



Online Distribution Strategies in delhi-based hotels: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Hotels use different distribution channels, be it online or offline, to sell their rooms to target patrons. Some of the common distribution channels hotel properties uses are online travel agencies, hotels' official websites, metasearch platforms, phone bookings, and global distribution channels. There are so many mid-range hotels in Delhi and NCR which depend only on conventional distribution channels. Their managers are more likely to have a lack of proper knowledge about online distribution strategies. There is a broad gap between average room tariffs between premium-range and mid-segment properties. There is also a great demand for affordable rates for world-class services and that demand is likely to grow.

This review is aimed to discuss the major distribution strategies and factors that may influence managerial decisions on choosing distribution channels for the hotel management. In terms of online distribution, there are different options to choose from. Hotels can offer direct bookings over phone or their official website, list their properties or rooms on online travel booking portals and apps, and use several other channels. The key here is using a blend of different channels to reach the maximum number of target audience and maximize revenue of their business.

Keywords – hotels in Delhi, hotels in NCR, online distribution strategies, distribution channels, hotel management, hotel properties, online travel agencies

Introduction

Tourism and hospitality industry is recognised as the most promising and leading industry in terms of revenue generation, employment GDP, globally. According to WTTC (2021) tourism and hospitality contributes US\$8 trillion to the global economy, representing 10.4% of GDP. Further, WTTC (2021) estimates indicated that travel and tourism contributes to GDP per capita 6.9% and contributes US\$ 191.3 billion in India.

Similarly, the tourism and hospitality industry have a widest share in the Indian service sector (Travel & Tourism). It accounted for 334 million jobs worldwide, directly or indirectly which accounting for 10.6% of total global employment. However, the Indian tourism sector accounted for 31.8 million jobs, which was 7.3% of the total employment in the country in 2020. By 2029, it is expected to account for about 53 million jobs (Tourism and Hospitality Report Mar, 2022). India witnessed a total footfall of 24.62 million of foreign tourists in 2020 (Jan-Nov), with a growth of -74.6% over same period of the previous year (Annual Report 2021-22, Ministry of Tourism Govt. of India)

There are so many options and information available to the customers. So, it is not easy to sell the services and products in this age of competition. The situation is even worse in the hotel industry due to inseparability, intangibility, and heterogeneity and cost-cutting is no longer effective in this day and age. Hotel chains are focusing more on customer satisfaction to make a positive market presence. But corporate image and customer satisfaction are also not enough to serve the purpose unless they cannot retain old customers along with focusing on new ones (Kumar & Malik, 2013).

Customers can now do comparison shopping when choosing hotel rooms thanks to online travel agencies (OTAs). Due to this reason, hoteliers find it hard to maintain a balance between channel management and revenue goals. Hotels may now open new avenues of sales in order to reach new patrons and markets. There is also a risk of channel conflict, i.e. the same product can be offered with varied pricing through different distribution channels. This paper will highlight online distribution strategies ideal for hotels in Delhi and also the issues that may take place because of lack of control on room tariffs in a brand and transfer of the authority of pricing to third party OTAs.

Objectives

- To examine existing online distribution systems
- To identify variations in online distribution systems in selected hotels of Delhi (NCR)

