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Mobile poised to become the dominant channel for booking hotels

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Hotel mobile apps and websites still are something of a Wild West, with many hoteliers looking to find their footing while numerous third parties jump into the game. But mobile is poised to become in the very near future the dominant channel through which travelers discover and book hotels.

Virtually every major hotel company and brand today has a mobile site and app that at least allows travelers to explore available hotels, make bookings and monitor reward program activity. These apps generate a small portion of total hotel bookings, but it is growing exponentially.

In 2012, bookings through mobile phones and tablets made up about 7 percent of bookings through hotel-owned online channels, according to PhoCusWright. That's almost 12 times the share mobile channels had in 2010. By 2014, PhoCusWright projects such bookings will make up 20 percent of bookings through hotel websites.

"Mobile is no longer a novelty or nice-to-have for any hotel competing for bookings from global business travelers," according to David Millili, CEO of Pegasus Solutions, which aids hotels in transforming brand websites into mobile sites. "It has become a must for generating revenue."

Some hotel companies already are trending above average in mobile bookings. Choice Hotels International president and CEO Stephen Joyce noted in a February conference call with analysts that the mobile channel accounted for 10 percent of Choice's online revenue during the fourth quarter of 2012 and

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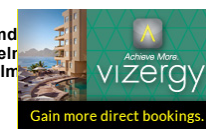


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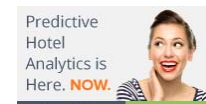


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that mobile-channel revenue nearly tripled year over year in 2012. La Quinta, which last year invested in a new mobile site and smartphone app, reported that mobile now accounts for about 23 percent of its online traffic, according to chief marketing officer Julie Cary.

That does not take into account the growing volume of bookings from third-party mobile sites and apps, available not only from the legacy online travel agencies but the ever-expanding list of startups targeting the hotel sector. Room 77 and Hotel Tonight are two such firms generating lots of buzz. PhoCusWright estimated that OTAs made up about 64 percent of gross mobile hotel bookings in 2012, compared with 36 percent for hotels' own mobile sites.

Of course, the average mobile hotel booker does not match the profile of the average business traveler. Mobile bookers tend to be looking for last-minute deals. Priceline monitored mobile bookings this past New Year's Eve and found that 42 percent of bookings for hotels that night were made after 5 p.m. Hotel Tonight's entire raison d'être is to accommodate travelers looking for same-day deals.

Some hotels have geared their apps to that trend, removing from the last-minute booking process many obstacles—entering credit card information, for one. La Quinta last year added its Instant Hold feature, through which users can reserve a room for a short period using only their phone number. Wyndham Hotel Group's app has an express booking option, through which a hotel will hold a same-day reservation until 6 p.m. with just a guest's name and email address.

Although this has some utility for business travel—a car-bound road warrior looking for an overnight stop in a small city, for example—it is geared much more toward leisure travelers than those in managed corporate programs. That does not mean business travelers are not using hotel mobile apps, however, even if as nothing more than information sources. PhoCusWright reported that 36 percent of mobile web users in 2012 researched hotel options on their mobile devices.

"The information-gathering stage for business travelers continues to escalate, and all travel providers need to provide powerful content on the web for them to best make their travel decisions," Best Western senior vice president of sales and marketing Dorothy Dowling said in March at the company's annual Business Travel Summit. "While mobile is being used as an information source, it's not necessarily a transaction source yet."

Several hotel companies have developed their apps and mobile sites to be information sources for travelers both before and during their stay. Starwood has used a

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"state-aware" design, in which the display changes depending on whether travelers are booking, getting ready to travel or are already at their hotel. Hilton's app includes a "request upon arrival" feature, through which guests can ask for specific amenities to be in their room upon arrival.

Reviews also are of growing importance for hotel mobile sites and apps. Starwood was among the first to allow unedited reviews of properties, according to the company, and others bring in reviews from third parties. Wyndham, for example, includes TripAdvisor ratings in its app.

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