Digital channels

Earlier in this toolkit we discussed ways to make sure your business is digital ready and how different aspects of digital can help you grow your revenue. This section will discuss some channels that can be explored by businesses who are more comfortable with digital and looking to go further.

While a significant portion of potential customers can be reached through the channels previously described, there are also consumers who want to use alternative ways of planning their trip. Digitally-mature tourism businesses can consider these extra channels as potential additional sources of revenue and customers. Here we cover some of the most common avenues for tourism businesses looking to take the next step in their digital journey.

TripAdvisor

TripAdvisor has grown into the best-known provider of reviews in the travel and tourism sector, which can be both validation and a challenge for business owners.

In the last year, TripAdvisor has changed its design slightly to appear more like a social media channel. Forbes covered the changes in its article ‘TripAdvisor Wants to Become Your New Social Media Feed - At Least For Traveling’ explaining that “Businesses can now take advantage of the platform and use the travel feed to reach new customers and reach people in real time.” You could now use the platform to post offers or exciting news, as well as check reviews.

With reviews being posted, whether the business promotes itself on the site or not, it’s key that operators are aware of what is being said about their business and have a plan of response if required.

There’s no denying the power of reviews, with studies suggesting that up to 4 in 5 of all travellers check online reviews as part of their consideration when looking at a trip.

To begin with:

- Start actively monitoring your online reputation by putting “(your business name) reviews” into a search engine. You will likely have results returned from sites such as TripAdvisor, a Google My Business listing or perhaps Yelp for food and drink. You can also receive reviews on Facebook.

- It’s important to investigate these and note the frequency, average rating and common threads in the comments. This allows you to formulate the right strategy moving forward.

- If your business is only receiving a handful of reviews per month, but they are positive, these will be beneficial in pushing your business up in rankings on review sites. The more you can prompt your customers to leave reviews, especially if they are satisfied customers, the better. Make it easy for them to do so by putting direct links to your review profiles in multiple places such as a newsletter, your website or email communication.
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However, if there are some common customer service issues, or perhaps historical problems, then your strategy would be to put more effort into addressing and responding to those comments before actively seeking more.

When responding, it’s important to be measured and remember that anything said online is very easily shared and potentially taken out of context. It’s often best to acknowledge on a public platform and offer to continue the conversation privately. If you receive a negative review, then a standard format for a good customer service response is often: Acknowledge, Defuse, Detail, Resolve.

Sites such as TripAdvisor work on much the same principle as Google My Business earlier in this toolkit. You start by claiming your business listing and getting verified as the owner. By going through this process, you can fully update your profile (including details on things such as photos, opening times or prices) and then to reply to reviews with an “Owner response”.

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While there may be negative reviews, it's also important to monitor and acknowledge positive ones, even a simple “Thank you, that means a lot for the team to hear.” This approach humanises your business and encourages repeat visits.

TripAdvisor has several paid advertising options, such as Sponsored Placements which push your business to the top of the listings. These work in a similar way to Google Ads, with set budgets and opportunities to put in special offers. Here are ‘7 tips for making the most of placements’ from TripAdvisor if you decide to use them.

Resources
TripAdvisor have a significant TripAdvisor insights section which gives good background reading on the platform, from basic introductory guides through to how to respond to travellers leaving reviews, including negative ones.

The platform also publishes a more detailed official TripAdvisor Help and Support section which has a wealth of very practical advice and how you can use TripAdvisor as a business owner.

For some quick tips in optimising your listing and use of TripAdvisor, read ‘8 tips to get the most from your TripAdvisor listings’ from ReviewTrackers.

For more on Instant Booking through TripAdvisor read their FAQ piece.

Following this pattern gives responses such as “Thank you for your comment {username}. I’m sorry you didn’t have a positive experience on your visit to us and want to say we take any feedback on board and would like to resolve this for you. I can see that you visited us on {date} and we didn’t meet your expectations by {detail}. We faced some significant operational challenges that day, and despite our best efforts we’re very sorry that these affected your visit. That shouldn’t have happened. In order to make this better, we’d like to contact you directly to see how we could renew your confidence in us.”
Metasearch and Online Travel Agents (OTAs)

These two terms are often mistaken for being one and the same; however, they do differ in both technological detail, the user experience, and critically how your business interacts with them.

Online Travel Agents (OTAs) aggregate availability and pricing for thousands of hotels into one platform. The most common examples are the hotel booking websites such as Booking.com or Expedia. The OTA takes payment for the booking and collects customer details, then passes these on to the accommodation provider and charges a commission payment.

