

4 ways to gear up your traveller marketing strategy and maximise revenue

South Africa is preparing for a bumper summer season ahead. Forward booking trends show travellers are ready to explore the unique attractions and warm hospitality that South Africa has to offer, with planning for the Christmas holidays well underway for visitors from key international markets.



Source: Supplied

The latest forward bookings performance data, released by the Department of Tourism this September, show bookings between August to October are up 287% (187,667), while bookings for August to January 2023 have increased by 227% (294,220).

According to data from digital travel marketing platform, Sojern, domestic tourism and travellers across Africa continue to be the mainstay of the sector's recovery during 2022, with 46.2% of flight bookings as of August coming from South African travellers. However, South Africa's top international markets are already exceeding 2019 performance.

The United Kingdom's percentage of international arrivals to South Africa in 2022 has increased to 9.6%, compared to 6.6% in 2019. US arrivals in 2019 were 3.9% and have grown to 6.6% in 2022 thus far, while Germany's 3.7% arrivals in South Africa are up to 4%.

International travellers are planning further in advance compared to the pre-pandemic period of 2019, with over 40% of trips being planned over three months in advance. In contrast, domestic travellers are booking trips closer to departure dates, with only 2% of Sojern's total flight booking volume made up of January and February 2023 bookings thus far.

The evolving booking windows show that the tourism and hospitality sector can't only rely on seasonal predictability, says Stewart Smith, Sojern's managing director for the Middle East and Africa. "These new consumer habits should be the building blocks of your future-fit, digital toolbox. At Sojern we believe an 'always-on' marketing strategy optimally focuses on traveller intent at the right moment, wherever they are across their planning and booking journey.

"As South Africa gears up for its high season, getting ahead of your digital marketing strategy will ensure your hotel stays top of mind so you can win more direct bookings."

What does 'always on' mean?

'Going dark' is just not an option in today's environment. People are always travelling, even during the low season, and you need to meet the traveller's given needs at that moment.

Your marketing strategy needs to be ever-present and you can no longer rely on one or even two digital channels and expect to establish and build a relationship with your guests. This means campaigns should always be live with a multichannel approach. Your advertising is running across all the various digital channels consumers are shopping on - including display, search, paid social or metasearch.

Four factors to consider for your future-fit digital marketing toolbox:

1. Smart execution with a multichannel approach

Shifting traditional booking patterns, coupled with potential travellers manoeuvring across the digital world, creates a complex challenge for travel marketers.

But it is possible to be competitive in a fast-paced, digital landscape if you understand your guest's intentions and stay on top of the reasons travellers are booking. Having access to granular destination data insights and leveraging your existing data through a multichannel approach can help you do this. It's also vital to find new reasons to attract travellers.

A few years ago, hotels wouldn't have dreamed of advertising to travellers to work on vacation. Right now, travellers are booking last-minute trips and extending their stays to take advantage of remote working.

Sojern has found adopting three channels – display, Facebook/Instagram, and Search Engine Marketing (SEM) - can double conversions, with such results coming from creating a well-rounded strategy from start to finish. A multichannel marketing strategy also gives you clear, measurable goals, cross optimisation between channels and clean data.

2. Target audiences and marketing channels

Travellers are dynamic and can jump from search engines to social media to travel sites and back again before making the final decision. Find the right traveller for your business ahead of the upcoming high season through travel intent data.

Sojern, for example, monitors the intent signals of potential travellers across platforms and can target them to help them book directly with you. This makes the "why" and "how" of your strategy crucial and gives your campaigns a sense of direction so you can plan and adjust throughout the duration.

It is essential to set the goals and metrics of your Multichannel Advertising Campaign, so you can evaluate and adjust to see better results, adds Smith.

3. Cohesive messaging and design

Grab the attention of the target audience you've now identified with a polished message and well-designed advertisement. Draw on unique aspects of your business to help establish it as a preferred brand as you showcase special offers, packages, and promotions relevant to your user.

Google reported that 65% of Millennials and Gen Z-ers travellers are inspired by digital content to book a trip. But you literally have seconds to tell the right story.

"Sojern, for example, has found AB testing on different ads effective to see what works best for conversion. The right picture can make all the difference. A recent Sojern test on hotel images found that exterior photos had a 55% better click-through rate than images for rooms, lifestyle activities and amenities. Exterior images also drove an almost 4% increase in conversion. In addition to this, room rates on ads also saw a much higher engagement and a 12.5% increase in conversion."

Ad size also matters, says Smith, and can save you money. The top-performing global ad sizes Sojern's creative team found are:

- 300x600 - half-page
- 160x600 - wide skyscraper
- 300x250 - medium rectangle
- 728x90 - leaderboard

In the EMEA (Europe, Middle East, and Africa) region, Sojern found that all four of these sizes are effective, but for this region, in particular, they found that including a 980x90 size creative to the campaign improved the conversion rate by 25%.

HTML5 Ads are also driving more engagement. An AB test comparing animated HTML5 ads to static JPG ads found that HTML5 ads had a 13% higher click-through rate, 8% more converters (individuals who converted), and a 13% higher search rate on the customer's website. If you want your brand to stand out, use HTML5 ads in campaigns.

4. Activate loyalty to prepare for a cookieless world

Loyalty means being hyper-relevant and hyper-targeted to your guest. It's more than the practical application and transactional side of loyalty, which looks at points, value-adds and free nights. "There is a huge emotional connection that translates into brand loyalty if you get it right. Sometimes it's as simple as asking what the reason is for that trip. But it's what you do with the answer that matters," says Smith.

As Google Chrome moves to phase out cookies in the second half of 2024, collecting first-party data isn't a maybe—it's a must. Loyalty programs are an effective way to do this as you manage and grow your direct booking strategy.

Benefits of using first-party data for personalisation include the ability to draw on the guest experiences at all touchpoints of the buyer journey. As you host the data, you can control how clean it is.

The data provides personalisation so you can share the guest's preferences across all areas of your company's value chain, giving you more opportunities to build trust and wow them.

Targeted and relevant information in your campaigns will drive travellers to take action – increasing bookings and providing opportunities to build loyalty. But remember, loyalty isn't created overnight.

Sophisticated predictive intelligence and observational data are brought to life by your multichannel strategy and personalisation to stay top of mind. Ultimately, your brand has to cement that relationship to create new possibilities and add value for travellers.

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