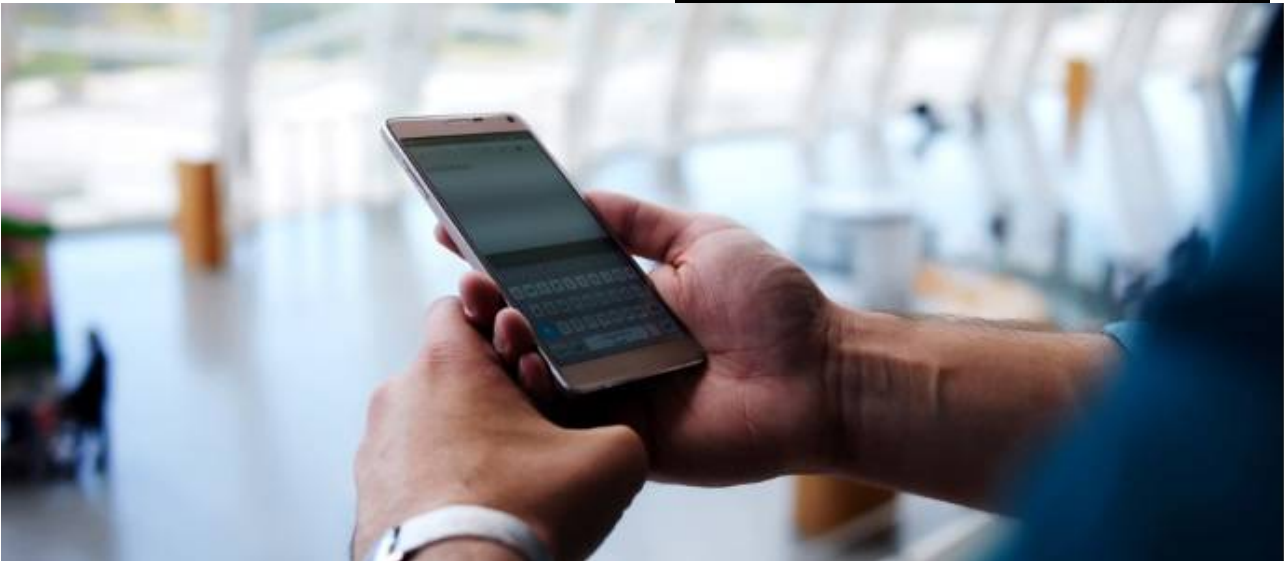


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## Why mobile travel chat will revolutionize online travel bookings

Since online travel agencies (OTAs) first appeared around 15 years ago, few tears have been shed in memory of having to visit local travel agencies.

**NB** This is a viewpoint by Matt Zito, managing partner at [Travel Startups Incubator](#).

But while browsing deals online is undoubtedly easier than flicking through holiday brochures, one element is missing: personalized customer interaction with a representative who can answer questions and alleviate concerns.

A new wave of startup companies have the answer. By applying artificial intelligence to the travel tech sector, they aim to edge out OTAs and offer consumers a more convenient, personalized experience from their desktops and mobile devices.

In this article I will outline the benefits that mobile travel chat (MTC) offer to businesses and consumers, and how artificial intelligence could bring the human element back into making holiday reservations.

### The problem

In recent years many OTAs have struggled to stay relevant due to a push back from leading airlines, such as Southwest and Delta, who have removed flights and schedules from OTAs and price comparison websites and begun intense marketing campaigns to win back customers for themselves.

To stay in the running, OTAs need to show consumers that they can do things [better, faster, and cheaper](#) than a supplier can directly.

Another challenge has been providing a service that offers users a range of affordable options, while maintaining a level of personalization and customer care.

OTAs use dropdowns and widgets for users to select flight times or hotel stay dates. They have uniform blank boxes and drop-down calendars within the interface that help the system users identify the correct flight, based on the information they input.

By all intents and purposes, it is a very efficient and effective way to find the best flight and hotel options. But it lacks a personal touch that was once afforded by working directly with a travel agent, or dealing directly with an airline or hotel via phone.

The majority of these platforms have no communication or customer service tools available, which means that to address common queries, potential customers are often forced to visit the official sites of the airlines or hotels themselves, thus effectively making the OTAs redundant.

