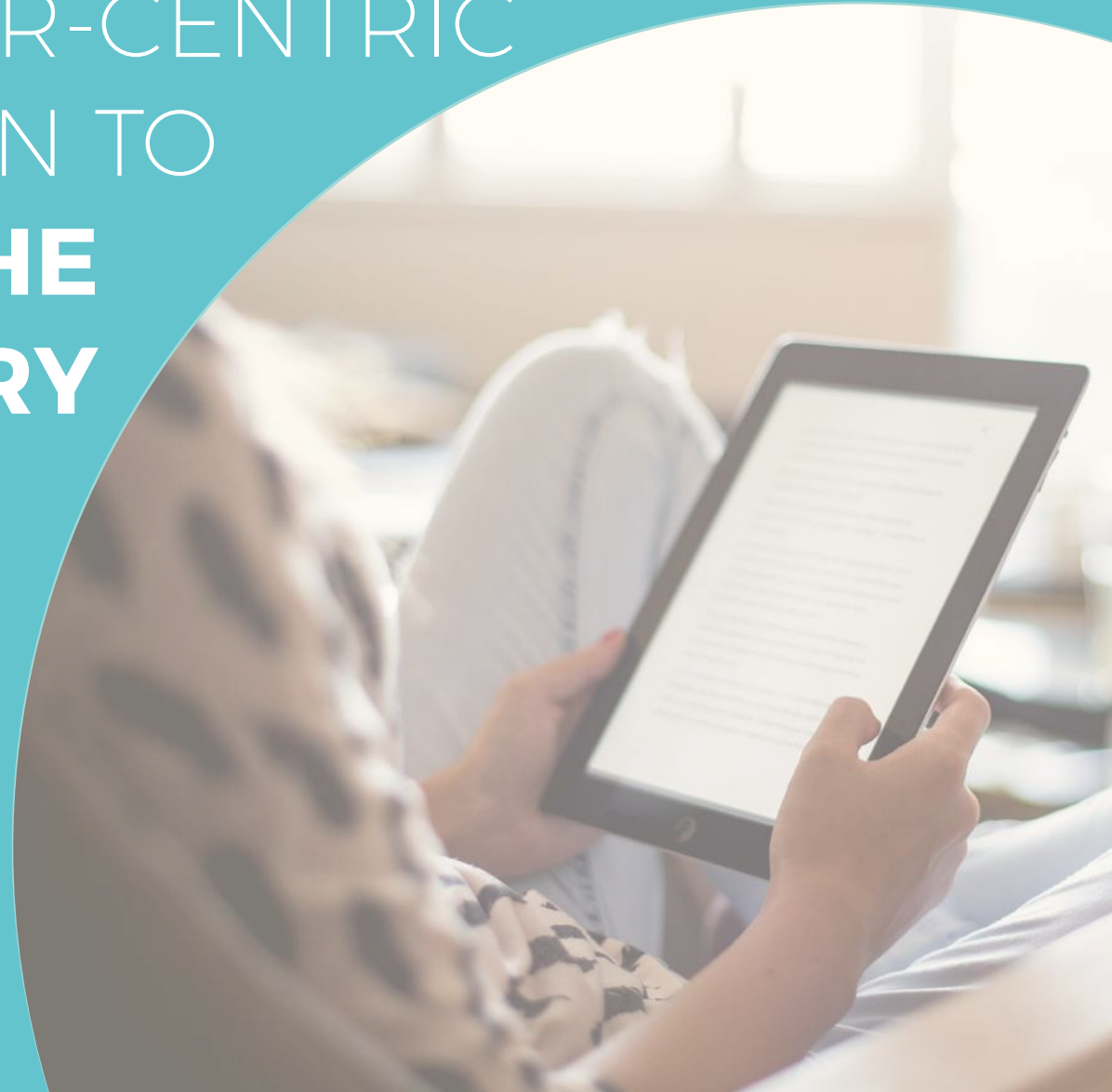# Skift
INSIGHTS DECK

USING CUSTOMER-CENTRIC PRODUCT DESIGN TO **STAND OUT IN THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY**

Sponsored by

User Testing

About **UserTesting**

UserTesting enables companies to create great experiences by leveraging the power of human insights. Our platform gives product, design, UX, and marketing teams in-the-moment access to a diverse panel of over 1 million people. And then, you can ask them anything, through a recorded session, or a live conversation, giving you answers at the speed of your business.

Companies today are swimming in data, but still struggle with understanding what drives their customers to behave in certain ways. All the survey data and analytics in the world won't answer the underlying question of "why" that underlies each click, tap, swipe and conversion. UserTesting provides the context behind the numbers through allowing companies to put their customers at the center of everything they do and incorporate human insights into every stage of design, development, and optimization.

By adopting the UserTesting platform in their the day-to-day operations - from running usability tests to competitive benchmarking to messaging feedback - leading travel brands are making smarter and more assured business decisions, leading to demonstrable improvement in their most important business metrics.

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ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform, providing Media, Insights & Marketing to key sectors of travel.

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content marketing studio, working collaboratively with partners on integrated projects including webinars, video, research, and live events.

Visit skiftx.com to learn more or email at skiftx@skift.com.

Put Your Guests at the Center of Every Business Decision

Your travel experiences powered by Human Insights

Introduction: Why Customer-Focused Design is a Competitive Advantage in the Travel Industry

Today's travel consumer is armed with more information, and more choices, than ever before. Thanks to the growing popularity of metasearch and OTA websites, increased transparency from online review services like TripAdvisor, and the delightful customer-focused experiences of companies like Apple, Google, Amazon and Uber, entire sectors of the travel space have been forced to rethink their products and experiences for a new customer-focused era. And increasingly, many travel businesses are realizing that thoughtful customer-focused design plays a central role in this transformation process.

Today's most innovative travel businesses are putting a renewed focus on understanding the needs of their customers, using this direct feedback to reimagine the entire travel experience, from A to Z. By doing so, these forward-thinking companies are able to drive real business results, growing their market share, creating more loyal customers and reducing costs in the process.

Skift's "Using Customer-Centric Design to Stand Out in the Travel Industry" insights report examines the origins of this increasingly popular discipline in the travel industry, tracing its evolution to become a must-have differentiator for today's most cutting-edge travel companies. It also examines the behind-the-scenes customer-focused research processes used by some of today's most progressive travel organizations, and provides examples of how some of the world's best-known travel brands like Marriott, Delta, HotelTonight and Expedia are utilizing the discipline in their own organizations.

