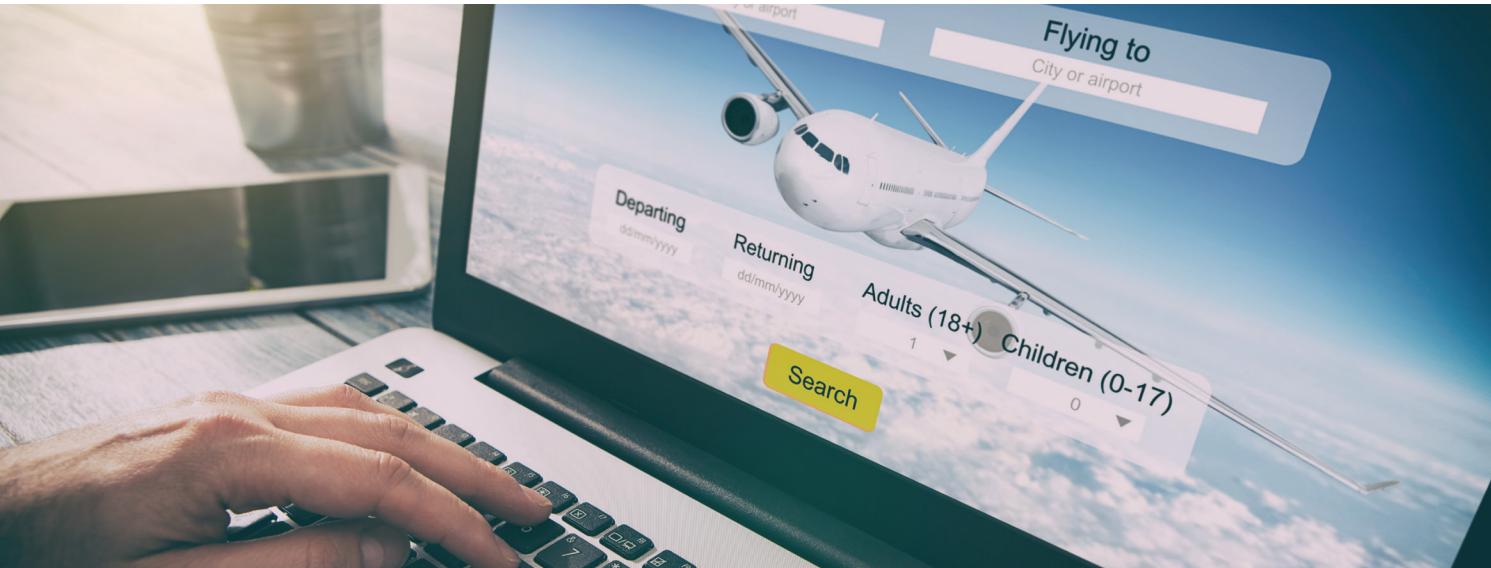


White Paper

6 Ideas For Optimizing Your Booking Funnel



Conversion rates in the travel industry range from [less than 1 percent](#) for travel package sales to just over 2 percent for the industry as a whole. Those are tough odds! Travel-focused businesses can't afford to lose any site traffic to a clunky booking funnel.

That fact is even more evident when you consider that the average travel consumer made 38 website visits before making a purchase. 38! And once a traveler has made the decision to move forward with a reservation, they must contend with long and complex purchase funnels that typically require several pages and a multitude of form fields.

Improving the conversion performance at the funnel represents a huge opportunity for the travel industry as a whole. However, having a meaningful impact on the last stages of a purchase process can be difficult. We've put together these 6 tips to help.

1. Establish a baseline

How often do you get really excited about how well something is going, then you get the question: "How does this compare to what visitors were doing previously?" Uh oh.

You have to establish a baseline of behavior on your site to understand the nature of your problems before trying to fix them. Unfortunately, this step is often skipped, with managers moving directly to developing ideas for redesigns or tests. To establish a baseline of behavior on your site and identify potential problems, begin by looking at page metrics.

Conduct a drop-off analysis to determine at which page or step most potential customers abandon the process. Once this is done, look at behavior on each page of the funnel. Use click-tracking or session replay tools to create activity maps to illuminate which parts of the page are receiving focus and which are not. If paid search campaigns are used to drive customers to the website, a keyword analysis will help to better understand the motivations and interests of those that convert. Similarly, a basket analysis of completed orders can help to identify the most popular combinations of products.

This is also a good time to conduct user interviews. Ask a sample of participants to attempt a booking in a lab or at home while performing a "think aloud" task to reveal patterns of problems perceived by customers. Post-booking surveys about the process may reveal attitudes or opinions about the process as well.