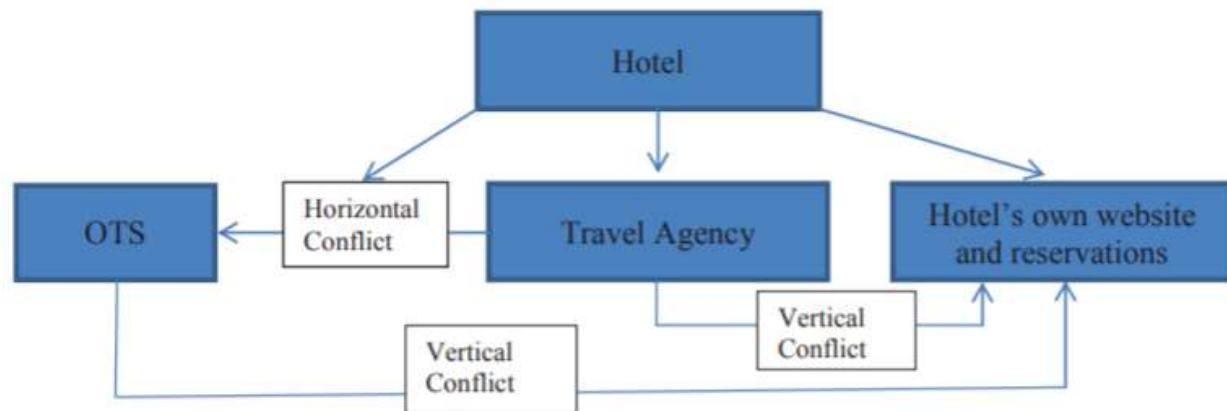
1.1. The 4 Ps of Hotel Industry

The way traditional distribution strategies were operationally introduced and determined has been redefined by the use of the internet in the tourism and hospitality industry. The “Product, Price, Place, and Promotion” or the four Ps are the classical aspects of marketing and they are being customized to the features of online distribution strategies. In promotion and distribution of services and products in the travel industry, internet and communication technologies have made the greatest change (Pilepic et al, 2013). In the hotel industry across the world, online sales have been very important over the past few years as they provided great opportunities for sales, branding, promotion methods, and customer relationship management.

These days, marketing messages are conveyed to hyper-active travelers across the world through different online strategies. We are going through a progressive change of the mixture of traditional and digital formats, and both offline and digital marketing avenues (Estis Green &Lomanno, 2012). Traditional modes of selling hotel accommodation had set a trend before the modern revolution of information technology. Hotels had their own sales staff, sales representatives, distribution channel, mail order/catalog department, call centers, and other channels to sell their rooms in the past (Friedman &Furey, 1999). Technological advances have now transformed the value of these channels and consumer behavior also has been through social changes.

1.2. Hotel Channel Conflicts

Hotels can use digital channels to offer their products to customers directly or using third parties. The intermediaries should cooperate with hoteliers or tour providers to sell service or product and make the market win-win for both parties. The problem is when existing channels perceive another distribution channel to chase after the same consumers using the same brand. It causes channel conflict. Figure 1 illustrates the connections a hotel may build using online and offline distribution strategies. There is a conflict between two external distribution channels “travel agents and online travel services (OTS)” and the official website of the hotel.

Figure 1 – Hotel Channel Conflicts

Source – Tan & Dwyer (2014)

The above figure shows a hotel that sells accommodation using its own website to the intended customers. The website enables customers to book accommodation in partner hotels globally. On the other side, the hotel also partnered with local tour operators and online distributors to sell rooms in the property. Ideally, the hotel would sell to the customers directly to avoid commissions to be paid to third parties and enhance its revenue while providing value to the customers through direct bookings. Meanwhile, tour agents may also want to sell rooms when the hotel reaches its excess capacity.

Once channels deemphasize the brand or offer too much to keep its account against excessive competition, the conflict would affect channel partners, hotel brands, and customers too. This is where channel conflicts take place due to conflicting goals. This kind of conflict is known as “Vertical conflict”, which happens between distributors who are playing varied roles, for example, conflict between a travel agent and a hotelier, or travel agent or tour wholesaler (Coughlan et al, 2006). Horizontal conflict is another conflict among partners playing the same roles in the same industry. For example, a conflict between a travel agent with another agent or between two hotels in terms of price-cuts (Ganseler et al, 2007).

Budget hotels have been considered as a different and vital segment in the tour and travel industry since the past few decades (Fiorentino, 1995). Budget hotel industry has grabbed a different segment of customers with a different market position by providing value for money

and decent service quality (Gilbert & Arnold, 1989). It is also growing significantly in Europe, Asia, and the US – three biggest markets in the world (Ruetz& Marvel, 2011). The rising population of tourists who prefer budget stays are expected to support the growth of mid-range hotels, especially in countries where service sectors and middle-class population is expanding (Ruetz& Marvel, 2011; Canadean, 2017).

