the lowest-cost market also offers opportunities for travel businesses.

Martin Ratolístka is chief data and automation officer at low-cost flight agency Kiwi.com, whose clever technology combines flights from airlines that don’t normally collaborate in one itinerary and guarantees the journey in case of

cancellations or delays. “Do you know what an air flight costs?” he said, pointing out how fearsomely complex it is now to find the “true cost” of travel. “I don’t, and I’m in the travel industry!”

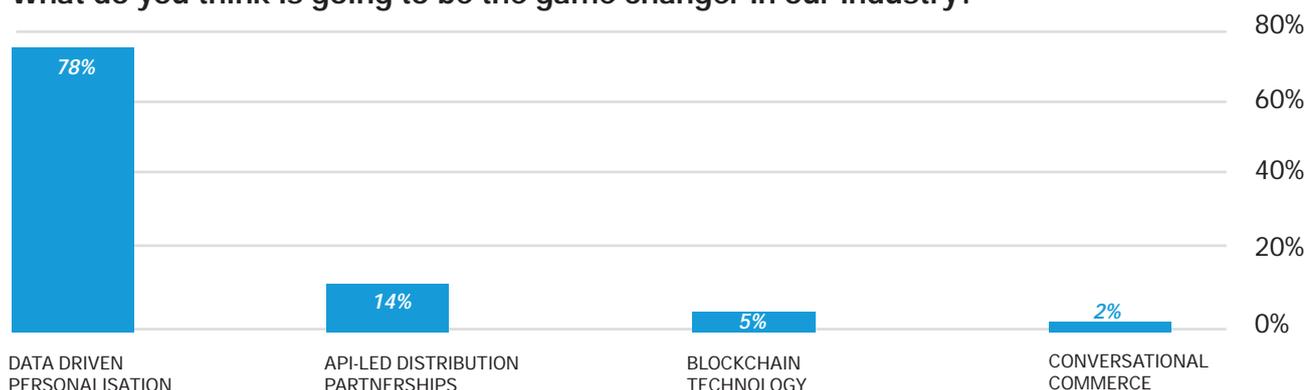
This hasn’t stopped the Czech company growing from a €10 million turnover in 2014 under its original name of Skypicker, to sales of more than €400 million in 2016 and collaborations with almost all airlines.

These two firms have the advantage of catering to particular markets, so what should larger firms who span the entire travel market do to offer the many different kinds of travelers the best possible experience?

3.2 Create Simple Customer Models

Alessandra Di Lorenzo, chief commercial officer in advertising and partnerships at Lastminute.com Group, argued that just starting with simple pieces of information, such as when someone travels and where they typically go, can create a useful customer picture. “It’s about predicting in a simple way what a customer might be interested in – simple inferences based on

What do you think is going to be the game changer in our industry?





common sense," she said. "We found simple predictions have massive impact in terms of conversion and customer loyalty.

"First, create a simple and single view of the customer, simplify this into actionable chunks of data without stereotypes, test and learn. By getting things wrong, we could fix them. We've seen massive improvement just using age and gender, also creating opportunities to cross sell."

Expedia, which has more than 400 million unique customer visits each month, and owns brands including Trivago and HomeAway, believes that the smallest travel firm can compete by using data to identify – and better serve – customer segments. "If you are not willing to put the customer first, all the terabytes of data and machine learning algorithms aren't going to help you," said Jan Krasnodebski, director of lodging revenue optimization. "Personalization is all about the customers – providing them and connecting them to the best hotel offers for them. The person with less data, trying to give the best personal experience, is going to do better."

He advised trying to break down customers into segment groups, and understanding the situation: Americans going to Paris tend to like the Champs Élysées area, and Expedia customers tend to go for hotels with an average recommendation score of 4.2. But someone looking at hotels in low season near Chicago Midway International Airport probably has another motivation for looking there. "There are some hotels around the airport with review ratings of 4 and above but predominantly they sell for low rates with lower averages," he said. "If a customer looks at a hotel for 50 dollars and 2.8, that tells you that person has a specific reason to go. It is the second airport for Chicago, where the cheap flights go. You can personalize a lot."

"Small Data, Big Actions"

Alessandra Di Lorenzo, Chief Commercial Officer, Advertising and Partnerships at Lastminute.com Group

I would like to ban "big data" – to me it means nothing. I would substitute it with "actionable information", in particular to improve customer experience and create commercial opportunities.

We have lots of data. In order to use it we had to bucket it up in three categories – socio-demographic, traveler information (weekend, couple, family, number of nights), and then location. We know where people are travelling from and to, home location, and their dynamic location on mobile phones and at the airport.

We implemented a data management platform from Krux that listens to all interactions customers have with websites or mobile apps. All those cookies suddenly turn into profiles people understand and can use.

In 2016, we launched travelpeople, a B2B brand offering brands the opportunity to reach our customers. We turn big data into actual information we can use for monetization or to make our customer experience better.

3.3 Make Your Website Reflect the Customer

The journey through your website should reflect what you know about the customer, according to Andy Owen-Jones, chief executive and co-founder of data management platform firm bd4travel. "As soon as people start to interact with your site, you can start to personalize," he said. "It's probably better to suit products to people than just show them price. In travel, comparison is everything."

People who already know what they want need to get straight through to a streamlined booking process, but you want to tempt people who are just browsing to stay on your site for as long as

possible. “You want to create more and more interactions, but first you have to spot who people are – create and engage with lookers, not with bookers,” he said. “The best thing we do for Google is give people a bad travel experience. We need to bring people back on our sites and take them away from Google!”

On a wider scale, third party data from social media and review websites can be very valuable in telling you more about customers – even more so if you get this type of review onto your own website. Emanuel Zeiler, chief executive of Romanian online travel start-up navigator.ro, said: “We are skeptical when we don’t see the negative reviews. Even though there are owners who say ‘TripAdvisor put me out of business’, this is natural selection. We should encourage the user to review and in the end everybody gets better. And the quicker you respond, the better. The customer is somewhere in the world facing a problem – you need to help them.”

3.4 Use Social Media, Despite the Risks

Fergus Boyd, VP of digital and IT at new “affordable luxury” hotel chain Yotel has another idea: use customer content to generate a bigger “bang for your buck” than you can afford with advertising, and rather than encouraging customers to write reviews, offer rewards for posting pictures. He gave the example of online photography lessons.

The next challenge is the latest wave of technology: increasing numbers of conversations are losing their public “hashtag” and going private, with messages via Whatsapp groups, Snapchat or LinkedIn. And, Sanchez points out, virtual assistants might soon be taking over the conversation with customers via chatbots and artificial intelligence – anytime, anywhere, and over the mobile network.