The goal is to identify potential bottlenecks, annoyances and bugs that prevent or dissuade customers from completing the booking.

2. Emphasize the unique selling position

Travelers have so many options online when making a booking—it can be hard to stand out. Some of the most popular sites—as well as a handful of smaller niche sites—may enjoy a certain default status that draws large numbers of organic and direct visits. Establishing this status, however, typically requires huge marketing and advertising investments to build awareness.

Even with a limitless advertising budget, keeping customers requires a unique selling proposition—a unique benefit offered by a product or company that separates it from competitors. This is often a brand's reason for being, the value it creates in the marketplace, the thing it does better or differently than the competition. The

rub, however, is that it is often hidden from the customer.

Maybe a travel website is unique because it searches more bookings than any other. Or maybe it uses a process to find a guaranteed lowest price. Or maybe it caters to a certain type of travel or location. Whatever the unique selling proposition (USP) is, ensure that it is clearly presented throughout the site and especially in the booking funnel. After all, this USP answers the key questions of “why now” and “why from this website?”

3. Guide decision-making

Related to emphasizing your USP is structuring the design and messaging in your booking funnel to guide decision-making. A customer, for example, could be close to making a decision, but may delay the actual purchase, leaving a booking in the cart. He or she may be trying to decide between different destinations and feel stuck without a clear differentiating criterion. Guiding decision-making is the process of using cues to nudge such customers along.

One excellent way to do this is to build urgency around a decision. This is particularly relevant in the travel industry where dynamic pricing is the norm. Make it clear that prices may change and are only locked in for a certain period of time. Similarly, scarcity appeals may increase the motivation to complete a purchase (Only 2 seats/rooms/etc. left at this price!). Social proof, too, can help motivate a decision or differentiate one option from another—seeing reviews or ratings from other travelers can validate a purchase.

These techniques aren’t exclusive to the checkout funnel—they can be used throughout a travel website. In fact, they are often surfaced earlier in the decision-making process to encourage visitors to convert. Carrying such messages through the entire booking funnel may help encourage the completion of bookings, as well.

4. Reduce conversion friction

Perhaps the most immediate and direct method for optimizing any conversion funnel is to simply make it shorter and simpler. Of course, this is easier said than done.

More often, the funnel is dictated by business, regulatory and practical necessity. However, simple adjustments, like grouping similar fields, improving page-load

speeds, adjusting the number of pages, and so on can have significant impacts on performance. Prompts and guides, which help customers add information more quickly and with less thinking, also help.

It seems obvious—that simpler is better—but there's interesting research that supports the idea as well. The theory of processing fluency suggests that individuals associate emotions and memories with a task based on how easy or difficult it was to make sense of (see [Higgins, 1998](#); [Schwarz, 2004](#)).

Put simply, when a task is cognitively easy, it is remembered as being positive. When it is cognitively challenging or confusing, it is remembered as being negative. The amount of effort a person needs to exert comes to represent his or her attitude toward the object of that effort (a.k.a., your site!). So keep it as simple as possible to keep customers coming back.

5. Improve the mobile experience

As much as [59 percent](#) of traffic to travel websites comes from mobile and tablet devices. This makes a lot of sense—travelers are researching and booking relevant accommodations, transportation, tours and more while on the road. This means that it's critical that travel sites have a robust and accessible mobile experience. This is especially true of the booking funnel, which often does not scale down effectively.

The mobile site or app should be optimized with care, just as any other part of the site would be—maybe even more depending upon how much traffic it gets. Improving page load times, the funnel interface and navigation elements is particularly important. See the point above about reducing friction—this is essential on a mobile device. Nobody wants to type in a ton of fields on a tiny mobile keyboard!

6. Introduce personalization

Personalization is still a super broad and nebulous topic. Often, when personalization is mentioned, it is in the context of implementing dramatic new technologies, generating individual-level experiences, and re-structuring entire organizations. But it doesn't have to be. In the case of your booking funnel, much more subtle forms of personalization can prove effective.

Consider adding location-based cross-sell recommendations based on the items in a visitor's basket. This can help increase total order size and reinforce the unique

selling proposition of the site. Pre-filling some form fields based on recognized user variables, too, can make the checkout process easier. Why not pull in relevant social media posts—Instagram photos for the destination in the basket, for example—to encourage customers to move forward through the funnel?

The important thing to keep in mind with all of these optimization techniques, however, is that they are only true optimizations when they are effectively tuned to your website and customers.

This is best accomplished through a testing series in which the results of each test informs the design of the next. Start by conducting such iterative testing across these six tips, and it may be possible to improve the conversion performance of your travel booking funnel. And, as always, if you need help, reach out to us at Brooks Bell.



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