6 The Impact of Third-Party Internet Sites on the Hotel Guest Journey

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Learning goals

This chapter focuses on the sustainability challenges that arise from the increased influence of Third-Party Internet sites on the guest journey, in particular during the gathering of information and judgement of alternatives phase. After studying this chapter, readers will have the ability to:

1 Define the growth in the use of online information communication technology (ICT) from a hotel perspective;

2 Describe the guest journey focussing on how a hotel guest uses a Third-Party Internet site (TPI) as a booking tool;

3 Describe the main technology for data gathering behind TPIs, and the resulting bubble effect;

4 Explain the sustainability challenges connected with the bubble effect;

5 Identify tools to address the challenges of the bubble effect considering also best-case examples.

Introduction

Reservations are essential for hotels to plan their operations. When considering reservations for their planning, hotel departments usually refer to the reservation horizon, that is the number of rooms booked on a day in the future, and the predicted pick-ups, that is the number of room reservations a hotel expects to

get confirmed over a certain period. These figures are used to decide upon, for example, the number of employees needed in the F&B department for the breakfast shift or in Housekeeping to clean the rooms; the volume of ingredients needed for breakfast; and planning hotel rooms' maintenance during less busy periods.

Nowadays hotel reservations are highly dependent on information communication technology (ICT). Most of the reservations enter the hotel's Property Management System (PMS) via interfaces linked to different booking websites. These are owned and controlled by Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) and are generally referred to as Third-Party Internet sites (TPIs), because OTAs are independent organisations and not directly related to a hotel or a hotel chains, but exist to provide hotels with reservations. These concepts have already been discussed in Chapter 5, to which you are referred if you wish to know more about how TPIs work. In line with this, an OTA TPI is defined as an Internet Distribution System (IDS) or Internet Distribution Channel operated by a variety of travel intermediaries not directly controlled by a hotel (Hayes and Miller, 2011; Yarcan and Çetin, 2021). Chapter 5 also addressed the question of what happens with the information that guests provide while making a booking via an IDS, and has shown that large quantities of data and information are gathered by TPIs. Following up on this discussion, this chapter focuses on the sustainability challenges that arise from the increased influence of TPIs on the process through which travellers gather, select and judge information about their next trip.

It is important to know that this chapter, if not otherwise stated, is written from the guest perspective. We generally agree with the statement that the use and abuse of a tool is in the hand of the user, although the developer or owner of the tool can nudge its users towards a more sustainable practice, and a more sustainable selection, and that is exactly where the sustainable challenges are.

In closing this brief introduction, we wish to share a word of caution. Considering that developments in innovation technology are quick and continuous, and that regulations impacting the use of technology are inevitability changing, the authors would like to acknowledge that from a future perspective the issues discussed in this chapter might seem obsolete, and that in a few years and even in a few months more urgent issues might occur.

Main sustainability challenges

During the *Guest on Earth* conference held at Stenden University of Applied Sciences (Leeuwarden, The Netherlands) in 2015 one of the attendees raised the issue whether staying at home would not be the most sustainable form of tourism. An interesting question and starting point for this chapter. This person might be right that, at least from an environmental perspective, no-tourism may qualify as the best option. On the other side, going on a holiday can potentially change guests' perspectives on the environment and open up their mind regarding different cultures and customs (Nandasena *et al.*, 2022; Cavagnaro *et al.*, 2018). The