### **The Answer**

Mobile Travel Chat – also known as Mobile Travel Concierge, Mobile Travel Agent, Artificial Travel Intelligence, Travel AI — is a new mobile travel application that is making waves in the consumer travel industry. Harnessing the power of machine learning and natural language recognition MTC offers a more personal and free flowing experience than OTAs because of the way users interact with it.

As the world has moved [its internet usage to mobile](#), personalization has become a key selling point. For years [marketing professionals](#) have stressed the importance of personalization within the mobile experience. Even mega-OTAs such as Booking.com have acknowledged personalization's importance, and the company's CEO, Darren Huston, [told the Wall Street Journal last year](#) that younger travelers don't want to be bombarded with choices, but rather prefer hotel searches closely tailored to their profiles.

New MTCs – such as [HYPER](#), [Lola](#), [ETA](#), [HelloGbye](#), [30secondstofly](#), [GoHeroGo](#), [Pana](#) and [Hello Scout](#)\* use mobile and desktop apps that work with SMS and other messaging services, offering users a direct line of communication with a travel agent, automated or not. The machine learning that these new MTC startups use personalizes the experience by learning user preferences and remembering them to make suggestions for the next booking.

(\*Name corrected, post-publication.)

Instead of filling in a blank box, users can answer natural language questions prompted by the MTC like “where would you like to fly?” or send a request such as “Need to fly to LA from JFK Wednesday morning for three days with three star accommodation and transport.” Reminiscent of personal concierge apps, [which are gaining in popularity](#), the new tech utilizes AI technology to act as a pocket-sized personal travel agent offering suggestions based on the quickest to the most affordable, including options selected by the user in the past.

### **Potential drawbacks**

As any users of earlier versions of iPhone's SIRI will know, AI voice recognition is still prone to mistakes and misunderstandings. While voice recognition and machine learning AI has advanced dramatically over the years, many MTC startups are not fully automated, and human interaction is still necessary to handle complex queries.

As a result, there is a chance that users with complicated requests may need to wait if trying to book a flight outside of normal business hours.

[Accuracy and efficiency are also concerns](#). The traditional OTA dropdown menu may be doomed to become a thing of the past, but it does offer users a simple way to handpick their travel and hotel options with ease, clicking for single or return flights and details such as what class they would like to fly in, extra baggage options etc.

Using MTC technology, users would have to articulately explain exactly what they require, or risk receiving suggestions that aren't suited to their needs and wishes.

### **Looking ahead**

Last December, Facebook integrated the ability for users [to book an Uber ride directly from the chat](#) without having to go to the Uber app on their phones.

A few airlines are allegedly in talks with the social media giant to enable flight booking in the not-so-distant future, thus further cementing live chat as the next chapter for travel tech.

While MTC technology might not be able to do the job as well as a human travel agent would, a higher level of language comprehension by machines does not seem far off. The world's biggest tech companies are serious about pushing AI to the next level. Over the past two years, Google [acquired the London-based deep learning research group DeepMind](#), [IBM acquired AlchemyAPI](#), a leading provider of API services and deep learning technology, and in October 2015, [Apple made two AI acquisitions in just four days](#).

MTC technology is still in its infancy, but as the AI tech develops it promises to be one of the biggest shake ups in the travel industry since making reservations moved online.

**NB** This is a viewpoint by Matt Zito, managing partner at [Travel Startups Incubator](#).

**NB2** [Image](#) by Shutterstock

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### Comments



Do check out <http://www.ithaka.travel> , a chat based travel planning app for SE Asia

[1 day ago](#)



I can see a startup using Whatsapp or something similar to do this, but sms seems a bit dated, but when your on the road your not guaranteed data signal. Good work everyone listed in the article.

[1 day ago](#)



**Dennis**

I happened to meet some of the team of HelloGbye and see their demo. It was really impressive. I do not see them disrupting all of travel, but for the business traveler who does not always have their own concierge, yes, they will make a huge impact. Who knows how their strategy could evolve.

[2 days ago](#)



Great article. I think we all saw this trend coming. There are also some free emerging apps like TALQ that are directed at guest-to-concierge communication. Connecting with the mobile traveler is going to be a big focus in hospitality for 2016.

[2 days ago](#)



**Jidesh**

Great article. Roomantra is another MTC based in India. It has been a great experience to book hotels and flight with Roomantra. Not only bookings, Roomantra is also assisting travelers in real time with travel recommendations.

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