How to survive and thrive IN THE DIGITAL JUNGLE
A GUIDE FOR THE MODERN TRAVEL AGENT
The birth of the internet completely changed the travel industry forever. Through online travel agents (OTAs) like Expedia, nearly all aspects of travel can be viewed, arranged and paid for anywhere on the planet without ever speaking to a travel professional.

But this doesn’t mean that the digital world needs to be a travel agent’s enemy. In fact, it’s quite the opposite.

While it may seem like a daunting prospect, by embracing it and making use of today’s digital technologies, your business will not just survive but thrive.

‘Going digital’ will give you deeper customer insights and a platform to galvanise your position as a travel pro. You can specialise, personalise and add a human touch to your offering in a way that OTAs will never be able to.

The digital world isn’t a travel agent’s enemy. It’s quite the opposite!

The implementation of the right technology whilst teaming up with right partners will allow you to work smarter and serve your customers more efficiently.

The objective of this e-book is to give you a more comprehensive understanding of the what, the why and the how on everything digital so you can be better prepared for the ever changing travel landscape.
2. Understanding Your Value
WHY THE WORLD STILL NEEDS TRAVEL PROS

While many a critic will proclaim that the need for a traditional travel agent is slowly dying with the birth of OTAs, the reality is however, that’s not dying; it’s changing.

What many forget is that we are social creatures who need interaction in all formats – online, on social sites and MOST importantly - face-to-face.

Travel professionals come to the table with experience that consumers are hard-pressed to find when they’re exploring travel options online, particularly when self-directed. This is at the centre of what makes them valuable. The more complex a travel request is, the more someone should want to deal with a travel agent.

However, it's not just about the expertise, while many may see online as the most convenient way to book a holiday, the statistics tell another story.

Recent research by Google that looked at the typical customer journey to purchase in the digital travel ecosystem found that the average user looked at 380 web pages through 34 different searches taking place over a two-month period.
For the customer in a hurry, more than 400 digital moments (on average) can be too time consuming, the travel professional can easily be delegated this task and with better results.

It’s not all rosy for the OTAs. Plenty have gone out of business without having the right protection in place for their clients, leaving thousands upon thousands of travellers stranded and/or out of pocket.

Ok, so travel agents might not be able to control a flight being cancelled or a hotel over-booking themselves, but when this does happen, having a name and telephone number to call will offer them some comfort – something that an Expedia or Booking.com certainly can't offer.

THE NEED FOR A TRADITIONAL TRAVEL AGENT ISN’T Dying, IT’S CHANGING...

Keeping this message in front of customers who are within fingers’ reach of booking their next trip online with smart digital marketing like social media and blogs is an opportunity for agents. Travel agencies that have failed to offer to do this are the ones that are no longer around today.

It’s no surprise the agencies who have understood how a connected offline/online strategy works to offer customers the best of both worlds, are the ones winning in today's battleground.
3. Learn to LOVE DIGITAL
We get it, taking your first strides into the digital realm might seem like you are venturing into unknown terrain, but to survive, it's a crucial step that will need to be taken. And to keep your head above the water; it needs to be taken NOW.

You are probably asking yourself the question:

"do I really need to do this?"

The thing is, the digital revolution has left no room for this question. Anyone who fails to recognise the impact of this will pay a heavy price by losing their money and time, or worse, their business altogether.

Here's how to get ahead with digital...
WORK SMARTER

By creating digital databases on your clients, destination research and more, you will be well-equipped for every touch point of the customers booking journey. This quick-access information will allow you to be more useful and resourceful for your customer's, help make the sale and provide you with cross and upselling opportunities.

Learn to LOVE DIGITAL
Digital marketing means that it’s now possible for you to connect with your customers in ways that you never thought possible.

Social media has made it easier to communicate with your customers, address their queries, offer them advice and most importantly create a stage for you to further bolster your status as the travel expert.

Compared to the traditional forms of marketing, the versatile tools, tactics and techniques of digital marketing can help you develop a stronger relationship with your existing customers at a considerably lower cost.
3. ANYTIME, ANYWHERE

The next time you walk in the park or are in a cafe, look how many people are interacting with their phones. Digital marketing connects you to the mobile user.