2.1. Hotel Industry and Pandemic

The current pandemic has expanded interest on online distribution strategies and its adaptation and response on hotels (Connolly et al, 2020). Even though urban research associated with earlier pandemic was based completely on inequalities that increased vulnerability of marginalized and poor to the pandemics, urban design focused on healthy and safe spaces to stay for travelers (Wade, 2020). Tourism and urbanization are intensely connected. The pandemic needs an afterthought related to the relation between hosts, tourist flows, and adaptation of spaces (Corbisiero& La Rocca, 2020). There has been a significant change in trends in the tourism and hotel industry.

Hotels have to guarantee hygienic and safe stays for customers by following proper COVID-19 guidelines (United Nations, 2020). It is important to improve collaboration between tourism and health authorities. It is important to adapt with current restrictions to face the new normal (Robina-Ramírez et al., 2020; Breier et al., 2021). Substantial changes are required in order to serve customers, i.e., from old models of tourism experience to new models of safety and health in the hospitality business. Hotel managers have to wonder what kinds of services they should offer, under what circumstances, and how to give customers the value for their money in the midst of a pandemic (Breier et al, 2021).

2.2. Effect of Distribution Strategies on Hotel Performance and Revenue

Researchers have constantly focused on the effect of distribution strategies on hotel productivity while studying hotel revenue management (Scaglione et al., 2018; Guillet and Mohammed, 2015). It is very important to have the right blend of distribution channels because of perishable lodging products (O'Connor and Frew, 2002; Choi and Kimes, 2002). Hence, there is a great emphasis from researchers on the value of evaluating the effects of distribution strategies on

existing revenue for hotel management and to find out how to make the most of it (Choi &Kimes, 2002).

These days, third-party online tour operators like Bookings.com, Airbnb, Expedia, Oyorooms, GoIbibo, etc. have been very popular and widely used as they can provide a huge range of hotel rooms and homestays at reasonable prices. The consumer usually visits several distribution channels when booking rooms, such as seeking lowest prices for hotels in their selected location and segment and hotels' official websites. These online distributors provide information to customers and enable them to compare rooms and prices as per their ratings and given quality. It is more convenient and easier for customers but it is equally challenging for hoteliers to have a balance between management and revenue goals (Carvell& Quan, 2006).

2.3. The Trade-off between premium hotels and third-party apps

There is also a conflict between higher yield rates and occupancy rates management. It is not easy to control this trade-off as premium hotels have to keep "Revenue Per Available Room (RevPer)" higher than market's willingness to pay in order to sustain their brand image and investment levels. In order to boost sales revenue, hoteliers need to have low occupancy, which is a concern if they avoid online distribution strategies. Hotels have to rely on online distributors as these channels can erode their overall pricing policies and revenue.

Price-sensitive customers are more likely to rely on third-party tour apps and sites with lower tariffs. Hotels have to share losses because a booking which is made through a more discounted third-party channel adds to an unwanted channel as it causes one less booking for that hotel through its official website. Leading hotel brands need to look for digital innovations to lead their position in the market as more than half of hotel bookings have been done online. Hotels were estimated to bear US\$2.5 billion due to e-distributors in 2010 as they captured up to \$120 as commission for each booking versus the cost of booking at official site, i.e. up to \$6 (HawkPartners, 2012). With the rise in distribution intensity and involvement of several distribution channels, "margin dilution", "sales cannibalization" and "customer diversion" are three major threats to hoteliers' profit (Buhalis, 2000).

There is a significant impact of "information and communication technologies (ICTs)" on travelers' attitude, knowledge, and behavior. The rise of new business models like e-auctions, product transparency, and online price are empowering tourists to be less loyal to brands, more

price-specific, and smarter (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). There is also a rise in competition, globalization, customer acquisition costs, customer turnover, and expectations of customers in the hotel industry. Hence, competitiveness and performance of hotels depend highly on the way they fulfill the needs of customers effectively and efficiently (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Connolly & Olsen, 2001).

How small hotels can survive in the market and thrive despite competing with large hotel chains like Oberoi, Taj, etc. is still a matter of concern. The internet is going to be a major communication channel for the B2C market. Hence, small hotels need to make the most of online distribution strategies to build trust and improve their market share. They can redefine their business models and products to make the most of online distribution strategies. According to a survey conducted by FHRAI (2003), over 85% of 3-star and 4-star hotels are owned separately and 92% have limited rooms, i.e. fewer than 150. It shows the impact and significance of an ideal online distribution strategy for small establishments. Failing to set up e-commerce functionalities will cause strategic issues and loss of a competitive edge.

