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Vital Wave Consulting White Paper

Learning from Long Tail Success: Strategies for the Online Retail Distribution of Travel



September, 2012

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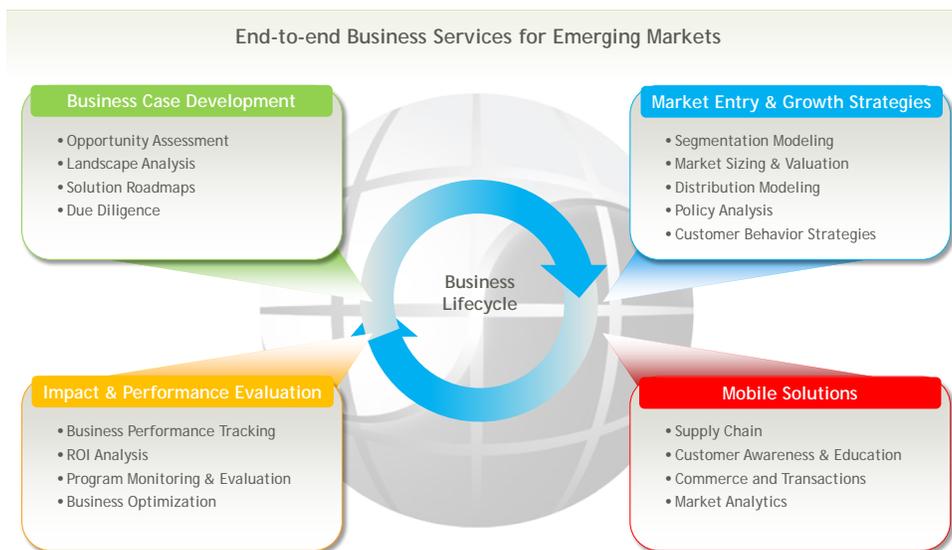
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Learning from Long Tail Success: Strategies for the Online Retail Distribution of Travel

Worldwide, an increasing percentage of tourist spending is going to specialized, niche destinations, activities and accommodations. These niche services could be considered the tourism industry's "long tail," after the retailing strategy of selling a large number of obscure, niche items in relatively small quantities. Vital Wave Consulting predicts that successful marketplaces in the new class of tourism retailers will inspire consumer confidence while offering a mix of traditional and niche products and services.

This paper discusses the emergence of long tail tourist products and services, and explores how successful strategies in the retail and entertainment sectors may be applied to the tourism sector. Taking a cue from lessons learned in other industries, tourism retailers are advised to 1.) aggregate inventories of niche products and services, 2.) identify and cultivate "powersellers," 3.) use traditional channels and technology to reduce perceived risk in purchasing, and 4.) leverage search to increase marketing and sales.

Challenges and suggestions for acting on these lessons are offered.

Introduction

Prior to 2004, if you searched for the term “long tail,” you probably would have found images of monkeys or peacocks. Today, you will likely find articles about the “long tail” retailing strategy first proposed by Chris Anderson in a 2004 issue of *Wired* magazine. In statistical terms, the “long tail” is a feature of distributions in which a high-frequency population is followed by a low-frequency population, which gradually tails off. The events at the far end of the tail have a very low probability of occurring individually but when added together, comprise a significant portion of the market. Applied to the retailing context, “long tail” describes a strategy of selling a large number of specialized items in relatively small quantities. Since the term long tail was introduced, it has become such a successful online business and marketing strategy that it has spawned university courses and several doctoral dissertations.

The strategy is currently in practice in the retail, entertainment and media industries, as well as social networking and micro-finance enterprises. In his seminal article, Anderson argued that online retailers like Amazon, iTunes and Netflix found success by offering a large number of hard-to-find items. To support the point, Amazon currently reports that 30% of its sales are for items not available in the largest offline retail stores, and Netflix claims that a fifth of rentals are outside the top 3,000 titles. Search giant Google found the long tail of the advertising market – providing the multitude of small companies and individuals previously too small to warrant attention from advertising salespeople – with a way to advertise with a few lines of code. Anderson used the term long tail in reference to the graphic representation of a distribution trend, where a few sales of each obscure item complemented, and sometimes even bolstered, strong sales of more mainstream items. It is no accident that the long tail retailing strategy has become somewhat synonymous with online enterprise; many suggest the Internet is key to the very existence and success of the strategy, as it connects vast numbers of consumers with any type of goods or services.

Recently, economists have begun to examine a wider variety of products and services through the long-tail lens. And while long-tail distribution trends occur in every industry and market niche, each has its own dynamics and challenges that require customization of the broader strategy. This paper explores the growth of niche tourism, the immense opportunities it presents for the industry, and strategies for succeeding with a long tail strategy in the tourism sector. Specifically, it focuses on the retail distribution link in the travel supply chain (see Figure A, below).