It does not limit you to time or space as compared to traditional marketing. You can connect with a wider audience and therefore generate more sales opportunities, all while keeping your costs to a minimum.

4. KEEP UP WITH THE COMPETITION

Every business, however big or small, will have some competition. And if your competitors are using digital marketing and you are not, then you run the risk of being left behind.
Start with your strategy
Whenever you set off across new territory you’ll want to consult a map, otherwise you’ll get lost.

Think of your strategy as this map. Clear thinking and knowing where you are going will make your first steps in conquering the digital world much easier.

From content marketing to data collection, it can be overwhelming figuring out where to start - and, more importantly, what will have the biggest impact.

It is certain that your goals will evolve as time goes on and things change but having even the simplest of strategies can help you stay focussed on meeting those objectives.

However simple though, there’s no doubt it can be difficult to get started actually building one.

To help your business on the road to digital success we have put together a series of seven building blocks.
To know where you’re going, you have to know where you are right now.

Look at your current business and determine what has worked well, what could have been better and what opportunities, more importantly digital opportunities, can improve your business.

Evaluate your existing digital marketing channels (if any) – your website, your blog and social media content, and your paid channels such as Google Adwords.

Analyse the results, identify where there are gaps and see where improvements can be made.
A mission statement will define your purpose, but it also outlines its primary objectives. This focuses on what needs to be done in the short term to realise the long-term vision. For the mission statement, you’ll want to ask yourself the questions:

- What do we do?
- How do we do it?
- What value do we bring?
A vision statement describes the future direction of the business and its aims in the medium to long term. So, for this you want to ask yourself:

*where do we want to be in 3 or 5 years?*

Your vision statement can then be the ‘guiding light’ for all your marketing goals (as well as all other areas) and will help you choose the tools you need to realise these goals.

**Identify your goals and the possible digital marketing tools you will need to help you realise them.**
For a successful marketing strategy - offline or online - you need to know who you’re marketing to.

The best digital marketing strategies are built upon detailed different buyer personas, and your first step is to create them.

These are best created with real data, rather than making assumptions.

Later in this document we will discuss low cost ways on collecting data but to get a rounded picture of each persona, your research pool should include a mixture of customers and people outside your current database who align with your target audience.

Here are some starting points on the type of data that would be useful:

**DEMOGRAPHIC**
This will provide you with a good understanding of the different client types you need to appeal to.
- Location
- Age
- Income
- Household family status

**QUALITATIVE**
This will provide you with a good source of knowledge about the different customers, needs, requirements, preferences and priorities – perfect for when you’re creating enticing content.
- Requirements & preferences
- Hobbies and interests
- Priorities
At this stage you should develop a priority set of objectives that ensures delivery of the company's vision and mission. They should be specific, measurable and realistic with consideration to time and costs.

If you set yourself realistic objectives and share them with your team, you will always be able to refer back to it to make sure that you are on track.
Now is the time to put some meat on the bones of your strategy by translating the strategic objectives into more detailed short-term plans. Consider the digital tools you are going to be using to realise your objectives and consider how strategic partnerships can help accelerate that process by leveraging on their expertise.

You'll also need to map out your strategy for an extended period of time - usually 12 months or longer.

Bring all of this together to form a solid strategy document, an excel sheet is probably the best format.

Remember that the purpose of your strategy document is to map out the actions you're going to take to achieve your goal over a period of time – but it doesn't have to be set in stone, it can evolve and change as your business does - as long as it communicates that, then you've nailed the basics of creating a digital strategy.
All the planning and hard work may have been done, but it's vital to continually review all objectives and action plans to make sure you're still on track to achieve that overall goal.
5. Brand Experience
Understanding the customer journey

By having a deeper understanding of your customers’ buying journey you can identify areas where implementing digital will boost your business.
Specialise

By having a niche product – whether that’s business travel, incentive group trips, adventure, retirement, disability access or swimming with pigs in the Bahamas – you’ll get access to markets that the OTAs won’t be able to touch.

A combination of popular and new destinations will make your portfolio sing. Add unique experiences, throw in places that you love, add cruises and luxury vacations.

