TRUSTYOU

Consumer Research Reveals Guest Preferences and Expectations for Direct Hotel Communication

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Executive Summary

Travelers become guests as soon as they complete their booking decision. At this point, the line of communication opens between the traveler and their accommodation provider. In this research, we sought to identify the guest's experiences and expectations through the means of digital correspondence between guests and their overnight stay providers. This relates to the guests' pre-arrival and on-site experiences with a hotel, which occurs between the search and booking and the post-stay feedback phases of the guest journey. Therefore, the following results are strongly related to previous research that focused on uncovering consumer behaviors during the search process leading up to the travelers' booking decision.

Clear communication between a hotel and its guests has a major influence on guest satisfaction, which is measured by the difference between expectations and the realized experiences. Through a contingent series of survey questions, a representative sample of US travelers revealed their preferences and expectations for interacting with their accommodations.

Finding show that:

- The majority (80%) of hotel guests expect that the accommodation provider will initiate communication regarding their booking, and 80% also expect this to be sent via email.

- 73% of guests communicate through online communication channels, combining emails, social media, and text messaging; additionally, two-thirds say they prefer to communicate through written electronic means rather than by phone

- Guests who communicate through text messaging services and through social media report statistically significantly higher satisfaction levels over those who do not.

- A large majority (75%) of guests want to communicate one-to-one with representatives on location and 91% would communicate issues during their on-site experience.

Method

To gain insight into the guests' on-site experience, a survey was deployed to reach travelers who booked an overnight stay through online channels within the previous year. Through the use of progressive questioning, further details about preferences and expectations help to show what impacts satisfaction levels. The objective of this research was to identify online communication aspects that impact satisfaction levels.

The research sample was drawn from a representative panel of online consumers in the United States from Qualtrics during late 2016. The sample consisted of 920 participants of adults over the age of 18. To take part in the survey, all respondents must have traveled and booked a place to stay online within the past 12 months for business and/or for leisure.

Survey participants responded to an online questionnaire which concerned their expectations regarding communication with the accommodation provider, namely hotels. This research was designed as a piece of a larger body of research conducted to reveal relevant consumer behaviors of today's travelers.

Respondents were asked about their online experience after their booking decision, while on site, and directly after their stay. Through multiple-choice, short-answer, and Likert scale questioning, the research concentrated on the preferences and expectations of guests. The results of which are intended to spotlight measurable areas of guest satisfaction.

Additionally, respondents were both directly and indirectly questioned about their usage of mobile devices during the experience, which played an important observational role as a variable within the study.

By following up on the data from the previous study, this research enabled deeper insights into consumer behaviors and provided the opportunity to revisit some of the previous results under new observations. Through this approach, the results of both researches are strongly linked.

Profile of Today's Guest

Those sampled in the research were a representative group of travelers within the US who had booked overnight accommodations within the previous year. All respondents indicated they had booked online at least once for leisure, and 51% had also booked for business purposes. The majority of guests (71%) booked online between one and three times.