What is customer-centric design?
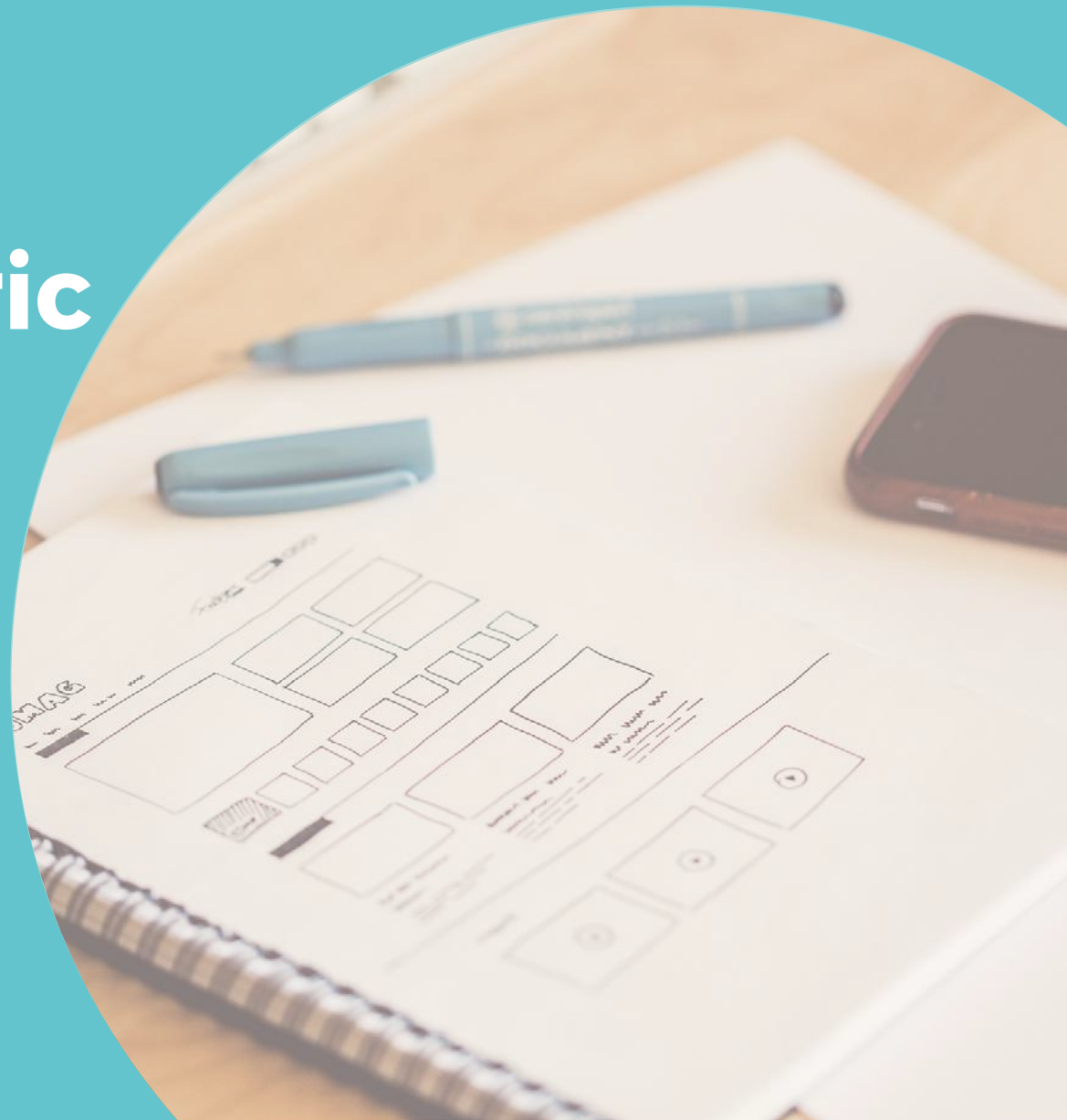
What is **customer-centric design?**

Customer-centric design (an offshoot of user-centric design) is an approach to designing digital and interactive products that puts the needs of the user or customer at the center of all design and development decisions.

As explained by Jeffrey Rubin in "Handbook of Usability Testing: How to Plan, Design, and Conduct Effective Tests," customer-centric design typically includes the following features:

1. **A focus on users and "tasks:"** brands start by gathering information about users' habits and needs
2. **Empirical measurement of product use:** focus on ease of use during the design process, and then test the success of design prototypes by giving them to users to test and provide feedback
3. **Iterative design process:** products are designed, built, tested and launched on an ongoing, evolving basis

What is **customer-centric design?**

"

It's always about finding the unmet physical and emotional needs of travelers. In making digital products, we try to understand these needs by finding real-world models, and then see how technology and user interfaces can improve the user experience."

— Scott Jones, VP of design and user experience, Expedia

"

Customer-centric design means creating products and experiences, whether they're digital, in-person, or involve a touchpoint with a brand, that are designed with the customer in mind."

— Janelle Estes, VP, solutions consulting, UserTesting

# Design is more than **"interfaces" and "visuals"**

Customer-centric design isn't just about making products look visually appealing. Travel industry design executives emphasize the importance of taking a more holistic view of design, one that starts with listening to travelers and guests and then extends into all facets of the customer's interaction with a travel brand:

> You have to have a very broad vision of the [travel] industry. To be an effective, successful, designer these days, you're missing an opportunity to learn from the good products if you don't have that broad view...as designers we're responsible for having our ear to the ground, interacting with users and testing different products. Who knows what kind of ideas you might miss if you're not doing that?"

— Dylan Mullins, product design manager, Egencia

Why customer-centric design matters to the travel industry
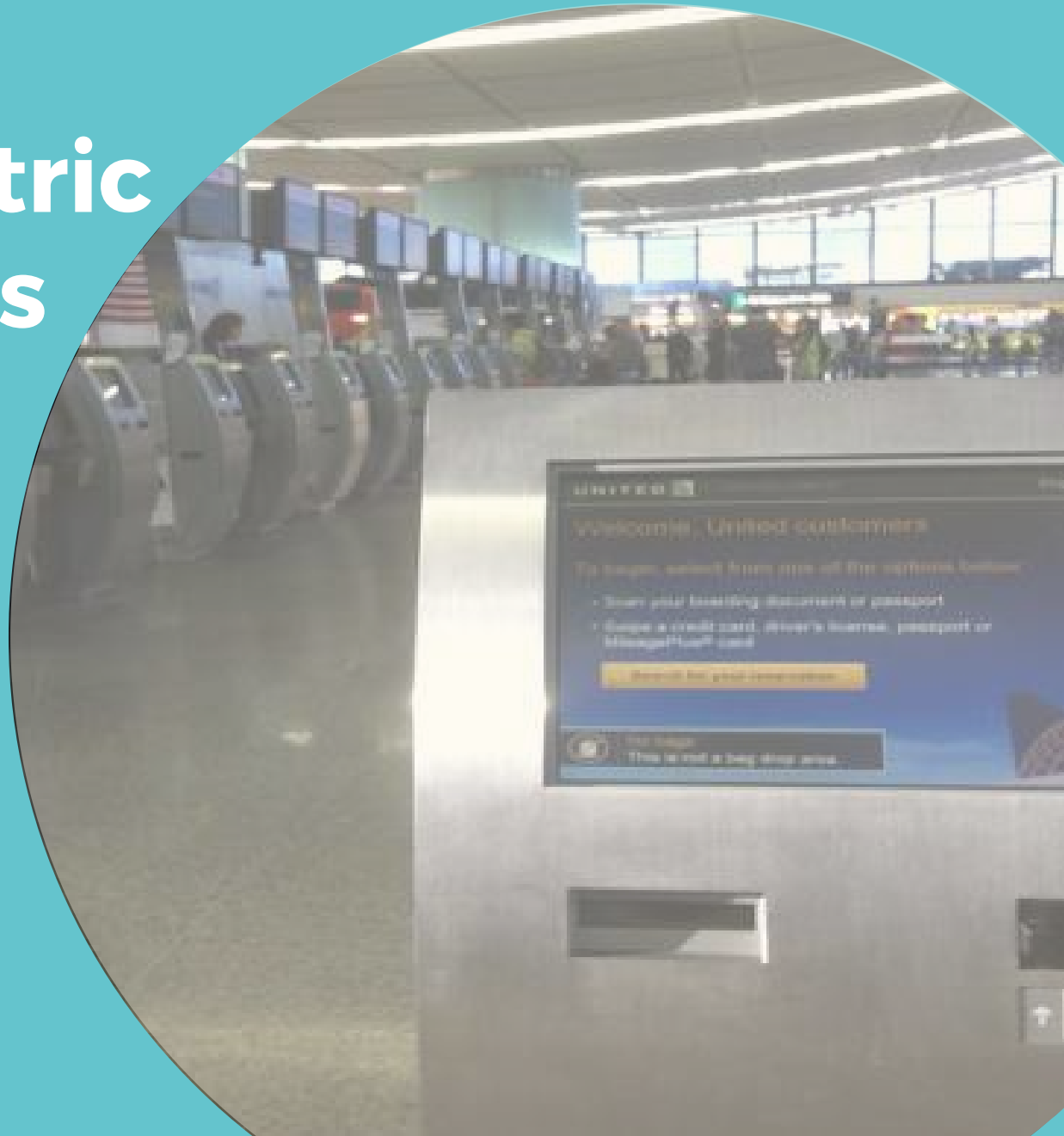
Reason 1: it has significant business value

"

Creating great experiences leads to more loyal customers and higher retention. It also reduces costs by creating experiences that don't require people to call customer support or ping an agent. And ultimately, you're also making more money, because you have customers that want to come back and continue doing business."

— Janelle Estes, VP, solutions consulting, UserTesting

"

Competition is fierce in travel...design has advanced the way it has because winning the battle for share ultimately means investing in total experience design. Not just the design of interfaces, but the full branded system."

