Consumer Research Identifies Which Attributes Are Most Important to Travelers When Booking A Hotel

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Executive Summary

Review data has a significant impact on travelers' booking decisions; 95% of travelers read reviews, according to a recent TrustYou study. This study was designed to understand which factors (e.g. cleanliness, service, WiFi, etc.) mentioned within those reviews have the greatest influence on travelers' booking decisions. Eight different travel contexts (i.e, romantic get-away to business travel) were served to US travelers in simulating booking engine environments. The variables of price and quality were kept constant, and respondents were asked to choose a hotel in each scenario based only on a short review snippet containing a couple of words about hotel attributes, such as "great service," "free WiFi," "clean rooms," etc. Booking choices were then analyzed using heat-mapping technology. Following the booking simulations, respondents were asked to rate the importance of each factor when choosing hotels. Data were gathered from 568 respondents in the United States.

Findings show the complexity of the booking process. To be within a traveler's consideration set, hotels must provide basics like cleanliness and comfort, which are the self-reported most important factors in determining where to stay. However, when presented review "snippets" or excerpts within a booking scenario, travelers often choose a hotel based on other factors relevant to the context in which they are traveling.

Findings show that:

- Business travelers are significantly more likely to book hotels with positive reviews about WiFi
- Those traveling with friends are significantly more likely to book hotels with positive reviews about food
- Those booking a romantic vacation are significantly more likely to book hotels with positive reviews about the rooms
- For a family vacation, travelers are most likely to book hotels with positive reviews about the room/comfort

Method

To examine the impact of reviews and optimal visualization of review data, an electronic survey was employed using heat-mapping techniques developed by online reputation management firm, TrustYou. The objective of the research was to understand which hotel attributes are most valuable to travelers when booking a hotel for various occasions.

The sample was drawn from a nationally representative US panel of Internet users from Qualtrics during January of 2015. The sample consisted of 568 adults over the age of 18. To participate in the study, all respondents must have traveled within the past 12 months, either for business, leisure or both.

Respondents participated in an online questionnaire about their hotel booking habits. The research instrument included eight graphics, each containing nine hypothetical hotel choices in a simulated booking engine. Each graphic was shown in random order and represented different travel scenarios or contexts chosen based on an analysis of TrustYou's database of most common types of travel. The leisure experiences analyzed were:

1. Romantic beach vacation
2. Romantic mountain vacation
3. Romantic city vacation
4. Casino vacation with friends
5. Family beach vacation
6. Family city vacation

The business travel experiences analyzed were:

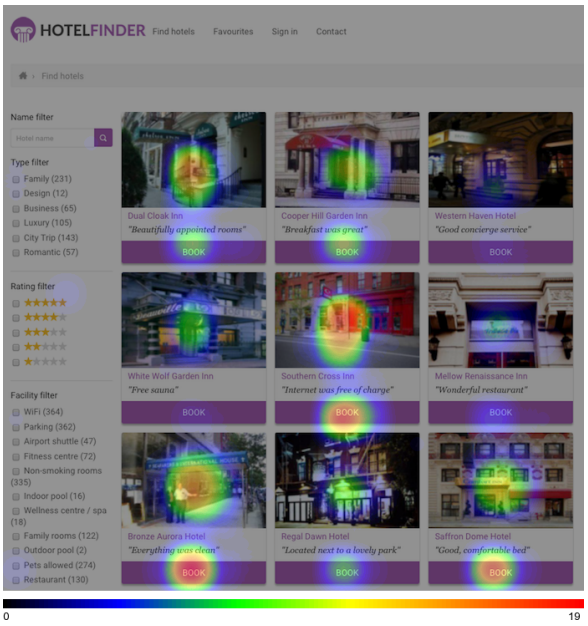
7. Business travel in a luxury hotel
8. Business travel in a budget hotel

The hotel choices within each booking engine were all priced the same. The only variable analyzed was a snippet of a review about each hotel in the following attributes:

- Room
- Breakfast
- Service
- Wellness
- WiFi
- Food
- Cleanliness
- Amenities
- Comfort

Based on these snippets, respondents were asked to choose which hotel they would be most likely to book for each scenario.