Guests reported booking across multiple devices, with the majority (66%) book on desktop while the other portion (34%) book on a phone or tablet. Regarding the devices used, there is a significant difference regarding which devices are more common by gender as seen in the following figure.
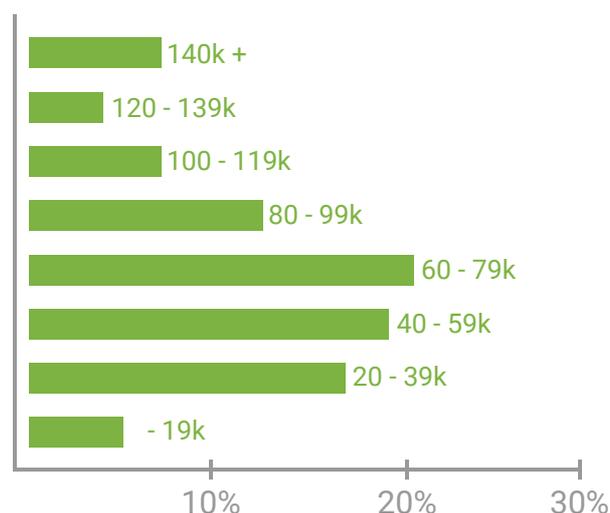
Device Used to Book and Gender
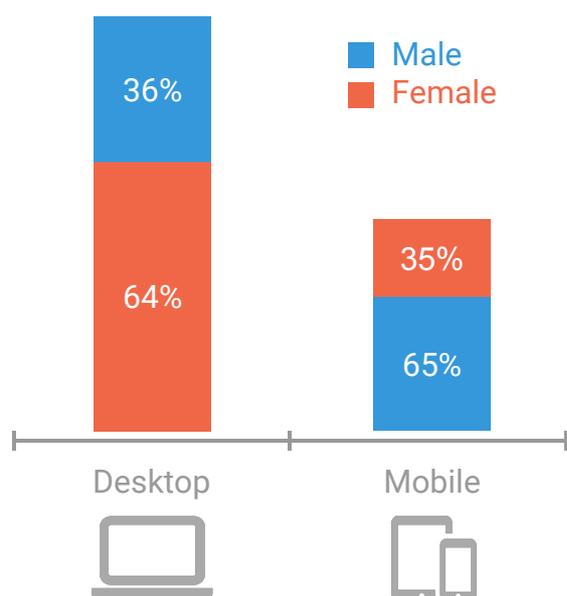
Furthermore, guests varied in age range, yet there is a trend that younger people travel more frequently.

Age Frequency
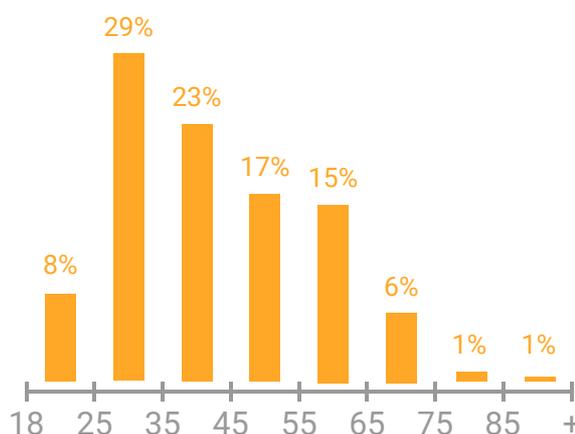
The reported weighted average household income of travelers actively booking was nearly $70,000, 10% higher than in the previous year. [1]

Income Distribution

Research Results

Pre-Stay Communications

The traveler transitions into a guest once the booking has been made. Starting at this point in time, the majority (80%) of respondents stated that they expect the accommodation provider, whether the hotel or booking engine, to initiate contact regarding their reservation. Further, guests typically received the following types of communication prior to their stay:

Received Communications
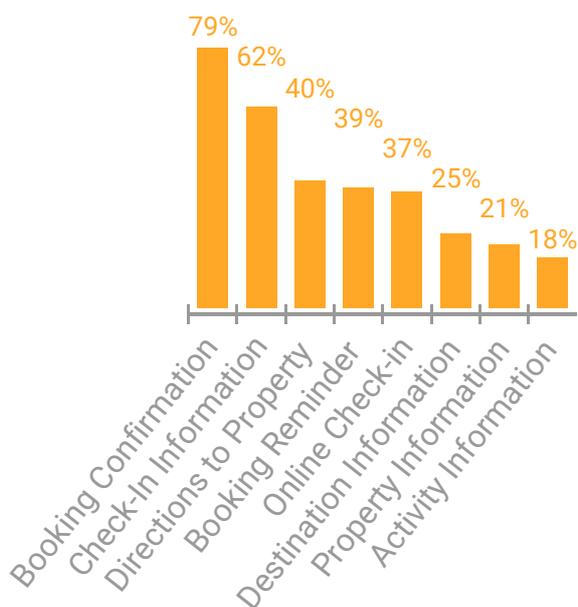
In addition to receiving the previous information, respondents reported their prefered pre-stay online sources of relevant information are the following:

Preferred Channels of Communication
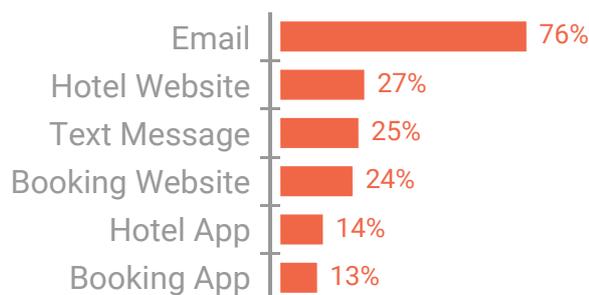
Of the survey sample, most (76%) agree that information regarding a booking should to be communicated through email, but there are also a significant amount who would prefer to access their information through the hotel's website (27%), text messaging (25%), and/or the booking website (24%).

In regard to the hotel's website, those studied admit to visiting the hotel's website, with 43% of travelers always visiting the site, and 35% visiting the site most of the time, and less than two percent stated they would not visit the hotel's website.

The Lines of Communication

Pre-stay information sets up expectations for the guest experience, yet is a static one-way method of communication from the perspective of the hotel. Due to the prevalence of missing information, two-way communication offers more value for the guest and the hotel, both prior to and during the stay. The ability to communicate effectively helps to meet expectations with reality, which is a key to a satisfied guest.

Research Results

When asked about the methods used to communicate between guest and accommodation provider, the following results illustrate the distribution of communication methods:

Current Communications Methods

Method	Percentage
Email	69%
Phone Call	58%
In Person	29%
Travel Agent	19%
Text Messaging	16%
Social Media	15%
Written Mail	8%

Communication by email is the single most frequently (69%) used interaction method; however, when the electronic engagement is measured together, consisting of Text Messaging, Social Media, and Email, it accounts for 73% of communications. The majority of respondents (68%) agreed with the statement that they prefer written electronic communication over phone calls, with only eight percent preferring to communicate by phone over through electronic engagement methods.

Respondents reported a satisfaction level regarding their overall communication experience, which displays a positive correlation to the methods used for their previous interactions with a provider. Out of the three channels for digital communication - text messaging, social media, and email
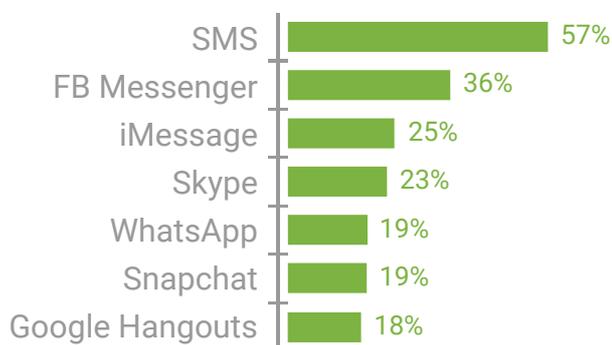
- both text messaging and social media show statistically significantly higher satisfaction ratings than when they are both respectively not used (t=2.9751, p <0.01). The average satisfaction scores fall in the middle of the scale between "Good" and "Excellent." However, email is reportedly the only mean of communication that has a significantly lower satisfaction score when not used.

With text messaging and social media corresponding to a high satisfaction level, research into this method of communication was undertaken to reveal further invaluable insights.

The Relevance of Messaging

Messaging channels, considering both social and text messaging, were identified to correspond to the highest levels of satisfaction from the guests' perspective. Both received an average score above 4.5/5 where 5 was defined as an "excellent" service experience.

Messaging Apps Used with Accommodations

App	Percentage
SMS	57%
FB Messenger	36%
iMessage	25%
Skype	23%
WhatsApp	19%
Snapchat	19%
Google Hangouts	18%

Research Results

Messaging is not the most commonly prefered communication channel, yet it is a developing trend in the hospitality industry and a new option as a customer relationship management (CRM) tool. Of the 16% of US travelers who used messaging services when communicating with a hotel, the most frequently used apps were SMS (57%), Facebook Messenger (36%), and iMessage (25%).

