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Beyond Mobile: How Voice and AI Are Changing Digital Travel

Adobe + Epsilon + Skift - Nov 08, 2016 10:50 am

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SKIFT TAKE

Despite the rapid shifts already caused by mobile, even bigger changes are on the horizon as voice search, artificial intelligence, and conversational messaging are transforming how travelers interact with travel brands. While there is a lot of excitement around the promise of each of these technologies, we now face the challenge of implementing them.

— Adobe + Epsilon

Last week, Skift published the 2017 Digital Transformation Report (https://trends.skift.com/trend/2017-digital-transformation-report/), sponsored by Adobe and Epsilon. Download the report for free here:

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In the past decade, mobile devices have revolutionized the travel industry. Some forecasts now predict more than half of all travel purchases (http://www.emarketer.com/Article/By-2016-Most-Digital-Travel-Bookers-Will-Use-Mobile-Devices/1013248) are made with mobile, and mobile is reshaping how every travel organization, from corporate travel (https://skift.com/2016/08/26/corporate-travel-companies-still-trying-to-figure-out-mobile-tools/) firms to airports (https://skift.com/2016/02/09/miamis-airport-becomes-one-of-the-first-to-connect-consumers-with-beacons/) to hotels (https://skift.com/2014/04/29/accor-drops-the-hotel-check-in-desk-for-a-mobile-app/), interacts with travelers. But despite all the rapid shifts already caused by mobile, even bigger changes are on the horizon. That's because three emerging interfaces, voice search, artificial intelligence and conversational messaging, are transforming how travelers will interact with travel brands in the near future.

The first big shift is the move toward conversational messaging apps like Slack and Facebook's WhatsApp and Messenger. These "chat" apps are reshaping how mobile users communicate with friends, family, coworkers and, increasingly, with travel brands, leading some to proclaim this paradigm as the start of a new era of "conversational commerce (https://medium.com/chris-messina/2016-will-be-the-year-of-conversational-commerce-1586e85e3991#.k349tab7x)."

Many travel companies are already working on messaging tools featuring "artificial intelligence" chatbots, fostering intelligent conversations with users about everything from online booking to customer service to itinerary status. These tools mimic the interface of popular mobile SMS and messaging interfaces already popular with consumers, while also allowing them to make requests using more intuitive language and questions. Online travel agency giant Expedia for example, is planning to use an AI-powered chat tool to assist with customer service (https://skift.com/2016/10/11/expedia-plans-to-use-artificial-intelligence-for-customer-service/). "For me to be able to message Expedia on [Facebook] Messenger or text ... 'cancel my hotel booking in New York next week,' it is a much more delightful experience than calling or even my getting on the website etc.," said Expedia CEO Dara Khosrowshahi in an October conversation with Skift.

For business travel management firms like BCD Travel, these types of smart, conversational mobile apps provide a new tool (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/business/ai-may-book-your-next-trip-with-a-human-assist.html?_r=1) for the company to quickly resolve simple customer problems so its human agents can focus on more complicated requests. The mobile nature of these tools is also key benefit for business travelers away from the office. Miriam Moscovici, director of emerging technologies for BCD predicted that within the next year, "lower-priority tasks will be handled by self-service artificial intelligence, which will free up human travel agents to do more of the intense work required."

Meanwhile, several airlines are also getting on board with the chatbot trend. KLM Airlines has earned plenty of attention for allowing travelers to request their boarding pass (https://messenger.klm.com/) within Facebook's Messenger app. Other airlines like Icelandair now even let passengers book flights (https://skift.com/2016/08/03/you-can-now-book-icelandair-tickets-on-facebook-messenger/) using the same interface. "It's Icelandair's strategy to bring bookings and other services to the places where our customers are," said Guðmundur Óskarsson, Icelandair's director of marketing and business development, in an August interview with Skift. "We see our customers increasingly using mobile devices, and we believe this channel is a natural progression."

Messaging apps and intelligent chat bots aren't the only trend shaking up mobile interfaces. The other new tool that's soon to be embraced by more travel brands is voice-powered searches (https://skift.com/2016/09/27/expedia-priceline-founders-say-voice-based-search-is-the-next-frontier-in-travel/). New tools like Amazon's Echo, a device which has already sold 3-million units, allow consumers to use their voice to do everything from call an Uber, order groceries or search for flights (https://skift.com/2016/05/13/kayak-trials-search-by-amazon-echo-and-more-digital-marketing-news-this-week/). Some hotels like Aloft are even testing out voice-activated rooms (https://skift.com/2016/08/30/voice-activated-hotel-rooms-are-now-a-thing-at-aloft/) that utilize Apple's Siri assistant to help guests raise the thermostat or turn on the lights.

For many travel executives, these voice-search interfaces represent are both a great new opportunity and a threat. On one hand, they are perfect for today's mobile environment. "As we move over to more of a mobile device-centric world, the interaction model with devices is going to be much more voice-based," said Expedia's Khosrowshahi in a conversation with Skift in October.

Yet as these same executives note, they will also require much more back-end work from travel brands to educate customers and to provide the right responses. "We have trained over years with wizards to tell people to put in a destination and date, and people have been trained to do that," said Khosrowshahi. "When you go to a voice-based interaction, you can't tell them to ask a question and structure it in one way."

Whatever the interaction model that travel brands choose in the future, be it voice or intelligent chat bots one thing is clear. Typing text into tiny boxes in a mobile web browser is no longer going to cut it in tomorrow's mobile-first future.

Three Strategies for Implementing Voice and AI Technology

1.Don't expect bots or voice search to replace human interaction – In the immediate future these tools will mostly be best used for specific use cases (for example, checking a flight status) rather than completely replacing customer service staff. In addition, the tech for these interfaces is still in its infancy, so assuming it can hold natural language conversations is unrealistic. Companies should design their interfaces for new chat bot applications accordingly

2.Consider IT logistics and security – Running chatbots on public platforms like Facebook makes them beholden to those platform's security protocols and encryption. They also often require a new set of programming skills to maintain, requiring new skill sets from the IT team. Keep this in mind in terms of your own company's resources, security protocols and customer data standards.

3.Think about using structured data – New automated systems and search interfaces can help users find and use information in new ways, but they also have inherent constraints. For example, a flight to New York could mean three different airports, but an automated system doesn't necessarily know this right off the bat. Make sure to "structure" data so it can be found in a logical way by automated systems and processes.

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