The key here is, you need to be an expert in that area, so stick to what you know and what your passion is.

Create personas of your customers

Create a document with all the various personas such as couples, families, honeymooners or retirees. Think about all the questions and requirements that they may have and the destinations that they’d like to visit. Also, consider what the potential cross-selling and upselling could be to each of those profiles.

Your job at the point of sale can be a breeze.
Brush up on your product knowledge

Doing your homework on destinations will give you further insights that can lead to personalisation and that’s exactly what your clients are willing to pay for.

Profile the different destinations, consider your different customer personas and what would best suit them in each of those different destinations – this way you will be armed and ready when they call or walk through the door.

**New destinations:** Read up on everything you can get your hands on - from local product to flights and suppliers, and connect with tourism boards offline and online.

**Popular destinations:** There’s a way to differentiate - put a spin on existing destinations by showcasing what’s new.

Go digital

Digital marketing isn't an option these days. It’s HOW you go about communicating that makes all the difference. Your digital marketing strategy must include a mix of content marketing and social media.

Put your best foot forward

One of the best investments you can make is getting a designer to lift your online appearance. Sit back and watch great design drive your business.
Create client and destination calendars

Mark corridors, identify booking and travel windows.

Create one for your clientele by marking holidays, the booking and travel windows, and long weekends.

Next is your destination calendar - mark local holidays, and high and low seasons.

Figure out the best mix and match between your clients and portfolio.

Look for promotion opportunities

Keep those booking windows ready and before the season begins, pull your promotions together, add discounts for early bird bookings. Negotiate with your suppliers and push destinations during low seasons.
Create a good brief

Here’s where your personas come in handy. Ask your clients many questions and go beyond the obvious. You’re writing their story and setting the stage to add value to their holiday. The more you know, the more you can deliver.

Keep it fresh

Be it offline or online, no matter how you connect with your clients, think how you can improve that experience – how you present your promotional materials – videos are a great way to inspire.
Maximise revenue

Both these routes meet in a happy place of maximising revenue for you and additional value for your client. Up selling is offering a more expensive product in an existing booking like getting a hotel room upgrade; while cross-selling involves selling ancillaries on top of the original purchase like a local tour.

Keep in your calendar when your clients are travelling, when they reach their destination and when they are leaving – stay in touch, send them a message or call them to see if there is an excursion they may be interested in.

If you want to add genuine value, you need to authentically match your product with what the customer wants.
Be a data wizard

Feedback is just one way you collect data about what went right or could be improved upon: Did you upsell or cross-sell? Was it fabulous? Great! Now use this information well.

Clients love a good story before making a purchase, so give them happy endings.

Share stats on customer satisfaction on activities you recommend, with other clients. Random feedback will contain gems of information about your suppliers, hotels, tours, etc.

Encourage referrals

Referrals are the social marketer’s perfect result. If customers have had an incredible experience with you, give them an incentive for shouting about it on social media by offering them a discount on their next holiday.
6. The power of data
We hear the word ‘data’ being used a lot nowadays, yet it still feels like a topic for boring number-crunchers and not something that the modern travel agent can really find interesting or even use.

The truth is though, harness the power of it correctly and data will be your new best friend, and this is why...

1. **It will bring you closer to your customers.**

   It is likely that you are already keeping some data from your clients on file or on your CRM system. Take it one step further; keep ALL your customers’ data on file. We are talking about things like preferences and tastes, birthdays, demographics and so on.

   You never know when you could use it. The more you know about each and every customer, the better you can provide personalised and bespoke options.
2 · Cement your place as a travel guru.

You can do much more than just push out relevant and timely offers with your customer data. You can use all this data to create customer personas by cross-referencing the likes and dislikes of similar profiles, building different pictures of different customer types and then targeting new customers with offers with similar profiles.

Paid digital advertising like on Facebook and Google ads allow for very specific segmenting and targeting, and with solid customer data this becomes much more potent.

3 · You can gain insights at every step.