The Point of Contact

Despite the means of communication, respondents revealed many insights into their interactions with their accommodation provider. The survey participants overwhelmingly (75%) agreed with the statement that they would like to communicate one-to-one with someone directly at their accommodation. Additionally, over 90% would communicate any issues they experienced during their stay, instead of waiting until there was no opportunity for service to recover from these issues. However, 34% of travelers agreed that they might wait until check-out before addressing issues they encountered during their stay.

Conclusion & Implications

Both prior to arrival and while on site, guests have already accumulated certain expectations about the way in which their accommodations should communicate. Through multiple channels and on multiple devices, information is shared in a variety of ways, from just sending booking information to the actively resolving specific issues. The results of this research reveal quite a few relevant insights into the fulfillment of service expectations regarding digital interactions with guests. These conclusions are twofold: first, they reveal the guests' perspectives and second, shed light on how hoteliers can impact the digital and physical experience.

As a standard industry practice, it comes as little surprise that most guests agree that they expect to receive a booking confirmation after completing their booking. With the lines of communication opened, hotels and other providers have the opportunity to reach out with additional relevant information that their guests require before and during their stay, including; directions to the property, a reminder of their stay, check-in instructions, and other relevant information.

This information is best received when communicated through one of the guests' preferred channels, with email being the most vital. After having this information available on the hotel's website, the next most important channel to engage is through text messaging. One in four guests prefer to receive information through a text message, which means that properties who lack this capability are at a disadvantage. These results represent current behaviors and preferences; however, the landscape for online interactions between service providers and customers is developing and moving mobile.

Providing this information is just the starting point, because providers must be available for two-way communication. Out of the guests who have communicated with their provider directly, the most frequently used channel is to communicate over the email, which reinforces the necessity for hoteliers to actively engage through this channel. It is also important to note that guests are more satisfied with the overall communication experience than when they communicate through multiple methods. By expanding the communication mix, and reaching out through various methods, there is a higher likelihood in increasing guest satisfaction.

Messaging is one of the hospitality industry's emerging customer relationship management (CRM) channels, but has already been adopted by 16% of hotel guests. One explanation for the lower adoption rate is the industry's reluctance to invest in this as a communication feedback channel, yet the research shows there is a gap between those who have used this channel versus those who would prefer it. Of the guests who had experience

Conclusion & Implications

messaging the accommodation, the most frequently used methods were standard text messages and Facebook Messenger. These also correspond to the top two services most frequently installed on the travelers' devices. When implementing messaging into a guest experience strategy, hotel providers should incorporate the services that are already installed and used by the guest.

Overall, guests are in agreement that they want to engage with someone at their destination, as opposed to a middleman. By investing in technology and the resources to assist the staff with these interactions, hoteliers have the opportunity to improve the guest experience, leading to higher satisfaction rates, increased guest loyalty, and ultimately, more hotel revenue.

About TrustYou

TrustYou, the world's largest guest feedback platform, provides hotels with insights to improve their guest experience and market to future guests. Guest feedback influences 95% of booking decisions. TrustYou's guest feedback platform incorporates hundreds of millions of hotel reviews, surveys, social posts as well as direct messages sent through SMS, email, Facebook Messenger, and more. Along each step of the guest journey, this information generates actionable insights for 500,000 hotels to improve their presence along each step of the guest journey, from booking and pre-stay search queries, to real-time guest requests and messages, to post-stay feedback in the form of survey responses and reviews. TrustYou's platform is made up of various components including: TrustYou Meta-Reviews*, verified global review summaries displayed on travel and search sites like Google, KAYAK, and Hotels.com; TrustYou Messaging, real-time guest messaging service; TrustYou Stars, advanced guest satisfaction survey tool; TrustYou Analytics, the world's leading online reputation management tool and the accompanying app TrustYou Radar. Additionally, PMS, CRM, IBE and other hotel software providers benefit from TrustYou Connect, the partner program which integrates TrustYou's guest feedback platform into their products to help their hotel clients to positively influence every stage of the guest journey.

Find more information on TrustYou and the guest feedback platform on www.trustyou.com.

*TrustYou Meta-Reviews only contain verified reviews and do not include reviews from TripAdvisor