— Dylan Mullins, product design manager, Egencia
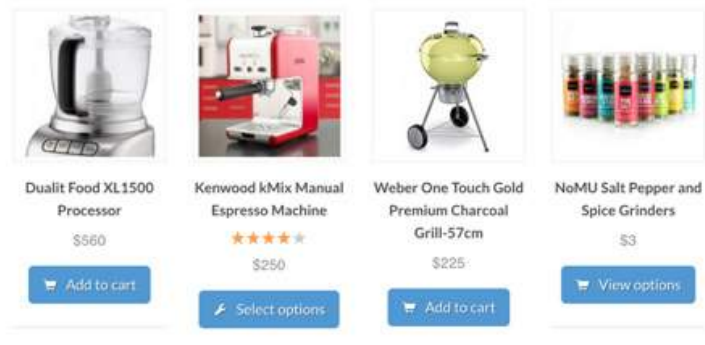
Reason 2: rising consumer expectations

Today's leading technology companies like Google, Apple, Uber and Amazon don't just create "products" in the traditional sense.

Instead, these companies' success is built on thoughtfully-designed experiences that delight users thanks to their speed of service, personalization, and an uncanny ability to anticipate and fulfill needs at exactly the moment they're most useful.

This has created both an opportunity and a challenge for companies in the travel industry, where users have come to expect these same tech-like, user-friendly, experiences from all their favorite brands.

The design decisions of companies like Uber, Amazon, Apple and Google are raising the bar for all consumers and companies.

# **Reason 2:** rising consumer expectations

"

As companies create experiences that are different and 'game changers,' we as customers get spoiled by those experiences. Then we expect other companies to be at that level. As customer experiences improve, customer expectations increase as well."

— Janelle Estes, VP, solutions consulting, UserTesting

Reason 3: the rise of mobile devices

As of 2016, more than 80% of Americans owned a smartphone. The exploding popularity of mobile devices, and the increasing power of their feature set, is enabling a range of new opportunities for travel brands to build more personalized, seamless, customer experiences:
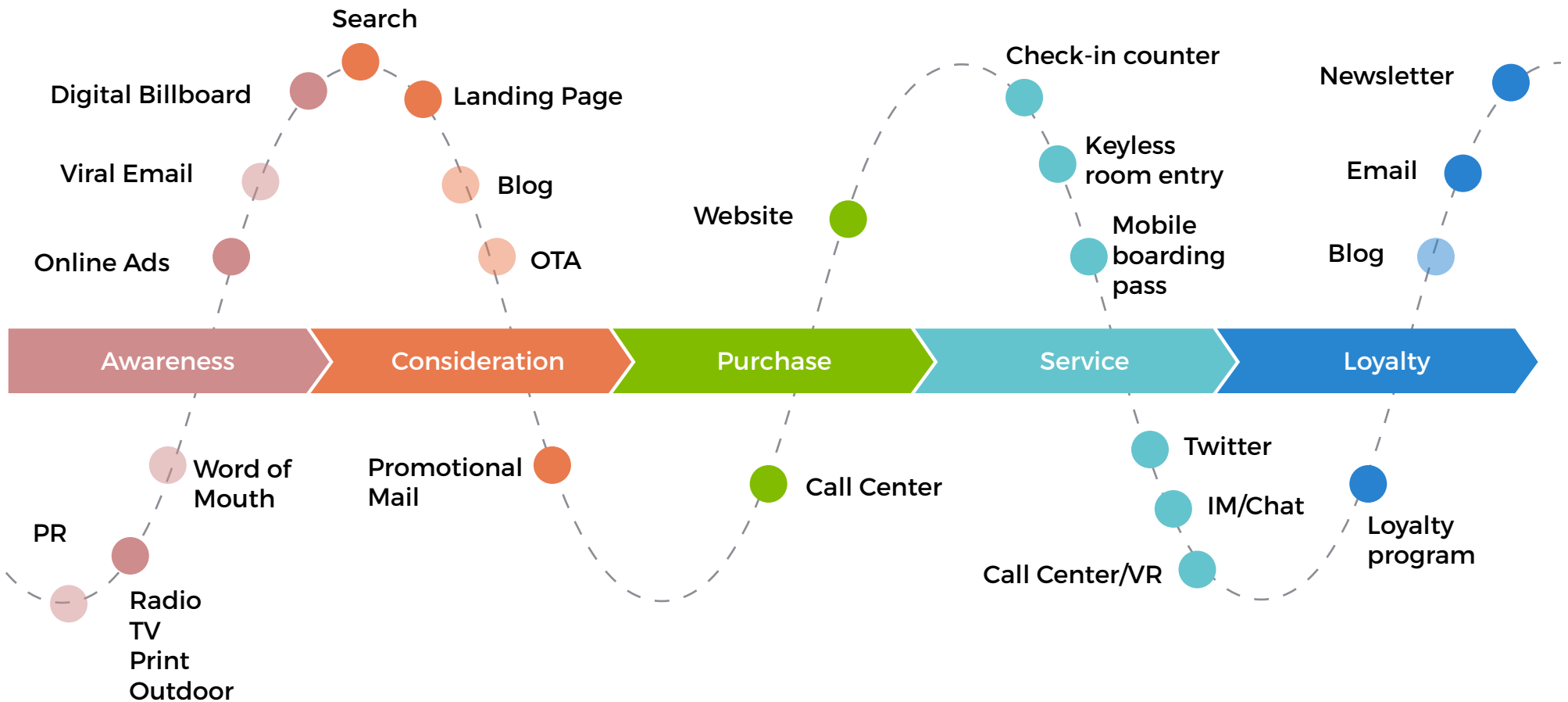
- **New information inputs:** location data, motion sensors and voice inputs offer new interaction opportunities for designers

- **Context specific:** interactions can be customized based on details like a user's current location, activity or the time of day

- **Personal to each user:** mobile devices are not shared unlike some PCs, facilitating access to personal items like credit cards, boarding passes or virtual hotel keys
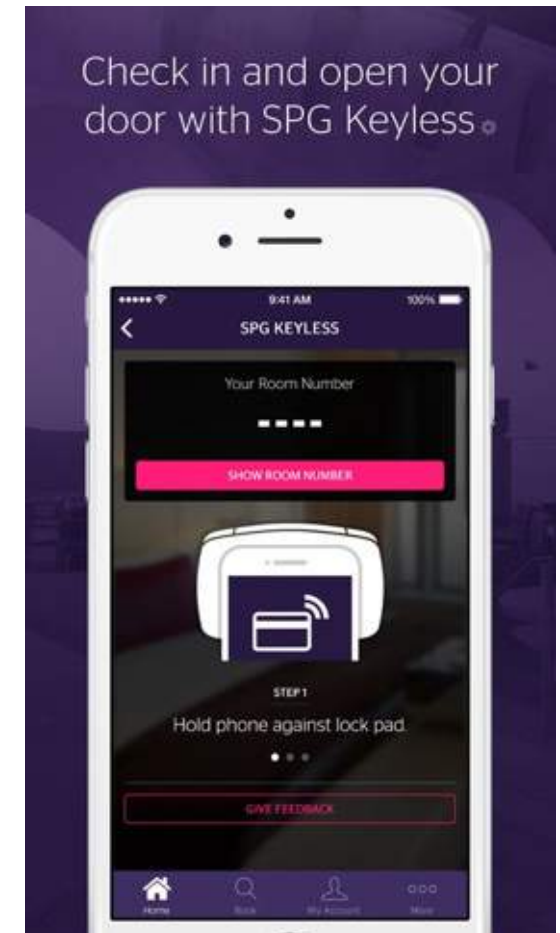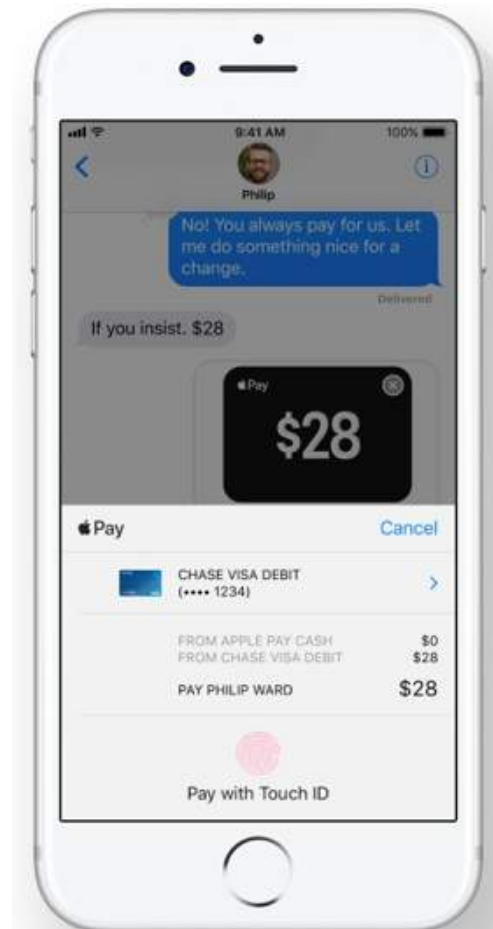
Mobile devices have opened up a whole new range of design possibilities, and complications, for companies designing products for consumers.