Data collection doesn’t need to start once you have customers on board. It can start at the first point of contact. For example, with insights from Google Analytics or Facebook, you have demographic information at your fingertips about who is browsing your website or reading your content. This will give you a better understanding about who is your online audience, what content is interesting to them, and how should you craft your advertising messages in a way that is appealing to them.
4 · Measure, assess, improve, repeat.

Another buzz-phrase right now is ‘ROI’. Everybody wants to be able to measure the Return On Investment on everything they do, but up until now it has been very hard to measure the ROI on things like marketing and advertising expenditure. The digital era we live in makes it much easier to now gain information.

Facebook for example, gives you loads of quality insights into the effectiveness of your advertising campaigns. Don't be scared to try different things. Test different types of images or videos and try writing the same message but in different ways. All can have a massive impact on the success or failure of an advertising campaign.

Don't expect to get it right first time, you will need to analyse and learn from the results to hone in on the best messaging and content for your advertising.

5 · It’s easier and cheaper than you think.

And finally, collecting and using data doesn't have to be an expensive strategy to embrace.
Collecting and using data across the customer journey

**Dream**

Use your social media channels to listen to the topics that are relevant to your customers. Free tools like Hootsuite are a great way to monitor your activities.

**Browse**

Use Google's remarketing pixel on your website. When somebody visits your website, it will keep their data which you can later use to target them with paid ads.

**Book**

Use this as an opportunity to get as much data from your clients, whether that's over the phone, face-to-face or through email, including preferences and tastes.

**Pre travel & travel**

Keep in touch with your clients while leading up to their holiday and while they are away to sell extras like transfers and excursions. Use the data you collected at the booking stage to find an incredible excursion that's perfect for them.

**Post travel**

Encourage your clients to leave reviews about your service AND their holiday, for this will give you ideas on how you can improve your business as well as insights into their personal preferences. The next time they book with you, you can offer the perfect product.
7. Customer Acquisition
If it is not already, then inbound marketing should be the powerful new tool in your travel guru armoury.

**but firstly, what is it?**

Inbound marketing is based on attracting customers through compelling content and engagements that are relevant and helpful. By showing you are the travel expert through this method before or when customers are searching for their holidays, it increases the likelihood of them booking with you when they are ready to.

Remember you are the travel expert, inbound marketing gives you the platform to shout about it. This should be at the forefront of your messaging.

80% of Bedsonline customers use Facebook to capture new customers.
5 ways to get started with inbound marketing

**EMAIL**
Email marketing is not just about promotions. Sharable content vastly increases your audience reach.

**SOCIAL**
Social media publishing allows you to demonstrate travel expertise by sharing knowledge and engaging with potential customers.

**SEO**
Many travel customers begin their buying process online. So you need to make sure you are easily found when they do.

**WEBSITE**
Your website is the digital window to your business, so looking good is imperative! Your website should be filled with enticing content.

**BLOGS**
A blog is a great way to attract new customers. You must create relevant travel content that inspires and informs.
There are low cost solutions available that give you greater insights and help you work with more efficiency.

**Social**
Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Hootsuite, Buffer

**Website**
Squarespace, Wix, Weebly

**Blogging**
Blogger, WordPress, Canva, Google Calendar

**SEO**
Moz, Google Analytics, Google Keyword Planner

**Email**
Mailchimp, Campaign Commander, Litmus
SEO

Search Engine Optimisation or SEO is the simplest form in the activity of ensuring a website can be found in search engines based on the relevance of the search term.

Although social media and other types of traffic can generate visits to your website, search engines are the primary method of navigation for most Internet users. The majority of web traffic is driven by the major commercial search engines, Google, Bing and Yahoo!

However it's not that simple; SEO encompasses both the technical and creative elements required to improve rankings, drive traffic, and increase awareness in search engines. The algorithm for SEO success is constantly evolving and in recent years the focus has been more on the user. Making your website easier for people to navigate and by filling it with original and useful content will improve your rankings.

While the world of SEO is complex, most people can easily understand the basics. Even a small amount of knowledge can make a big difference.
5 Reasons why your business needs SEO

1. User Experience
   SEO is ultimately about providing the user with the friendliest, fastest and best experience possible. A search engine wants to provide the user with what they are looking for, including great useful content.