2.4. Setting Up Market Coverage

Hotels have to come up with certain strategies so that they can handle conflicts in distribution channels. The key here is to find out when channel conflict gets worse and when to put solutions. Channel members must be able to work together smoothly as long as processes and policies are able to handle conflicts they suffer and to make them mutually beneficial and workable results. It is the role of a channel manager to find out who is buying and where, so that they can place the products at best prices and in the best channels possible. Pricing can be complex in several channels and a tourism or hotel supplier may not be able to avoid conflict sometimes even with strategic planning. Having right exposure to the market with proper distribution channels to represent the products for someone while having enough control to the channels is the right balance. This way, distributors and hoteliers can have competitive and healthy situations.

The top segment (Figure 2) suggests that hotels may have lower revenue because of commissions given to third parties, even though hotels have maximum exposure due to multiple coverage using several distribution networks. In that case, hotel's sales may decline in the market against third-party distribution strategies of the hotel. The middle segment suggests optimal coverage in the market through which the hotel faces ample market exposure with high share in the market

for direct sales in the hotel against sales made by distribution channels. This way, hotels won't feel exploited by the distribution and can manage the conflict.

Finally, the bottom segment suggests low market exposure for the business due to too limited distribution channels. From both direct sales and distribution, aggregate sales will have less overall market share.

Figure 2 – Market Coverage and Conflict



Source – Tan & Dwyer (2014)

Setting “best price guarantee” is an approach to manage the flow of guests who book through online travel websites on bookings made through online booking services offered by the company. These initiatives assure the customers that rates that brand websites offer are lowest possible rates, considering the need to look for lower rates at other platforms. In this program, hotel franchises can benefit from the realization that room revenue of the franchisee from discount and matching price is above the sales price of room with third-party sellers. Controlling frequent travel points to such rooms booked over the website of a company or other vendors is another control over hotel bookings made by the customers. For example, a lot of hotels don't provide mileage and bonus points to customers who booked through discount websites.

It can clearly demotivate guests looking for lower prices on third-party agent websites by bypassing any loyalty points for their stay. It may provide extra benefits to the consumers which may not be costly for the hotels. They can use rewards for the customers instead of consequences

of not using their own websites. Especially during off seasons, customers can avail a lot of benefits where hotels can gain more business for their properties. They can provide offers like late check-ins, free champagnes for booking dinner, higher reward points, and free Wi-Fi or parking, etc. These benefits have no or minimal extra costs that hotels can provide their guests without eroding their revenue.

Findings

Increasing awareness in IT and latest technologies among Indian customers is booming the travel industry in India. Management of distribution strategies is one of the important activities of managing hotel revenue (David-Negreet al, 2018; Guillet& Mohammed, 2015). In the past, hoteliers had to depend on “central reservation system (CRS)” and “global distribution system (GDS)” while intermediaries were very vital in increasing sales. Walk-ins, telecalling, and other traditional booking methods were very common for room reservations over the past three decades until electronic mediums started growing for increasing sales after the emergence of WWW in the mid-1990s. Hence, suppliers started investing in both third-party and direct online distribution strategies to meet online booking needs of customers (Kim & Kim, 2004; Amaro & Duarte, 2013; Wong & Law, 2005).

3.1. Existing Online Distribution Systems

These online channels have brought a lot of options to control costs, enhance market share and exposure, revenues, and booking volumes (Frazier &Antia, 1995; Buhalis, 1999; Moriarty & Moran, 1990). There are different types of booking avenues developed in this digital era, including mobile-based, location-based, and social-based applications. These social media platforms allow customers to be more informed as they can easily collect information to ease the booking process (Thakran& Verma, 2013; Kim & Connolly, 2012). In addition, more advanced platforms like WhatsApp promote 1-on-1 interactions between customers and service providers through emojis, voice messages, and video calls. Hoteliers can offer various customer services with these channels, including membership services and travel advice on a timely basis (Tong, 2017).