Sample Booking Engine Heat Map



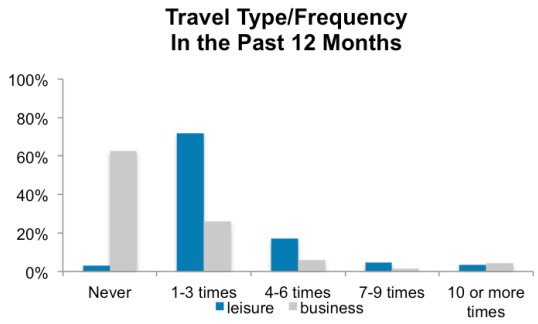
At the end of the survey, respondents were also asked to rank the importance of each service/amenity when choosing a hotel for leisure and for business.

Further details and analysis from the study follow below.

A Profile of Today's Travelers

Nearly all respondents have traveled at least once in the past 12 months for leisure. Among these leisure travelers, the majority (72%) took between one and three holiday trips in the past 12 months, and another twenty five percent reported taking four or more leisure trips within the past 12 months.

Thirty seven percent of respondents reported also having traveled at least once in the past 12 months for business.



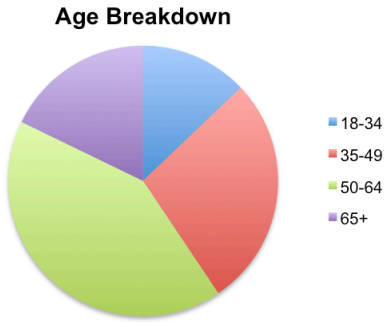
Booking Sources

When booking travel, 40% of leisure travelers and 31% of business travelers report booking directly through the property's website, leading all other booking platforms for both types of travel. After direct booking, respondents report that Expedia, Hotels.com, Travelocity, Priceline and Orbitz are the most popular platforms, in this order.

Gender and Age

42% of the sample was male, 58% was female. There were no significant differences in the frequency of leisure travel between men and women within the last 12 months; however, male travelers were more likely to have traveled for business within the past 12 months (48% of men in the sample had traveled for business, while only 30% of women had taken a business trip).

The age breakdown is as follows:

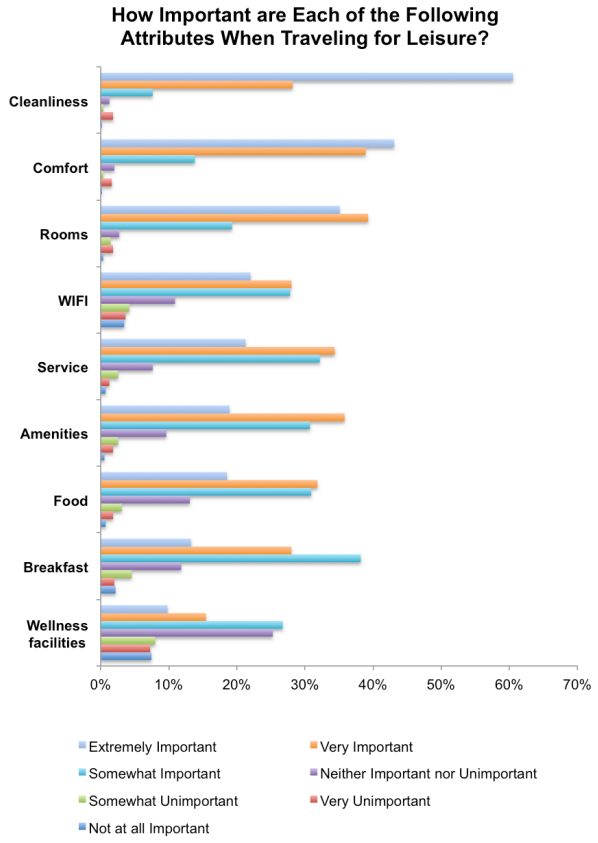


Household Income

The average annual household income for this sample was around US$63,000. Respondents who traveled at least once in the past 12 months for business averaged higher annual household incomes (US$73,200).

The Most Important Hotel Attributes For Leisure Travelers

When traveling for leisure, respondents self-report that cleanliness and comfort were the two most important hotel factors among those analyzed in this study. 61% said cleanliness was "extremely important," and 43% reported comfort as "extremely important."