Reason 4: proliferation of customer "touchpoints"

Today's travel brands have more opportunities than ever to interact with consumers during their travel experience, whether that's during purchase, check-in, travel, or the return trip. But this proliferation of interaction points also creates more potential to cause consumer confusion if those interactions are not thoughtfully designed. Preventing this requires a thorough understanding of customer needs throughout the process, along with an ability to understand how those needs will change at various stages of the process.

Awareness | Consideration | Purchase | Service | Loyalty

Search
Digital Billboard
Landing Page
Viral Email
Blog
Online Ads
OTA
Website
Check-in counter
Keyless room entry
Mobile boarding pass
Newsletter
Email
Blog

Word of Mouth
PR
Radio TV Print Outdoor
Promotional Mail
Call Center
Twitter
IM/Chat
Call Center/VR
Loyalty program

Reason 4: proliferation of customer "touchpoints"

The travel industry has a unique opportunity to make use of a new set of "touchpoints" that can help improve the user experience. A top area of interest is the growing use of customer service "chatbots" by companies like KLM and Hyatt.

New digital "touchpoints" like conversational chatbots are encouraging travel brands to rethink the user experience.

" We look at new technologies, models and trends to understand how we can create even more compelling products and user experiences that resonate; taking emerging innovations, such as conversational interfaces, augmented reality and machine learning, and applying them in a way that make a complex set of tasks simpler, smarter and easier to accomplish."

**— Bruce Nelson, VP of UX design, Sabre**

Reason 5: faster software update cycles

Today's consumer software environment is fast paced. Thanks to constant operating system updates, rapidly-improving hardware, and continuous innovation in digital devices, software needs to be continuously tweaked, modified and improved upon. One need only look at the never-ending smartphone app update cycle as one example.

In this environment of always-evolving software, travel brands need to build processes that allow them to experiment and refine software with the user in mind. Customer-centric design, which relies on heavily "iterative" changes to products, is one key solution.
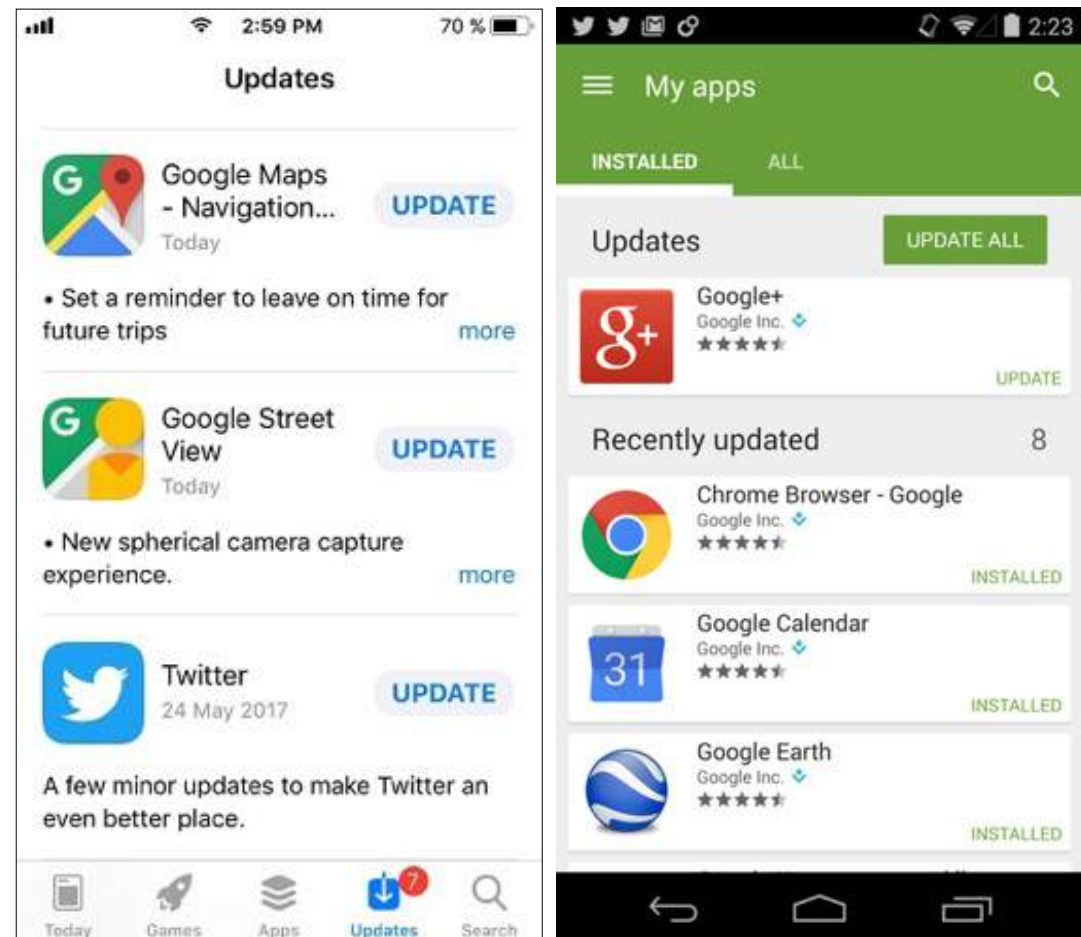
App updates are one example of the speed of today's software development environment. The situation is forcing more companies to rethink their design process to ensure more agility.
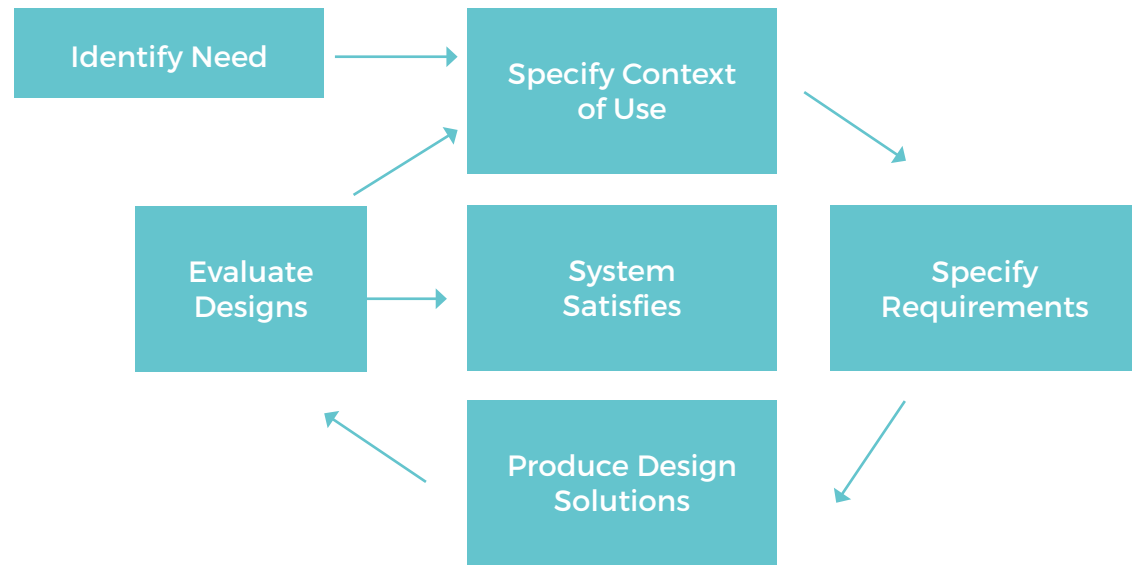
Understanding the customer-centric design process

An overview of the **customer-centric design process**

As explained by Usability.gov, a U.S. government resource on user experience best practices, customer-centric design involves the following steps:

1. **Specify the context of use:** Identify the people who will use the product, what they will use it for, and under what conditions

2. **Specify requirements**: Identify any business requirements or user goals that must be met for the product to be successful

3. **Create design solutions:** Create the solutions in stages, building from a rough concept to a complete design

4. **Evaluate designs:** Evaluation, ideally done through usability testing with actual users, helps identify issues that need to be further refined to meet context of use

Identify Need → Specify Context of Use → Specify Requirements → Produce Design Solutions → System Satisfies → Evaluate Designs → Specify Context of Use

Visualizing the key steps in a customer-centric design process

"

We usually have a key question that we're trying to research to find out what the potential points of confusion or clarity are, so that we can do more of the good stuff and fix anything that's confusing."