As mobile usage is constantly increasing across the world, tourists are depending highly on social, location, and mobile based channels to book accommodation and search details (Kim & Connolly, 2012). A multi-channel distribution strategy is being used in both practice and theory instead of single channel by hoteliers (Thakran& Verma, 2013). Third parties face competition

with direct channels of hotels which lead to channel conflicts, simultaneous routes of distribution are needed for hotels, including direct/indirect, and offline/online to reduce perishable inventory and operation costs (Thakran& Verma, 2013; O'Connor & Frew, 2002).

3.2. Variations in Online Distribution Systems in Selected Hotels of Delhi (NCR)

A multi-channel online distribution strategy is very important for small-scale hotels which operate on lower capital, scale, popularity, and market exposure (Bastakis et al, 2014). It is because different channels are needed to book volumes, increase awareness, and drive revenues (Dabas&Manaktola, 2007; Beritelli&Schegg, 2016; Mahmoud, 2015). At the same time, it is not easy to determine the right distribution strategy and it has always been the major concern for hoteliers (Gazzoli et al, 2008; Beritelli&Schegg, 2016; Kracht& Wang, 2010). Earlier revenue management researchers have discovered different practices for managing distribution channels (Kimes, 2016; Hui et al, 2009; Guillet& Mohammad, 2015). Majority of studies are based on pricing in various distribution channels.

It is because scholars are focused more on researching pricing strategies of hoteliers to appeal to direct bookings and increase yield. A lot of research is still required on integration of hoteliers on several inventory and pricing management methods in managing distribution channels (Ivanov &Ayas, 2017; Abrate&Viglia, 2016). Combination and utilization of distribution channels and other non-pricing tools are being studied (Ivanov &Ayas, 2017; Guillet& Mohammad, 2015). There are different complex factors involved in distribution channel management, such as fluctuation in demand, capacity allocation, and customer reviews should be taken by the hoteliers (Vinod, 2004). Revenue management is getting more and more dynamic as new competitions and models are constantly growing (Cetin et al, 2016). Further empirical studies are required to know the effect of distribution strategies on hotel efficiency and sales performance.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that distribution strategies for hotels have changed significantly with the advancement of the internet. Hotel customers are getting highly motivated and savvy, considering price advantages of online booking instead of direct selling with hotels, there is a risk of losing profits for hotel chains over time. The hospitality industry is getting more and more complex and competitive day by day. Optimizing the management of hotel revenue strategies has

been challenging. It is very much important to choose the right pricing strategy to improve value perception in hotel rate policy for customers. It is worth noting that price positioning is a task for hotels in a multi-channel, highly competitive, and price-sensitive market.

Wide use of third-party bookings has resulted under the merchant model in erosion of unified plans that are being promoted by the hotel brands. Social media, mobile, web, and online distribution have changed the way hotels engage, connect with, and transform customers. But the basic principles have always been the same for hotel distribution. With the rise in online shopping for rooms, it is worth expecting that hotels will constantly fight to market and control influence over the inventory of rooms, pricing policies, and their way to develop brand loyalty. There is a need to work on cost-effective distribution channels, secure rate parity, generate maximum bookings, and reach target customer groups. There are several advantages of using multiple channels for selling to minimize the risks. The unified pricing can be eroded due to widespread use of third-party online bookings, which were preferred by the branded hotels.

On the other side, mid-range hotels may not be confident enough to look ahead of their customer base. They have to be aware and gain knowledge about the latest international hospitality trends. Hotel managers tend to be satisfied with existing market demands but they may haven't connected demands to market rates. Prices are usually set per yield class, even though price variability has been introduced in revenue management. Rates are usually fixed every day in each yield class. Hence, dynamic pricing and revenue management are the concepts that are interchanged most of the time and their relationship is often misinterpreted.

Dynamic pricing is the core issue in revenue management. If a business is not online, it is not being sold. It is the harsh reality in today's hospitality industry. If a business needs to make an impact in the market, they have to be online. Innovative and user-friendly websites can provide even remote destinations and small businesses with equal presence to global markets. There is a need for hoteliers to look beyond old distribution strategies and allocate their inventories online. Though it seems to be a costly affair initially, it is also true that online distribution strategies can generate enough additional revenue to offset the cost of acquisition for the property.

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