There were few significant differences in the attributes that were self-reported most and least important to male and female respondents. Male respondents were slightly more likely to report that WiFi is extremely important compared to female respondents. Female respondents were slightly more likely to report that service is extremely important compared to male respondents.

When comparing self-reported responses from frequent travelers (4 or more leisure trips in the past 12 months) to less frequent travelers (1-3 leisure trips in the past 12 months), WiFi and wellness facilities were slightly more important to frequent travelers.

Once placed in a booking environment, however, respondents chose hotels based on different hotel attributes, suggesting that their hotel expectations in each given situation framed their decision-making process. Following are further findings from the simulated booking environment.

Family Travel

For family travel, respondents were most likely to book a hotel based on its room (23.06%). This group of travelers was also significantly more likely to book hotels with high scores for comfort (19.10%), particularly when traveling to a large city. When booking a family vacation to the beach, hotel amenities were also important in deciding where to stay.

Romantic Getaways

For romantic vacations, respondents were most likely to book a hotel based on its room (35.68%). Booking based on the room was significantly higher among this type of traveler.

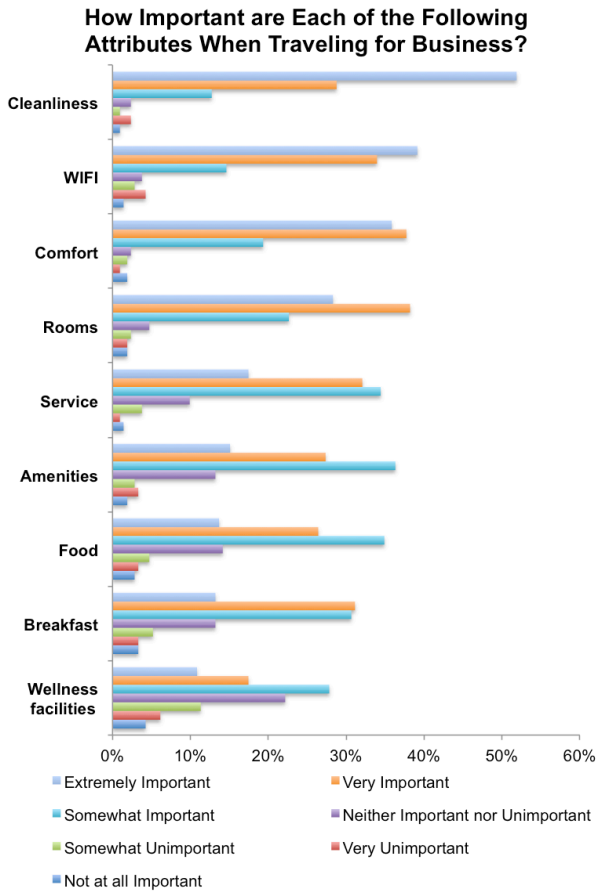
Travel With Friends

For respondents traveling with friends, food was significantly more important than with any other type of leisure travel. 27.53% of respondents booked the hotel with positive food reviews.

The Most Important Hotel Attributes For Business Travelers

When traveling for business, respondents report that cleanliness, comfort and WiFi are the most important attributes among those analyzed in this study. 52% said cleanliness was “extremely important,” 39% said WiFi was “extremely important,” and 36% said

that comfort was “extremely important.”



There were no significant differences between which services were most and least important for male and female respondents.

When comparing frequent business travelers (4 or more trips in the past 12 months) to less frequent business travelers (1-3 trips in the past 12 months), comfort and amenities were slightly more important to frequent business travelers.

Similar to leisure travelers, once placed in a booking environment, respondents chose hotels based on different attributes, suggesting that their expectations in each given situation framed their decision-making process. Following are further findings from the simulated booking environment.

Luxury vs. Budget Business Travel

Respondents were given two different scenarios for booking business travel:

1. Staying in a luxury hotel
2. Staying in a budget hotel.

When simulating booking business travel in a luxury hotel, respondents were more likely to favor hotels with great rooms, impressive breakfast offerings, and WiFi.

When booking a budget hotel, respondents were significantly more likely to book hotels that were clean and comfortable. WiFi also remained an important factor for budget business travel.

