

3 ways cruise line marketers can win with digital

Author

Jennifer Wesley

Published

Oct 2017

Topics

Search, Consumer Services, Travel, Experience & Design

Today's consumers have sky-high expectations. Whether they're calling a car, ordering groceries, or booking a cruise, people expect to find what they want, when they want it. And these rising expectations create an opportunity for cruise brands to build deeper customer relationships and elevate the customer journey.

Booking a cruise is complicated. There are a number of factors to consider—ports, routes, meal options, on-shore excursions, and vast differences in a ship's room selection.

Understanding such a complex product is tough and takes a lot of effort for consumers. Plus, the average time between when a person starts researching and actually books a trip is shrinking as people increase the amount of research they do across devices. Online research prompted more than 390 million visits to U.S. cruise line websites over the last year,¹ which is more than 34X the estimated number of U.S. cruise passengers in 2016.²

With that in mind, here are three principles that can help cruise marketers raise the bar.

Value early engagement

First impressions matter, and so does your first engagement with a potential customer. As with many products, search is the go-to channel when people begin to explore a cruise. Cruise brands, destinations, and ports are among the most popular types of searches conducted related

think with 

to cruises.³ We've also observed that category searches for terms such as "Alaska cruises" and "best cruise lines" exceed that of any individual cruise brand by more than 2X.⁴ This suggests that many travelers are undecided. If they're researching early enough, they may be more valuable than someone seeking a last-minute discount. It's vital to establish an engagement strategy that connects with these researchers early.

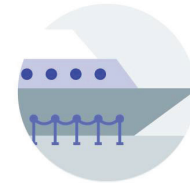
What people search for most when exploring cruise options



Cruise brands



Destinations



Ports

Source: Google search data, U.S., Jan. 2016-April 2017

[Berge & Meer](#), a German tour operator promoting package tours, including cruises, knew that customers conducted many searches before going on vacation. Travelers would often search with broad terms first such as "German vacation" or "cruise discounts," and not for their brand, leaving the company unsure of how to strategically market themselves in search. Berge & Meer worked with Google to implement a cross-device, data-driven approach to attribution and evaluate the impact that various keywords had on a conversion. The result? Optimizing its search strategy helped Berge & Meer grow bookings by 24% on desktop and by as much as 26% on mobile.⁵

Investing in brand and category search terms gives cruise marketers an opportunity to capture interest in the early consideration stages and engage consumers further on their website or through a call center. If a consumer isn't exposed to your brand in the early stages, she may not seek you out when she is further down the research process.

Make it easy to book with fast, frictionless omnichannel experiences

Digital's influence in the travel research and booking process continues to grow, as 70% of cruisers consulted a cruise line's website during the decision-making process for their most recent cruise vacation.⁶ Cruise research is also accelerating across devices: in the U.S., cruise searches on mobile grew at least 5X faster year-over-year than those for hotels or air travel.⁷ And while travel agents are a vital part of the cruise industry, consumers' demand for direct online bookings is high. Among consumers who have been on a cruise, 47% booked their most recent trip online vs. 35% who did so through a travel agent.⁸ Connecting with consumers online through channels such as search is the first step; having an easy-to-use website or app is next in moving them further down the customer journey.



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Source: Google Survey, "Cruises 2017", U.S., base n = 1842 U.S. online consumers who have gone on a cruise before.

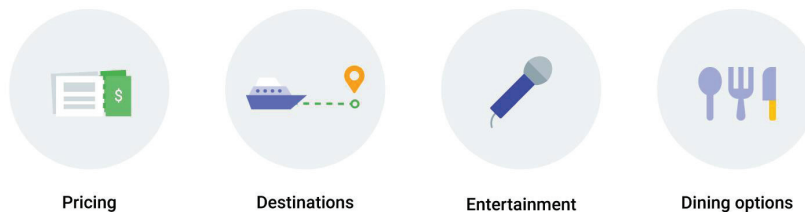
Creating frictionless, comprehensive experiences across devices should be a priority for all marketers. But it's even more important for cruise brands due to the complexity of the product experience. People interested in booking a future cruise told us that pricing, destinations, entertainment, and dining options were among the leading components that would influence their choice of a cruise line,⁹ but the average cruise website doesn't facilitate easy comparisons between ships or even rooms.

Kathy Mayor, chief marketing officer of Carnival Cruise Line, is bullish on the importance of evolving digital experiences to meet consumer needs:

“At Carnival Cruise Line, we believe in meeting customers wherever they are in their journey and providing them choices aligned with heightened expectations in this ever-evolving digital world,” she said.

“For a cruise rookie that is looking to be both inspired and educated about cruising as an option for their next vacation,” Mayor continued, “we evolved our website, carnival.com, to offer visual-based search, which saw improved conversion during the peak booking period in 2017. For a customer already booked on a Carnival cruise, they now have a choice of booking their shore excursions both on the web and on the app, both pre-cruise and during the cruise. This is an early example of digital being a key channel for onboard experiences and services across the customer journey.”

What matters most to people interested in booking a cruise



Source: Google Survey, “Cruises 2017”, U.S., base n= 929 U.S. online consumers who plan to go on a cruise in the future.

Automate to reach ‘new to cruise’ customers

The majority of cruise business is driven by experienced, or repeat, cruisers. However, travelers who are open to considering such travel should not be missed. The percentage of Americans who have never cruised but plan to do so in the future (29%) exceeds the percentage of those who’ve cruised before and plan to do so again (26%).¹⁰ By focusing

exclusively on an engagement strategy to reach those new to cruise, or similar to them in demographics, marketers may be missing opportunities to grow brand awareness and share.

With digital, marketers have the opportunity to [use data to understand customer intent, group customers according to lifetime value, and market to each segment accordingly](#). For instance, a first-time cruiser signaling interest in a Baltic cruise may provide more long-term value to a marketer than, say, an existing customer who shows annual interest in Caribbean cruises.

[Machine learning](#) will continue to fuel such innovations in targeting and automation, making it easier for marketers to reach and engage audiences. Still, the basics remain. People want to find information quickly, and they want their digital experiences to be seamless. If you can deliver that, you'll be well-positioned to build a long-term relationship with your customers—and drive profitability while doing so.

Jennifer Wesley
Industry Leader, Travel, Google



Sources

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- 2 Cruise Lines International Association, 2017 CLIA State of the Industry report
- 3,4,7 Google search data, U.S., Jan. 2016-April 2017
- 4 Google/Ipsos Connect, "Human Stories," May 2017.
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