— Susan Motte, formerly the principal of UX research for the Expedia Usability Lab

Some tools and methods for
customer-centric research

Executives at Expedia, HotelTonight, Egencia and Sabre reveal a range of methods to gather customer-centric product insights:

Heuristic evaluation	A walkthrough and analysis of an existing user experience or product by a company's design and research teams.
Field studies or ethnographic studies	Observing users while interacting with a product to understand how they accomplish tasks, as well as to see how their environment and situation may impact their use.
Diary studies or photo journals	Asking users to record an ongoing explanation of their use of a product, either by keeping a written record or through photos or videos demonstrating how they use the product.
User interviews	Talking directly to users to understand their experience of interacting with a product or experience.
Task analysis or concept evaluation	Study and measure a range of user metrics as users accomplish specific tasks. This is also done as "concept evaluation," where users are given a prototype to understand if it fulfills their needs.
Focus groups and surveys	Research conducted in-person, or via remote studies administered online, to define and understand a range of behaviors, wants and needs related to the product.
User testing and validation	Utilize design testing labs to gather metrics on product performance and verify that it fulfills customer needs. For some companies like Expedia, this involves software that can track users' eye movements and facial expressions.
Application usage	Analyze product metrics to understand usage patterns and continuously improve the experiences.

What it looks like: Egencia's design "sprint"

Today's travel industry design process is nimble iterative, and constantly evolving. One example of how the design process might play out is a recent five-day "design sprint" completed by Egencia, the corporate travel arm of Expedia.

The company wanted to experiment with different concepts before committing to a soon-to-be-launched wearables app for Apple and Android devices. Over the course of five frenzied days, the company brought together a team of product designers, product managers and engineers for a rapid-fire strategy, innovation and design session.

The team used a combination of white boarding, sketching, paper prototyping, hallway testing, and remote "non-facilitated" research tools to help realize their vision.


Egencia's team whiteboarding ideas for their five-day wearables design sprint.

What it looks like: **Egencia's design "sprint"**

"
One thing we tried to focus on in this sprint was not getting hung up on where we began, and instead focused on where users were driving the concept. Within a week, we had a wearables concept we were ready to start building."

— **Dylan Mullins, product design manager, Egencia**
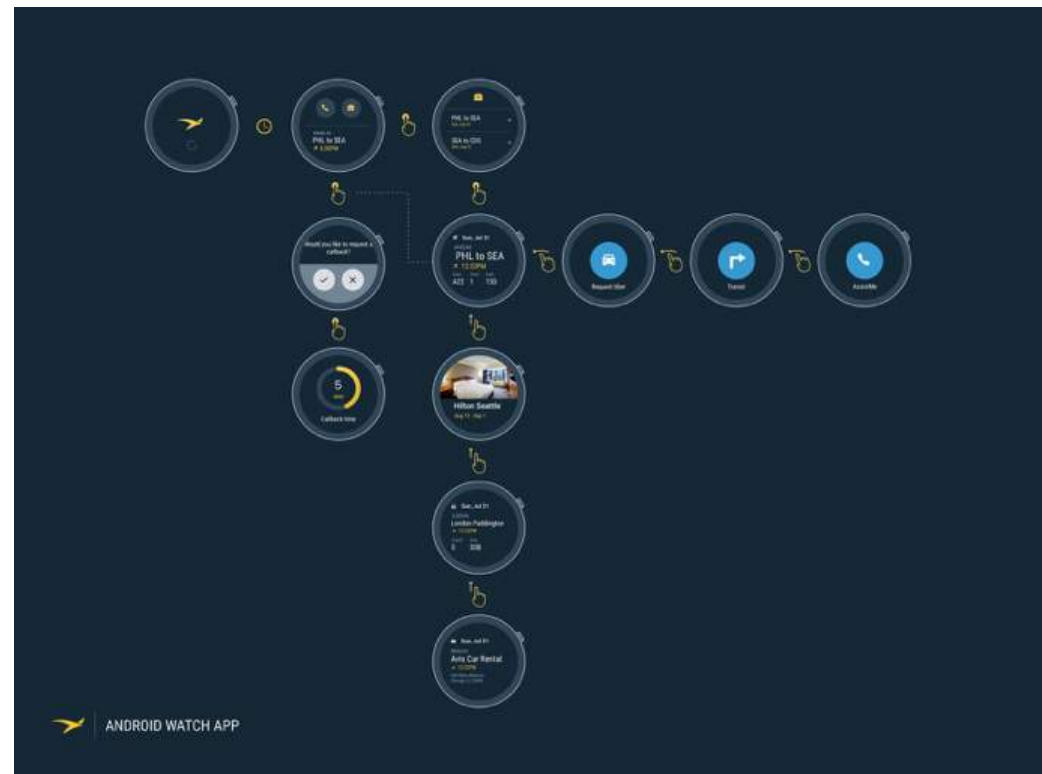
A mock-up of the user interactions for Egencia's new wearables project

Key design goal: **removing "friction"**

The logistics of travel can be complicated. Confusing travel purchase processes can mean travelers give up before they ever leave the house. Meanwhile there's plenty of opportunity for things to go wrong while in transit, including missed flights, cancelled cars, lost luggage and misplaced reservations.

That's why when consumers interact with travel brands online or in-person, simplicity is essential. Needlessly complex products can lead to frustration, lost sales, and customer complaints.

Simplicity matters. 64% of consumers in a survey by branding firm Siegel + Gale said they would be willing to pay more for simpler experiences.

"

The main thing in our design is that we have to make things intuitively obvious."

— **Steve Jobs**
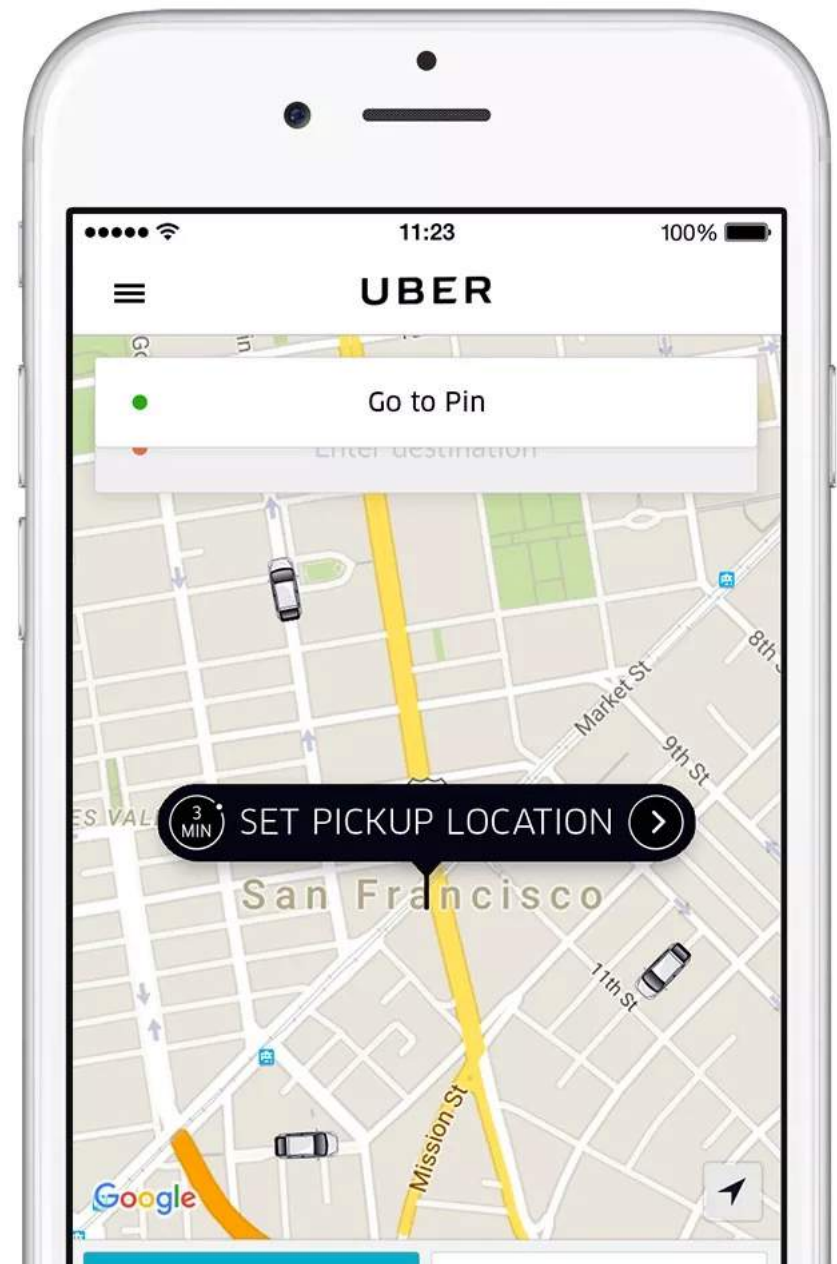
Key design goal: **anticipating consumer needs**