These differences are likely due to different expectations that travelers have of luxury vs. budget hotels (i.e. in most travelers’ minds, luxury hotels are assumed to be clean and comfortable, so travelers may seek out further amenities that would be added ‘perks’ when staying at luxury properties).

Conclusion

To best cater to travelers, optimize marketing and increase bookings, hotels must first understand what travelers want and need in a hotel when making their booking decisions. This research explored these traveler needs.

Findings reveal that self-reported attitudes (what travelers say is important) towards certain attributes often differ from behavioral (what travelers do when booking). Why is this, and what does this mean for hoteliers?

The self-reported hotel attributes that travelers rank as most important are basic necessities that hotels must have to be included in a traveler's consideration set. Those necessities are: cleanliness and comfort.

Once a hotel becomes part of the traveler's consideration set by delivering on the "must haves," it then must focus on attributes that actually trigger a traveler to book. Based on this research, those attributes are:

- WiFi for business travelers
- Food for those traveling with friends
- Rooms for those planning romantic vacations
- Room, comfort and amenities for family travelers

Implications for Hoteliers

These findings provide hoteliers with valuable information and focus when improving its services and optimizing marketing, which may lead to increased bookings.

Improving services

Via an online reputation management tool, hotels can monitor their reputation to understand which attributes need improvements and ensure that their offerings match the needs of their guests. Hotels should focus on both the self-reported important attributes like cleanliness and comfort, as well as attributes that are influential in the booking behaviors of their target guests.

Marketing

Hoteliers can also market attributes that trigger booking behavior, both by traditional marketing/advertising as well as by using review content for marketing. Using a tool like TrustYou's Meta-Reviews, hotels can quickly show travelers a summary of reviews with scores and review snippets about these key attributes. Further, hotels can incorporate this review data as rich snippets onto their site for improved SEO and more direct bookings.

About TrustYou

TrustYou's Mission is to positively influence travelers' decisions. Reviews and user-generated content now rank #1 in influencing travelers' hotel selections and industry reputations. Digesting all of these opinions, however, is beyond any one person's capacity. Each day things become more complicated because millions of new opinions in thousands of formats and dozens of languages enter the fray. TrustYou searches, analyzes and distills hundreds of millions of opinions scattered across this vast, fragmented market. Our products are extensively used by suppliers – hotels, accommodations, restaurants – to provide travelers with better services and enhanced offerings by monitoring, surveying and acting upon all worldwide guest feedback. Travel intermediaries – OTAs, meta-search, destination marketers – use TrustYou's Meta-Reviews™ to help travelers purchase wisely. TrustYou's Meta-Reviews™ are based solely on verified travel reviews. They do not include data from TripAdvisor.

Learn More About TrustYou >>

About the Authors

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Margaret Ady is based in Munich, Germany where she serves as Vice President of Marketing at TrustYou. She graduated from the University of Southern California with degrees in Economics and Psychology, and where she was awarded the Annenberg Communications Pathway Grant in 2004 for her research in new technology and its impact on health and healthcare decision-making. Margaret has extensive experience in research, marketing and brand strategy, having served in leadership positions at The Walt Disney Company (where she was appointed to the company's Peer Advisory Board), and The Oprah Winfrey Network. She has also provided research and strategic consulting services to 20th Television (Fox), Nielsen and many other companies in FMCG/Entertainment/IT industries.

Donna Quadri-Felitti
Donna Quadri-Felitti, serves as Director of the School of Hospitality Management in the College of Health and Human Development at The Pennsylvania State University. Prior she served as Academic Chair and Clinical Associate Professor of Hospitality and Tourism Management at New York University Tisch Center for Hospitality and Tourism in New York City. Donna completed her Ph.D. at Iowa State University in Hospitality Management where she received a USDA-funded Sustainable Community Development grant for her research in destination marketing and the experience economy. Named one of the Top 25 Extraordinary Minds in Hospitality and Tourism Sales and Marketing by Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International for the year 2012, Donna has earned certifications as a Hospitality Educator from American Hotel & Lodging Association, a Hospitality Digital Marketer from Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International, and wine captain from the Sommelier Society of America.