The term metasearch refers to websites that take other search results then aggregates them together. In travel this typically refers to sites such as Kayak or Trivago (and indeed Google itself via its Hotel Ads feature). The definition of a metasearch site is that for a single product (usually accommodation) it brings in information and pricing from other websites and displays them in a comparative list for that hotel. Commonly, once a user selects the product they want, the user is referred to the booking site (usually an OTA) to complete their purchase. The metasearch site charges the website which receives the traffic for the click.

While the usual dynamic is that the metasearch providers collect information across OTAs and then pass the customer on once the price has been selected, there is an increasing blurring of the lines, with some introducing ‘book now’ options directly. In addition, OTAs are becoming more like metasearch providers where they are offering price comparison to retain the customer.

When evaluating the potential of these websites as sources of revenue for your business you need to weigh up several factors:

- All bookings via a third party will attract a commission, so while they do represent extra revenue, there is a cost.
- If you had 100 bookings via an OTA, which cost a total of £2000, could you generate more profitable revenue with that cost by investing elsewhere?
- Consider the lifetime value of a customer. If they were to book again directly, you’ll potentially save subsequent commissions and gain a customer that might visit you several times in the future.
- Be aware that some OTAs offer loyalty schemes that could make it harder for you to get bookings directly through your own site.
Checklist

✓ Check the functionality of your existing booking systems to connect with OTAs and metasearch providers.

✓ Search for and claim your listings and ensure all details are accurate and fully featured.

✓ Create a financial model of the commissions paid when evaluating these channels.

✓ Check what commission is payable as different charges exist across different OTAs and platforms. This also applies to cancellation agreements. Read an ‘Analysis of Major Online Travel Agencies’ by Cloudbeds which is updated regularly and outlines changes and developments with OTAs.

The benefit of OTAs is that the cost is borne only on successful bookings. However, OTA listings are often very price sensitive, as your listing is being compared to hundreds of others in and around your location. Also, it’s hard to reflect special attractions of your property, such as painting workshops or being ideal for walkers and pet owners.

In some cases, you can log in and upload your information, pricing and availability manually. OTAs work best with an automatic feed, usually a channel manager. This connects to your property management system (PMS), which then controls the distribution across a variety of online channels. A channel management system might open these markets more easily; they are often based on a commission model.

Airbnb

Airbnb launched in 2008. Its original USP was that you stayed in someone’s spare room, but now hotels, bed & breakfasts and experiences are all available to book through the platform. Airbnb hosts, like any business, have a legal duty of care to their guests and must comply with relevant health & safety and fire regulations.

Creating an account on Airbnb is free and there is an onsite guide to becoming an Airbnb host. Airbnb operate a ‘shared host and guest fee’ as the standard fee structure for individuals. This fee is 3% for most hosts.

Hosts who offer experiences must pay a 20% service fee, calculated based on the price of the experience. If the experience you offer is through a not-for-profit partnership, this fee is waived.

After guests have stayed with you, they have 14 days to write a review. Neither host nor guest can see the review until either both have written a review, or one has written a review and 14 days have passed.

You can write a response that will show up directly below the review, which is visible to other guests and hosts. You’ll need to write your response within 30 days of when the review was written.

Resources

Some metasearch platforms offer help and advice for hotels around metasearch including Trivago’s Hotel Manager blog.

You can join and log in directly to metasearch providers such as Trivago or OTAs such as Booking.com or Expedia in order to edit and control the listing generated on their website.
TXGB

VisitEngland’s Tourism Exchange Great Britain (TXGB) is a business-to-business digital platform that allows B&Bs, hotels, visitor attractions and experiences to connect to a wide range of international distributors (including Booking.com, Ctrip and Expedia) all from one place.

It’s designed to help English tourism businesses grow in international markets and to give distributors access to a wide range of tourism products, services and experiences.

How does it work?
TXGB connects to your booking system and feeds relevant content, live availability and pricing into the distributor sites that you, as a supplier, opt into. It can also be used to identify trends across all channels, thanks to booking data and sales analytics.

If you don’t have a booking system, TXGB allows you to load this information in manually through a part of the system called TX Load. TXGB gives you your own personalised booking pages that link to your website or social media accounts, making sure you’re visible. You can add:

- Location maps
- Banners
- Background images
- Search rules
- Image galleries
- Booking restrictions
- Facebook and Google Analytics

TXGB gives you control of your product every step of the way. You can display your availability all year round, or select certain periods to advertise such as low season.

How do I sign up?
Signing up to TXGB is a simple process through the TXGB website. There are no upfront fees, as you work with the distributor commission rates that you have chosen. TXGB takes a booking fee of 2.5% to cover the ongoing development of the system. If no booking is made, there’s no fee.

Resources
The TXGB website has a FAQs section that can help you set up, explains terms and jargon and offers a way to get in touch for more support if necessary.

There is also a support team to help every step of the way at support@txgb.co.uk.