Figure A: Travel Distribution Supply Chain

Supply	Connectivity	Retail Distribution	Market
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Airlines • Hotels • Car Rental • Cruise Rail • Other 	Global Distribution Systems, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amadeus • Sabre • Travelport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Travel Agencies • Travel Agencies • Travel Management Companies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leisure Travelers • Business Travelers

Source: PhoCusWright

“Niche” Tourism through the Long Tail Lens

Traditional tourism is characterized by package tour operators, including cruises and bus tours, resorts, hotels and well-established attractions which seek to generate the highest traveler volumes possible. Mass tourism tour operators, hotel owners and transportation companies make up for low margins – typically 3-5% for package tours, for example – with volume sales. Mass tourism, growing at a steady rate of 4% since the 1950's, still accounts for the vast majority of tourism's \$4 trillion global economy.

However, empowered by Internet communications and the accessibility of direct-to-consumer portals, the niche tourism segment is growing rapidly and capturing the attention of a new breed of traveler. While mass tourism tends to draw travelers to a smaller number of larger tourism destinations, particularly in well-traveled regions of Europe and North America, niche tourism features a wide variety of destinations, accommodations, and activities, particularly in emerging-market regions like Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. “Niche tourism is a catch-all phrase for those seeking adventure, authentic cultural experiences, ecologically responsible travel, genealogical information, gastronomic thrills, exotic photos, wildlife viewing, volunteer experience, or even a view of the Earth from space.”ⁱ

Evidence is mounting that a steadily increasing percentage of tourist spending is directed towards specialized, “niche tourism” services and experiences.

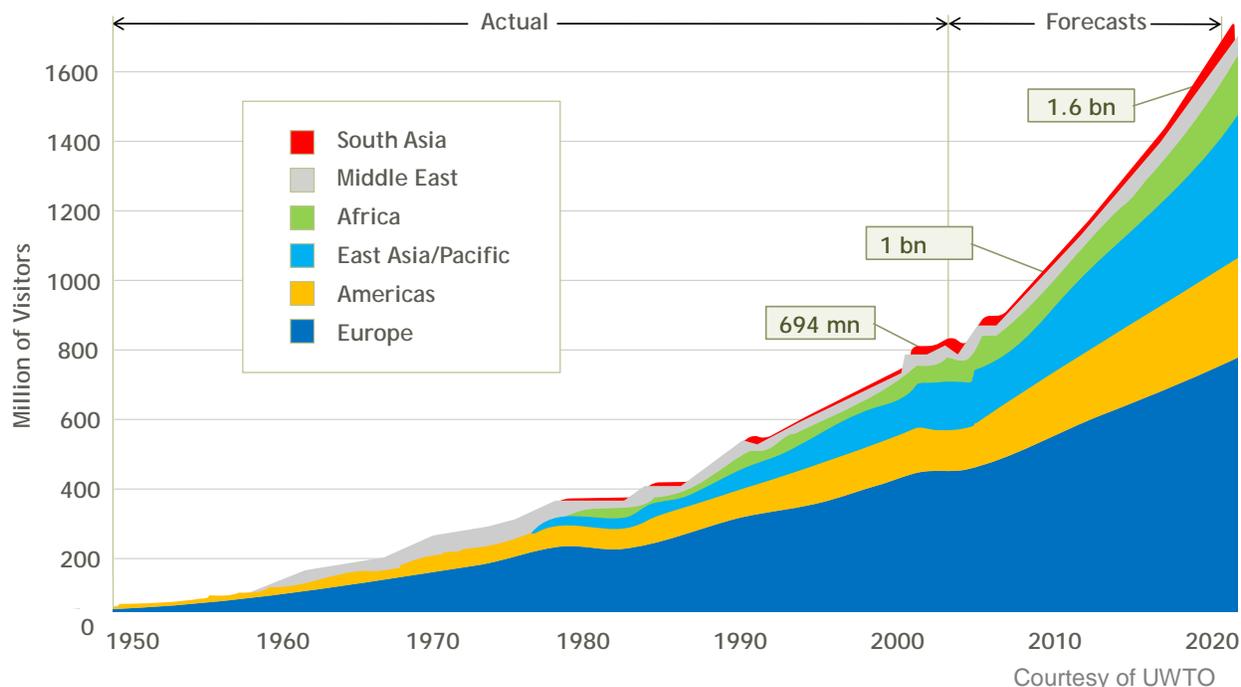
Figure B depicts the long-tail phenomenon in the context of the broader tourism industry. Located at the head are mainstream tourism destinations such as the resorts, cruises and theme parks of North America and Europe, where the focus is on high volume sales at low price points. Niche destinations and activities – such as hiking the Simien Mountains of Ethiopia or rafting the Pacuare River of Costa Rica – where the focus is on a smaller number of guests who pay higher prices – are the tourism industry's long tail.ⁱⁱ