2. Reach
   People unconsciously trust search engine results. If Google places your business near the top of the search then you will be able to reach more people.

3. Conversion
   Internet marketing, including SEO, attracts people who are already looking for your product or service. You don't have to scream or dance to gain an audience; they are already convinced of their need, which is why they are searching in the first place.

4. Brand Awareness
   As stated in point #2, people unconsciously trust search engine results. A searcher normally does multiple searches before making a final decision. What if you came up 3 of the 5 times they searched? Your brand automatically appears to have more authority and the next thing you know, they have clicked through to your website.

5. Insight into Your Customers
   Now that you are enjoying a higher numbers of visitors, Google Analytics (which every website should have set up) can track valuable information about your visitors. Find out what browser they use, what keywords, the technology they use, their geographical location, what content is working and what is not... and so on. This information will help you discover your target market and hone your advertising rather than just making educated guesses.

Search engine optimisation is no longer an option for businesses that want to be competitive, grow and see returns on investment.
There is no doubt that a solid inbound marketing strategy will give you the long-term results you are seeking, however the results might not be immediate. Keep in mind it's a long game.

If you have an incredibly special offer that you want to put in front of your client NOW – outbound marketing would give you more immediate results, however the investment is higher.

PPC (Pay Per Click) ads e.g. Google or Facebook ads or affiliate marketing offer fast results, give an instant boost to your brand and allow for segment targeting.

The best results are when inbound and outbound marketing work in harmony. Use the findings and data from your inbound activities to craft the right messaging and target the right people.
8. Keeping your audience on the hook
Here are our 5 tips for keeping hold of your customers

1. **SHOW UP. AS SIMPLE AS THAT.**
In 2017, it's safe to assume that most of your clients are online. But, did you know that 79% of adults online are using social media?

You have the opportunity to interact with customers from all over the world—including those who are right down the street. If you don't, a competitor will.

2. **TAKE THE TIME TO GET TO KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.**
Listen to the topics that make them tick. Discover what your competitors are saying.

3. **BE A VOICE IN YOUR COMMUNITY.**
Get involved in conversations online. Be helpful, offer advice and solutions. Demonstrate authority by sharing knowledge or expertise. When you speak, be human. Be kind, be real, be funny, be respectful, be sympathetic. If you come across like a robot, people won't want to interact with you.

4. **ADD VALUE.**
Don't limit your content to promotional updates. People will turn off very quickly. Post images that entertain and inspire, that people will love to share. Be off-topic. Enjoy a joke, celebrate world events. Share content that’s relevant to your business and to your audience – people love “top 5 lists!”

5. **ONCE YOU HAVE A PERSON’S ATTENTION, DANGLE THE CARROT.**
- Be clear on what you want your fans to do... Drive traffic to your website? Subscribe to your list? Therefore, add a call to action. E.g. Learn more, Book now, Call now, Subscribe now.
- Always drive traffic back to your blog or website.
- Run competitions... this is a great way to build your audience.
- Special offers, discounts, exclusive deals... don’t forget that everybody loves a bargain.
- Why not offer something if your customers recommend you to their friends? Get moving on social media and see what your customers might want in return!
9. Summary
Summary

In the digital jungle, fortune favours the brave.

Whether you are already doing some of what we have discussed in this e-book or you are yet to dive in, the longer you wait to embrace digital, the further behind you will fall.

It’s not about changing your business completely, it’s about using the many digital tools available to put you – the travel expert – in front of new customers, better serve your existing ones and create sales opportunities you previously would never have had.

Partnering with experienced companies, such as Bedsonline, can make the road a smoother one.

There is no off-the-shelf solution, all businesses are different, and what works well for someone else, might not necessarily work well for you. However, doing your homework, careful planning of your strategy, monitoring of results and keeping an open mind to adapt and change will allow for greater success.

One of the amazing things about digital is that it doesn’t all come with large investment which means you shouldn’t be scared to try it. Much of what we have discussed in this e-book can be done with little or low cost, making the potential ROI much greater if you get it right.
GOT A QUESTION?
Let’s talk! We’d love to hear from you.

REQUEST A CALL BACK