Thanks to the growing ubiquity of data generated by sources like mobile devices and social media, travel brands have more information than ever before about consumer behaviors.

This data is being used by today's smart companies to anticipate what users will need before they specifically ask for it. Just think of examples already in use. High-end hotels are great at keeping track of customer details and preferences from guests' past stays. Google searches "auto-complete" as you type. Mobile apps can suggest where you should have dinner based on where you've eaten in the past.

This data is a double-edged sword. On one hand, a great experience where a brand uses data to anticipate exactly what a user needs at exactly the right moment can feel like magic.

At the same time however, companies need to use data to anticipate specific pain points and problems, otherwise they run the risk of creating experiences that are needlessly confusing, or feel like invasions of privacy.

"

While predictive intelligence may seem like the stuff of the future, the building blocks are in place today. Already, a simple mobile search unlocks answers to the world's most vexing questions, like "Where should we have dinner tonight?" "Am I getting a good deal on this product I'm about to purchase in store?" Google knows what you are looking for from the moment you begin typing."

— Jeremy Lockhorn, VP of emerging media, Razorfish

Key design goal: **personalization and customization**

In today's hyper-competitive travel industry, where dozens of companies are scrambling to win customers using similar prices and distribution methods, it's tough for brands to stand out.

One opportunity for travel brands to distinguish themselves from competitors is by allowing customers to personalize and customize their experiences to suit their unique needs.

Personalization matters to consumers. One recent Accenture study found that more than 50% of customers were more likely to shop with a given brand that recognized them by name, knew their purchase history, or recommended products based on their preferences.

Hilton Hotels' "Fun Finder" app uses a combination of GPS, bluetooth and Wi-Fi data to help guests personalize their stay by finding nearby attractions and assisting with navigation.

Key design goal: **putting the customer first**

In the past, some travel interactions felt like customers had very little power over their experience. Endless customer service loops and unexpected departure delays made travelers feel like they had minimal control over their situation and caused unnecessary frustration.

Today's best-in-class customer-centric design helps put users back in control of their trips, providing them with more agency over their journey while also providing contextually-relevant information to create more stress-free, enjoyable, travel experiences.

Airline sites like SeatGuru have empowered consumers with more knowledge and control, allowing them to make better decisions about where to sit during their flights.

# Trends shaping customer-centric design in the travel industry

1. Expedia: designing for
omnichannel environments

Desktop PCs and laptops are no longer the only method for getting online. Recent research from Google suggests consumers are spending 75 minutes or more on various devices like smartphones and tablets each day. This is to say nothing of new devices like wearables or voice-controlled inputs like Google Home and Amazon's Alexa.

The situation is encouraging customer-centric travel brands to think about today's digital environment as "omnichannel," meaning that products need to be compatible with user behaviors as they move between multiple devices, situations and user experiences.

It's one reason why online travel agency Expedia began looking for a new way to help travelers keep track of travel searches as they researched deals across multiple devices and research sessions.

Average time spent on devices used in an average day:

Smartphone — 170 minutes*
Computer — 120 minutes*
Tablet — 75 minutes*
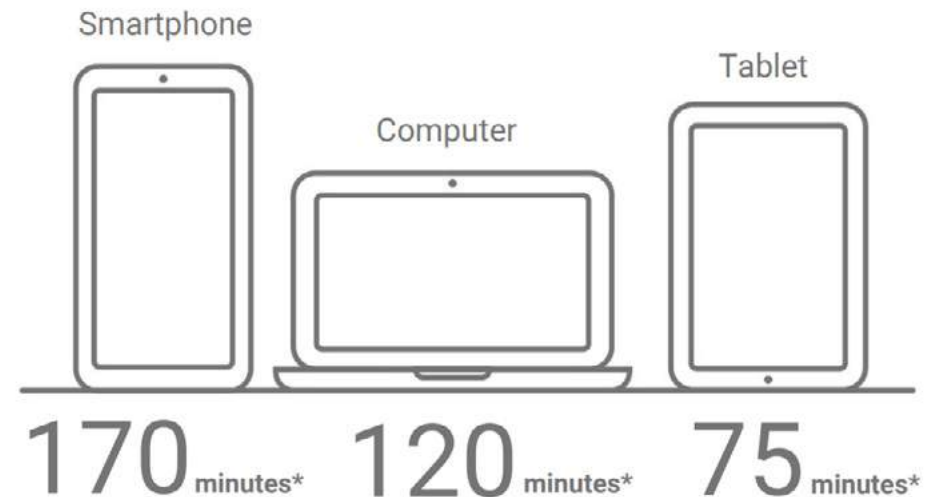
A recent Google study noted that consumers are spending more time than ever interacting with a wide variety of devices, complicating design decisions for travel brands.

1. Expedia: designing for
omnichannel environments

The result of Expedia's search for an omnichannel tool for travel searching was Scratchpad, a cross-platform trip planning tool where users can save past itinerary searches and collaborate with others on trip plans.

Expedia reports that the Scratchpad feature has tripled the company's "compulsion rate" and doubled users' repeat visits to Expedia over the 24-hour period studied.
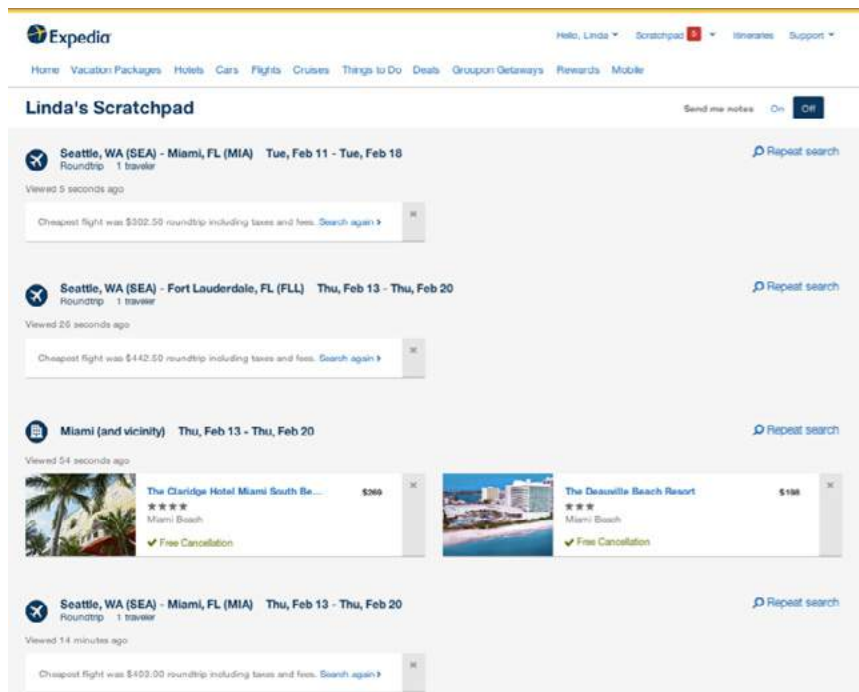

A screenshot of Expedia's Scratchpad product

> We introduced Scratchpad to give travelers a place to store their notes on searches they already completed. The product has evolved quite a bit over the years – from a collection of previous searches, to the ability to share content with fellow travelers, to the option to mark your favorite options by clicking on a heart icon."
>
> **— Scott Jones, VP of design and user experience, Expedia**

2. Marriott: **prototyping and crowdsourcing**

Building a new hotel can be an expensive and risky process. One recent analysis found that an "average" hotel construction project would cost upwards of $22 million. What's more, the US is facing a growing glut of new hotel construction projects which is increasing competition. One recent analysis expected more than 600,000 new rooms to be built as of 2016.

