

Maximize The Nine Stages Of Consumer Vacation Planning

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As the economy fluctuates and the marketing landscape becomes more competitive, advertisers must re-examine their approach to reach consumers. For those who are brave and vigilant, the current chaotic economic situation is an opportunity to leapfrog the competition. With ad spend in the travel category expected to exceed \$5 billion in 2009, hotel and destination marketers need to be smarter in the combative race for consumers' attention and wallets.



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Understanding travelers and their complex vacation-planning process is key in creating effective marketing strategies during challenging times. While a guest-centric approach is not a new concept, typical marketing plans tend to be myopic, only concentrating on reaching the potential traveler prior to their visit. Savvy marketers should recognize the decisions travelers make, leveraging the connection between consumer and brand before, during and after their vacation. This allows marketers to maximize budgets, build stronger brands, utilize more effective messages and create more efficient media plans.

By understanding the nine steps of consumers' decision-making process, opportunities can be found and ideas can be generated that increase short-term revenue and long-term loyalty.

1. THE TRIGGER

Consumer response: *"I need an escape."*

Marketer's objective: Ignite the need for a vacation

Idea: Media including online banners and radio live reads can be implemented instantly based on pre-determined factors. Sites such as weatherchannel.com can immediately feed contextually relevant banner messages depending on the weather report. This is an efficient use of media dollars since advertisers are only charged for running during activation periods.

2. DESTINATION DECISION

Consumer response: *"Where should I go?"*

Marketer's objective: Be considered as a choice

Idea: Hotel marketers can maximize media budgets by planning campaigns in conjunction with local convention and visitors bureaus. This will increase media reach and frequency while prompting potential guests to consider hotel options immediately after choosing their vacation destination.

3. LOGISTICAL DECISIONS

Consumer response: *"Which hotel fits me?"*

Marketer's objective: Get them to book

Idea: A well-crafted website with vacation planning features such as listings of amenities, video tours and past-guest recommendations cut down the amount of research and helps curb comparison shopping.

4. BOOKING

Consumer response: *"I've made up my mind."*

Marketer's objective: Begin a one-on-one relationship and introduce add-ons

Idea: The consumers' first interaction should align with the brand's personality. Agents should be scripted to reflect the appropriate tone and trained to handle situations in accordance with the brand's service ethic. This is also an ideal time to up-sell guests on services and amenities.

5. ACTIVITY PLANNING

Consumer response: *"What should I do while I'm there?"*

Marketer's objective: Make them aware of amenities

Idea: Pre-visit emails, amenity menus on websites and personal phone calls from the concierge can help ease confusion, educate the consumer and increase revenue before the guest arrives. Bundling options together gives the perception of value and can help cross-sell unrelated services.

6. TRAVEL

Consumer response: *"I hope I thought of everything."*

Marketer's objective: Establish emotional connection and educate guests and non-guests

Idea: Advertising in in-flight magazines, using airport signage and billboards creates awareness for property amenities and services for both guests and non-guests. It also offers the additional benefit of increasing anticipation while extending brand reach.

7. ON-SITE

Consumer response: *"I don't want to miss a thing."*

Marketer's objective: Maximize on-site revenue

Idea: In-room collateral, interactive video and on-property signage offer opportunities to create awareness and sales for property amenities and services. VIP events hosted by the hotel's manager can also establish a face-to-face relationship and begin the loyalty process.

8. AFTERGLOW

Consumer response: *"I need to tell my friends."*

Marketer's objective: Create an evangelist

Idea: A phone call, note or email from the manager/concierge can capture feedback and remind guests to tell friends about their experience. Word-of-mouth recommendations are the strongest, most efficient way to create awareness and shorten the Logistical Decision phase.

9. RECONTACT

Consumer response: *"I can't wait to go back."*

Marketer's objective: Create a repeater

Idea: Post-visit communications such as phone calls, direct mail and emails are inexpensive methods to keep in contact with past guests. However, these types of communications can be intrusive unless the overall communication is consistent with the brand they have come to know. 2009 is going to be a challenging time for our industry, so we must resist the urge to wait it out and seize the opportunity to surpass competitors. For those who are committed to long-term strategies, consistent with their brand and customer-centric in their tactical execution, 2009 can be a year of growth and success. Here's to being brave in 2009.