



# AVVIO

## BEYOND BOOK DIRECT

*Book Direct is no longer relevant.*

*Prominent across marketing campaigns, websites, and booking engines, these two words became the slogan of travel e-commerce.*

*However, Book Direct' has had its day, and now proves damaging to the long term viability of a hotel's brand.*

**#KNOW YOUR GUEST**

A fairly big statement to make, particularly from Avvio. And the irony is not lost on us, given it was our official tagline for years. However, there is a method to our madness.

Grab a coffee, over the next 5 minutes we'll outline why book direct should be on your list of banned buzzwords. Discover why it's moment in the spotlight is over, and learn how the travel industry needs to move forward.

We'll run through strategies to increase online visibility, brand recognition and revenue potential, focusing particularly on brand resonance and personalization of the guest journey.

First, let's acknowledge the benefit it once offered before we urge you to retire the 'book direct' brand. When hotels emerged online, analysing the cost of sale per distribution channel was vital to maximize profitability. Book Direct was integral in driving bookings through hotel websites, at a lower commission than an OTA. However, travel needs to evolve with current e-commerce trends by moving forward with a stronger focus on the guest journey.



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# Why 'Book Direct' Needs to be Retired

If you survey your guests, most won't fully understand what 'book direct' means. While the phrase is synonymous with channel shift for hotels, for the end user it's akin to shouting 'book here'. As an industry, we've grown comfortable with telling guests to 'book on this channel' instead of enticing them with personalized experiences. **Guests should never need to think about distribution channels** - it disrupts the flow of their journey. All they should consider is how excited they are to travel.

This focus on book direct started as a direct response to OTA activity, and so it's time to untangle the mess of the Book Direct war. For too long, it's been us vs them, the OTAs. In today's market, we need to realize time spent competing with distribution partners is time that should be spent evolving your brand instead. Instead of mimicking the messaging OTAs use across advertising, we need to focus on what is most integral to hotel revenue - knowing the guest journey. Over time hotels began to merge into one large online brand of "Book Direct". **Brand identity is lost in a sea of tired ad copy and repetitive buzzwords.** "Best Rate Guarantee", "Book Today" and "Mobile Only Special Offers" are echoed to the point they don't add value for potential guests - which is the entire focus of an ecommerce strategy.

By now, travel professionals recognize the guest is best served by a personalized user experience offered on their own websites. This allows control over hotel branding a potential visitor sees, as well as any communication during their journey, such as pre-stay emails. For hotels, the benefits are clear - controlling the point of cancellation, enticing upsells or upgrades, and encouraging reviews and repeat bookings after check-out. More importantly, it accurately represents your brand at all stages of the guest journey, which is key for consumer satisfaction.

Not only does this give hoteliers control of guest data and communication, it also allows a focus on net profitability for properties. While OTAs offer large amounts of visibility, they also drive up marketing costs by bidding on brand phrases - hotels typically spend an eye watering 60 to 90% of their online marketing budgets on Brand Protection. This is a staggering amount spent on swaying guests to a particular distribution channel, rather than promoting your property to new potential consumers.

Let's also briefly acknowledge focusing on OTA competition is harmful to your other business areas. Centering your online brand on room distribution removes a focus from other profitable sectors, such as weddings, F&B and conferencing. **Why are we screaming Book Direct at a potential bride looking for a wedding testimonial** or a conference organiser looking for the contact details or enquiry form to send an RFP? We need to be better at understanding the relationship between marketing and a hotel's official website. Are we there to just capture high intent bookings instead of OTAs, or should we be elevating the conversation to benefit the guests and the hotel brand?

To sum it up, focusing on competing with online travel agents is toxic and costly to hotels. **To change this, we need to put the focus back on the guest journey, instead of pitting distribution channels against one another.**

# Thinking Beyond Book Direct

If not “Book Direct” then what? – is a completely valid question and one that needs to be fully explained. Forget informing guests on distribution channels, and instead focus your sales messaging on adding value to their experience. The personalisation and experiences available on hotel websites should entice them to choose the right channel subconsciously. Hotel’s moving away from OTA reliance have exerted their brand voice online, and should be the example all of us follow. They’ve highlighted a personalized experience automatically increases direct bookings, and maximum profitability.