With so much capital riding on the success of such projects, hotel owners and operators are naturally anxious to make sure they create a winning formula. But how can they test out new hotel concepts and ideas without investing significant sums of money to do it?
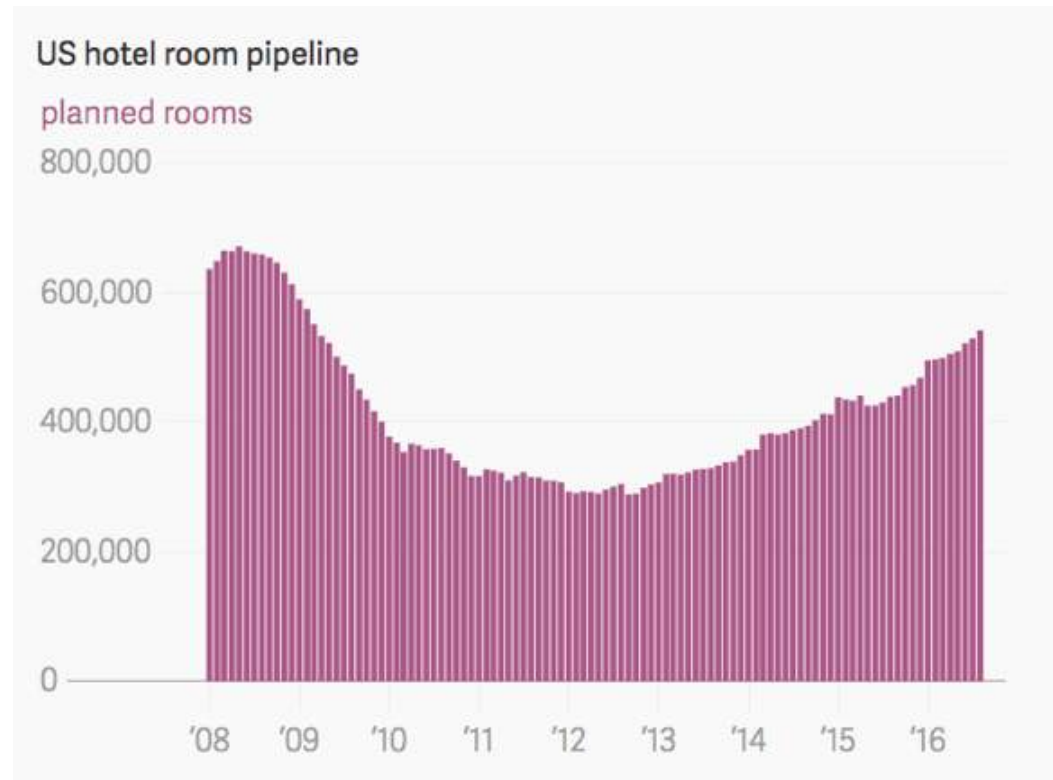
Designing and developing a hotel is getting more expensive and competitive. The obstacles are leading more hotel brands to look for new ways to test concepts before building.

2. Marriott: **prototyping and crowdsourcing**

For hotel chain Marriott, the solution to the high cost, high competition, world of hotel development has been to focus on prototyping and early-stage customer feedback during their hotel design process.

The company has turned its "M Beta" hotel property in Charlotte, NC into a hotel incubator, where the company tests new amenities, interior designs and procedures on guests. To gather feedback on whether or not customers enjoyed different room concepts, the hotel brand even installed real-life "Beta buttons" throughout the property, allowing patrons to offer real-time feedback on different hotel features.

> We are inviting guests to be part of the innovation and decision making...M Beta at Charlotte Marriott City Center is a forward-looking testing ground for exciting new concepts as we constantly evolve and challenge our way of thinking.
>
> — **Mike Dearing, managing director, Marriott Hotels.**

3. Delta: **giving customers more control**

Lost luggage is frequently a source of stress for airline travelers. For many years, passengers who checked a bag had to simply trust the system and hope their luggage showed up when they arrived at the baggage claim.

In 2016, Delta Airlines decided to try and address this customer stress through new tracking mechanisms and design. The system uses a combination of "RFID"-powered baggage tags, along with a new mobile app feature that lets travelers follow bags as they are processed through the baggage system.

The result of these efforts was two-fold. Delta expects the system will result in 10% decrease in misplaced baggage, while also contributing to an overall boost in customer satisfaction.

Delta now incorporates RFID technology into its checked baggage tags, making it easier for the airline and consumers to to keep track of their belongings while traveling.

3. Delta: **giving customers more control**

"

From the moment our customers drop off their bag, we want them to know we're looking out for it every step of the way and working to take the stress out of flying."

— **Bill Lentsch, SVP of airline operations, Delta**

Delta's RFID bag tags are paired with a mobile app feature offering travelers real-time updates on bag status.

4. HotelTonight: **reducing "friction"**

HotelTonight has earned plenty of fans since its launch in 2010, thanks to a simple, curated selection of hotel rooms that travelers can rapidly reserve from their smartphone on short notice.

But maintaining the balance between offering users more choices and keeping the booking process simple is tricky. Consumers were requesting a room upgrade option feature for the company's app, but HotelTonight wanted to do it in a way that did not add needless choices or unnecessary decision-making that might clutter the process.

Working with the company's data and strategy team, HotelTonight's designers built a simple "one-click" toggle switch with an offer that allowed customers to easily upgrade without getting overwhelmed by additional choices. Since its launch, the feature has outperformed company expectations by eight times internal forecasts.
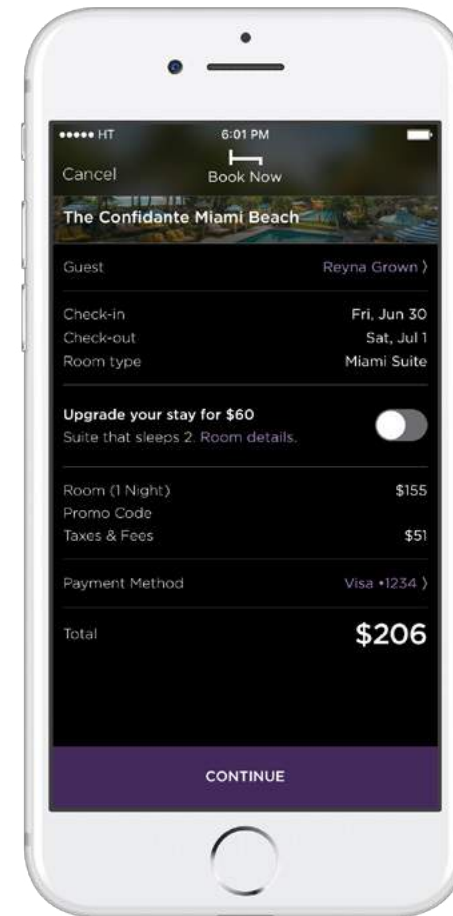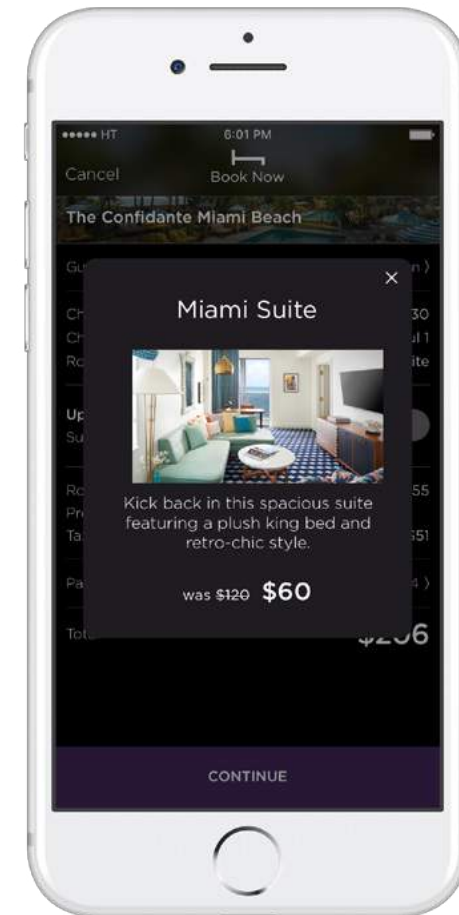

HotelTonight's one-click room upgrade button helps offer travelers more choice without creating needless complexity.

