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Hospitality
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Strategies

One-Screen vs. Multi-Step Booking Engine for Your Hotel Website

What's the best way to go? | By Max Starkov and Jason Price

A number of online booking engine vendors have launched different versions of a one-screen booking engine (as opposed to the traditional multi-step booking engine -see Marriott.com, Expedia.com, etc). The one screen booking engine is often presented as the latest cutting edge technology that immensely increases the conversion rates on a property website. Hoteliers are justifiably confused and often ask us to provide an opinion on this hot topic. Find out whether the one-screen vs. multi-step booking engine is the way to go.

Background:

Over the past several years a number of online booking engine vendors have launched different versions of a one-screen booking engine (as opposed to the traditional multi-step booking engine -see Marriott.com, Expedia.com, etc). The one screen booking engine is often presented as the latest cutting edge technology that immensely increases the conversion rates on a property website. Hoteliers are justifiably confused and often ask us to provide an opinion on this hot topic: one-screen vs. multi-step booking engine is the way to go.

HeBS provides critical expertise on Web-based inventory management and reservations systems. HeBS principals won the 2001 Worldwide Microsoft RAD Award for Web-based technology applications for inventory management and online reservations systems in hospitality and are highly respected for their unbiased decision-making and extensive knowledge in hospitality technology.

Since 2001 HeBS is often tasked to consult on online booking technology analysis and vendor selection. HeBS produces unbiased industry reports detailing the pros and cons of major vendors in the industry.

So which one is the way to go, One-Screen or Multi-Step Booking Engine?

HeBS has done extensive analysis of the one-screen technology, its pros and cons and has concluded that at this point in time, the multi-step booking engine is the recommended format for hotel websites.

Here is why:

Best Practices:

- The multi-step (4 or 5 steps) booking process has become the norm in the industry. For more than 11 years North Americans have been using this process to book online.
- All major hotel brands use a multi-step booking process, so do all airline and car rental companies
- All of the third-party online intermediaries (e.g. Expedia, Travelocity, etc) use a multi-step booking process.

Online Purchasing Habits:

- Close to 50 million North Americans will make online travel reservations this year. Almost 100% of them will book using a 4 or 5 step booking process.
- TIA reports that over 40% of U.S. travelers use the Internet exclusively to purchase travel, meaning that people book travel over and over using the same multi-step booking process thus further engraving this process into their purchasing patterns.

User-Friendliness:

- The multi-step booking process “is easier on the eye” as it presents the information in “installments”, one step at the time.

- The one-screen booking screen is exceptionally busy. The information is presented in one “concentrated chunk”, requiring extra time and focus on behalf of the user to figure out what is what, and where to begin and end.
- Layout of the one-screen is confusing: Do you start top left and go to the right, and then move top to bottom (i.e. the Yahoo model)? Do you read the information column after column as it is in your local newspaper?
- The fonts are too small and difficult to read (think senior citizen, baby boomers that all wear at least reading glasses, etc.).
- The room descriptions are too “skinny”—you have to scroll down to read more as opposed to having a page describing room descriptions and availability as it is currently on all major brands and intermediaries.
- Rich Media: all of the images are so small and unappealing.

Single Property vs. Multi-Property Booking Engine

- All of the comments above are based on a single property one-screen booking engine.
- For a multi-property website the one-screen becomes even a bigger problem. The one screen becomes even busier and more difficult to decipher.
- The properties are presented with inch-tall descriptions and photos that do not sell these properties well.

Download Speed and FLASH Blockers:

- The one-screen booking page is extremely time consuming to download on a 56K dial-up connection. Try it on AOL.
- The rich Flash image of the one-screen is often blocked by pop-up blockers (e.g. AOL, Yahoo toolbar, etc)
- Many Fortune 500 companies’ firewalls do not allow FLASH web pages or pages with “heavy” flash images to be displayed on the employees’ desktops.

Search Engines:

- The one-screen (it’s built in FLASH) is completely invisible to the search engines and cannot be optimized.

Trust Issues

- The multi-step booking process allows the hotel to carefully implement trust-building features at the point of sale e.g. Site Security, Privacy Policy, Best Rate Guarantee, etc.) which definitely influence the decision process thus boosting the conversion rates. See IHG’s Book with Confidence and imagine it on the very busy One Screen.

Website Analytics

- All of the website analytics applications (WebTrends, Urchin, SteelTorch, etc) have difficulty tracking visits and bookings via the one-screen reservation screen.
- Unfortunately Flash pages cannot be tracked (The former Ian Schrager Hotels learned this the hard way with their Flash site not knowing for many years how many visitors came to the site, what did they do there, etc)

Follow the Leaders:

- [Marriott](#)—the leader among the major brands in direct online distribution and marketing in hospitality uses a multi-step reservation process. Currently 80% of all Internet bookings of this brand come via the brand website (20% via intermediaries).
- [Expedia](#) -the leader of the intermediary channel and the savviest of all travel-related Internet marketers uses a multi-step reservation process. Expedia’s booking engine is considered as the best travel-related booking engine today. Expedia will book over \$12 billion worth travel bookings this year via this engine.

Research:

- As confirmed by the 2004 RUSH Report, a collaborative research study by HeBS based on 40,000 survey participants on 35 brand hotel websites, users overwhelmingly like to see a) a list of available properties with descriptions, photos, availability and rates for easy comparison, and b) a list of available room and suite types with descriptions, photos, availability and rates, presented in a fashion suitable for easy comparison.
- Presentation of this information is only possible in a multi-step booking process environment.

Case Studies from our client portfolio:

A. Small Hotel Brand:

- This hotel brand’s multi-property website used one-screen booking platform. As per our advice the brand changed the settings as part of a robust Direct Online Distribution Strategy developed by HeBS, and made the step-by-step version the default version on the site. This allowed the introduction of easy to read and better descriptions + photos of the properties and more enhanced room type descriptions and photos. Result: a direct traceable increase of over 25% of the bookings on the site within 3 months, without any major additional or new marketing efforts.

B. Boutique Hotel:

- This boutique hotel originally used the one-screen Flash version of the booking engine (more beautiful according to owner). Under our “influence” the owner switched to the multi-step booking engine version, as part of a robust Direct Online Distribution Strategy we developed for the property. Result: today the property generates over 45% of its revenues from its website.