STEP ONE is defining your brand values. For too long have we focused on what the OTAs and competitors are doing. Instead, it’s time to truly bring your hotel to life online. Go back to basics to clarify the unique selling points. This will allow us to market your property as a whole, instead of a preferred channel of booking. Replace your Book Direct message with unique aspects of your property you want a potential guest to see, explore and engage with.



STEP TWO is an easy one – once your brand is defined, promote it loudly. Use cohesive messaging across all online touch points. What you put on your website should flow across your online reach, from social media to Google Ad campaigns to organic listings. After all, we know the guest journey is no longer linear – anywhere your guests are seeing your brand should be personalised and value driven.

Emphasise consumer trust at all times. “Official Site” is far more reassuring in a Post 2020 world than an annoying sales message shouting “BOOK DIRECT” or “BOOK HERE”



Next, think bigger than competing with a distribution partner for a guest; after all these are already high intent users who are likely to book your brand one way or another. Instead, aim to grow your brand by getting in front of new prospective guests. Assign marketing budgets to prospecting campaigns, focused on targeting potential guests during the research stage of their trip.

Understand the guest journey doesn't end until check-out - or even then. Instead of competing to secure a booking, work to increase lifetime guest potential. Once they've booked, work still needs to take place to secure the check-out. Even once they've checked out, we still want reviews and repeat business. There is far more depth to an online guest outside of booking a room. We need to engage with the layers of intent, based on their stage in the user journey. Personalize your marketing based on where people are in relation to conversion. Different messaging should be used for prospecting campaigns to potential guests unaware of your property, compared to high intent guests who are already familiar with your brand. After guests have made their booking, or checked out, the conversation should naturally shift to reflect that.

Understand the real metrics for Guest Conversion, not website conversion. Every user coming to your website isn't looking to book a hotel room, some of them visit multiple times to price check, compare room types and amenities with your competitors or to find your phone number because they are a pre stay guest, due to check in and are on the way to the hotel and want to input directions into their sat nav. If every user came to your website looking to book you would not have any visitors coming to your wedding content, conference, dining or golf information. Why are we beating ourselves up over conversion rates on websites without fully understanding the context of the traffic we are appealing to, their current status in the booking journey and their actual level of intent.

Don't discount the place of the price differential. Book Direct campaigns are synonymous with 10% off verses OTAs - this is not a tactic to be retired alongside the messaging. Price differentials are an easy way to drive bookings to the right channel, without ever saying book direct. For many properties, price differentials are part of the intrinsic value and personalisation offered on the hotel site . However, consider why we immediately discount against OTAs, when savvy revenue managers are getting far more benefit and return by using member rates, closed groups, inventory blocks, lead times and room types instead of just going for the easy option and knocking 10% off.

Simplify your messaging and increase your conversion rate. So many hospitality websites have become noisy, scattered messaging, full of expensive add ons. When a booking is made all of them raise their hand to say they secured it. For a hotelier trying to understand the impact of their marketing activity it's confusing and costly. Clean brand messaging focused on your key selling points is the way forward. Offer the guest a clear user journey by focusing on what you want them to understand of your brand, where you want them to click, and how you want them to convert. Make sure the path to booking is straight forward, and remove as much friction from their guest journey as possible.



# Leaving 'Book Direct' Behind for Good



To conclude, if a guest books on an OTA after already taking time to explore your brand, it's not because you did not tell them to book on your website. It's because you didn't personalise the experience enough to win that guest's engagement with you. Move forward with travel trends by taking control of your brand online, and shedding the comfort of the phrase 'book direct'.

Instead of relying on a generic tagline to be your hotel's ecommerce strategy, identify how you can increase value for your guest, personalise their experience and personify your brand online.

## #knowyourguest

As an industry we need to start understanding our guests and getting to know them before they arrive at reception. In January 2020, domestic bookers required on average four website interactions/sessions to make a booking and from first session to booking was typically within 24 hours. By contrast today's domestic booker will have on average 10 interactions on a hotel website over 6.8 days in order to book.

You now have seven days to get to know a guest before they even book, what they have searched for, what are they interested in, what are their needs? We need to stop looking at the overall conversion rate and start looking deeper.