4. HotelTonight: **reducing "friction"**

" We see in user testing when people hit the [typical hotel booking] screen with 'Queen Double-Junior Suite with Wi-Fi,' there's just too much nomenclature...This feature is an opportunity for a hotel to a get a higher ADR and sell-through on more expensive room rates, and for users to get a bigger, better, room without a lot of mental math."

**— Amanda Richardson, chief data and strategy officer, HotelTonight**

HotelTonight's one-click room upgrade button helps offer travelers more choice without creating needless complexity.

5. Hopper: **simplifying travel search**

Flight search is one of the more complicated e-commerce transactions consumers make online. In addition to the highly variable nature of airfare prices, which changes by season, time of the week and destination, many consumers complete dozens of research sessions before making a purchase. One Expedia study suggests the average flight search involved 48 unique sessions.

Mobile app Hopper is one company that's using design to help rethink the flight search process. Thanks to a design decision to go mobile-only, the company has built a product that emphasizes simplicity and the anticipation of user needs to rethink the flight search process.

Users can visually see the price of flights color-coded by date, and Hopper's intuitive use of mobile "push notifications" helps the company update users of price changes on their chosen routes.
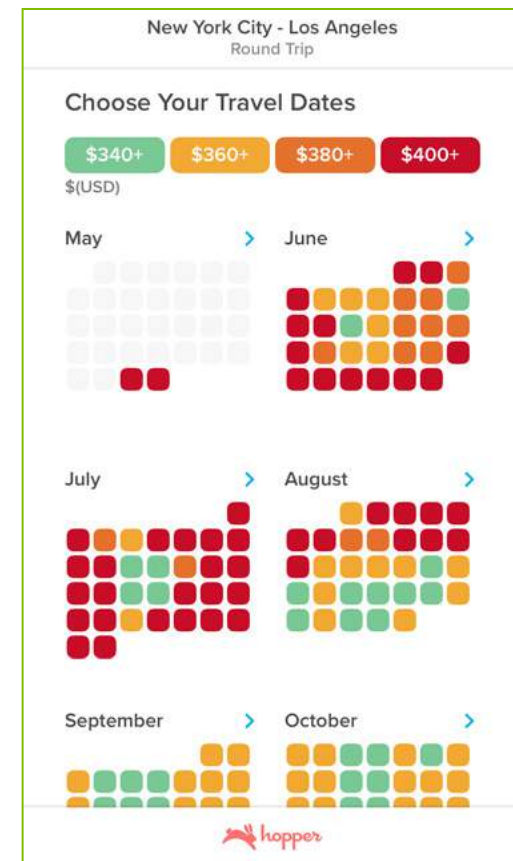

Hopper's flight search tool color codes flight prices for different days of the week.

5. Hopper: **simplifying travel search**

"

We actually tell 70 percent of people who first search for a flight to not buy the flight. We tell them to wait instead....We do that because we're mobile only, and we have a very high "push notification enabled" rate. Since 65-70 percent of people who bought our app enable push notifications. We're fairly confident we can re-engage that user at a later date in the future when the price is better – and we tend to convert them then."

— Dakota Smith, head of growth, Hopper
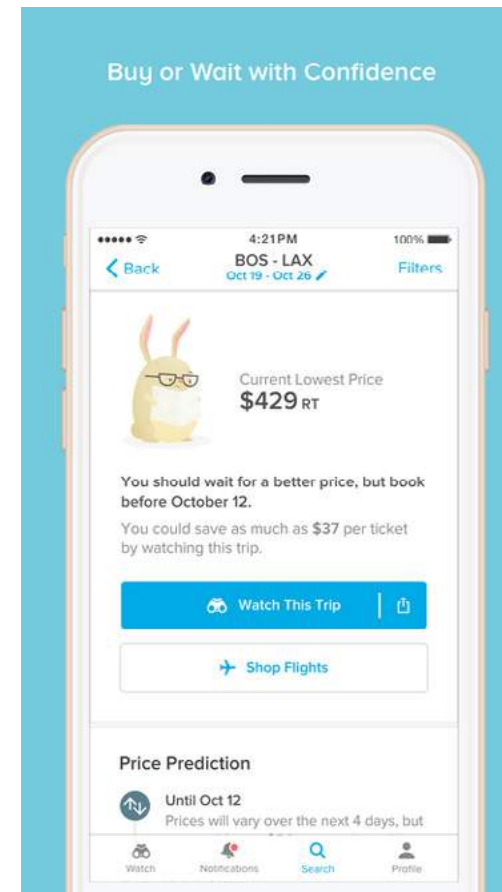
Hopper users can sign up for push notifications letting them know when the price for a given airline route has decreased.

Executive letter

As a travel professional, you intimately understand how critical your customers' travel experience is in driving brand loyalty and ultimately the impact on your bottom line. At UserTesting, we believe travel brands that are "Customer-Obsessed" (to borrow a phrase from Amazon's Jeff Bezos) lead the field competitively and capture greater consumer mindshare.

Stop and think about that phrase for a minute. Is your brand customer obsessed?

According to Gartner Research, almost 90% of companies realize that they will win or lose business based on customer experience (CX). However, according to Forrester, only 20% of companies are delivering a good or great customer experience.

Travelers today approach any interaction with your brand with extremely high expectations. Because of their experiences with products delivered by Uber, Slack, Amazon, and Apple, both business and leisure travelers expect your experience to be innovative, seamless across channels, and on brand.

And yet delivering a superior, integrated customer experience is challenging, to say the least, given that it is likely, a different team responsible for each of your customer touch points. You have Marketing owning messaging and brand, sending email campaigns, and running direct response efforts. You have BI crunching the numbers and informing teams what happened. You have Customer Service owning the support experience through phone, email, live intercepts, Twitter, and more. You have product teams developing new experiences on the web, mobile web, apps, voice enabled devices like the Amazon Echo, and in-the-wild.

What we see at UserTesting is that often these teams unintentionally operate in silos looking at different data or concentrating on different parts of the customer journey increasing the risk of delivering a fragmented or less than holistic experience across your various touchpoints.

UserTesting enables you to connect the dots by putting the guest at the center of everything you do. To understand their needs, their wants, their true intentions. We allow you to leverage the power of human insights to make smarter and more informed business decisions.

We're firm believers in the power of quantitative research, but all the survey data and analytics in the world won't answer the underlying question of "why" that underlies each click, tap, swipe and booking. You need to marry this data with human insights to truly understand your guests and bridge the gap between customer expectations and your customer experience.

Using Customer Centric Product Design to Stand Out in the Travel Industry is just the start of the journey. We hope you enjoy this report.

Sincerely,
Darrell Benatar
CEO UserTesting

Like what you see?

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform, providing Media, Insights & Marketing to key sectors of travel.

Through daily news, research, podcasts, and Skift Global Forum conferences, Skift deciphers and defines the trends that matter to the marketers, strategists, and technologists shaping the industry.

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content marketing studio, working collaboratively with partners like Mastercard, Hyatt, Adobe, Lyft, and many more on custom projects to engage the world's largest audience of travel influencers and decision makers.

Visit skiftx.com to learn more or email at skiftx@skift.com.

Carolyn Kremins
President, Skift
ck@skift.com
212-564-5830