Figure B: Depicting Tourism's Long Tail



Evidence is mounting that a steadily increasing percentage of tourist spending is directed towards these specialized, “niche tourism” services and experiences. As shown in Figure C, niche destinations are now forecasting annual growth rates of over 5% compared with mature destinations, which are projected to continue on the rate of 4% growth they have experienced since the 1950s.

Figure C: Tourism Growth Forecasts by Regionⁱⁱⁱ



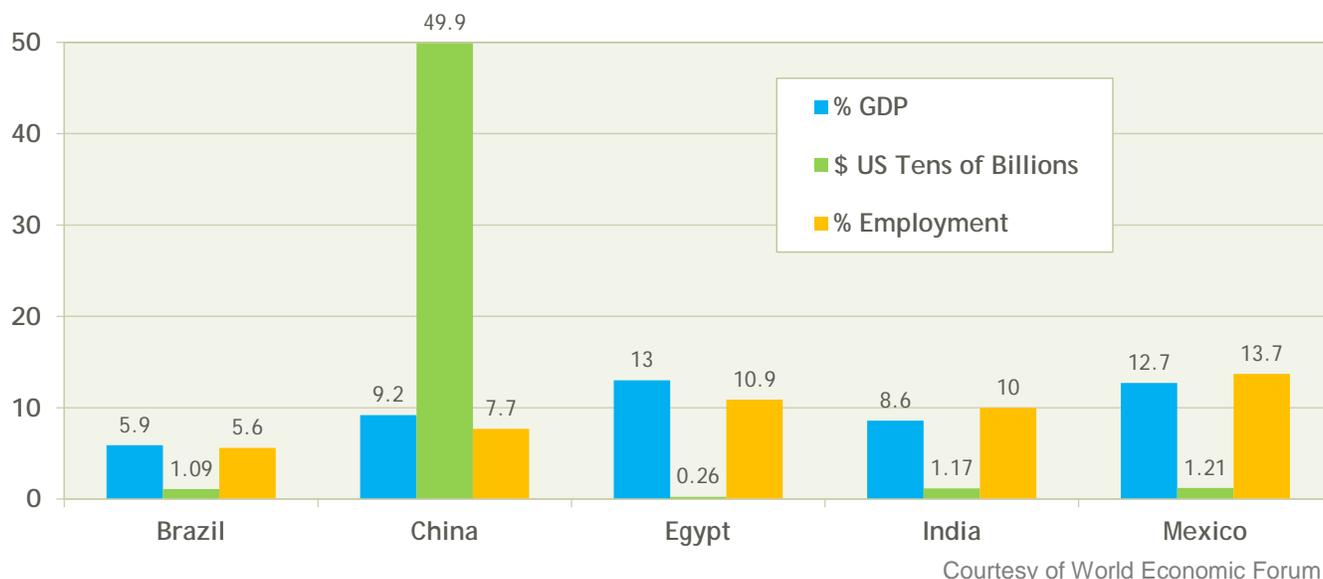
Valuing Tourism’s Long Tail

While measuring the value of the various niches can be challenging due to the lack of common definitions,^{iv} the long tail of tourism is generally considered to be growing the fastest. Available data suggests that the revenue potential of the cultural tourism and adventure tourism niches is significant. According to research conducted by Vital Wave Consulting with The George Washington University and The Adventure Travel Trade Association, the “eco-adventure” tourism niche grew at an average annual rate of 17% over the past decade and accounts for an estimated \$89 billion in global spending. Meanwhile, cultural tourism – often thought to be a small market – actually doubled from 1997 to 2007 and accounted for 40% of international tourism in 2007.^v

The “eco-adventure” tourism niche grew at an average annual rate of 17% over the past decade.

Employment and GDP data can also be used to value the long tail of tourism destinations. Total foreign exchange earnings from tourism in developing countries grew from US\$50 billion in 1990 to US\$200 billion in 2005.^{vi} In many of these emerging markets the travel and tourism economy is a growing contributor to GDP and a significant provider of jobs. Figure D, on the next page, illustrates this trend.

Figure D: GDP and Employment Growth from Tourism Economy^{vii}



Keys to Winning: Making Long Tail Dynamics Work in Tourism

As niche tourism grows, the opportunity to build a business around these activities becomes more viable, attracting an array of new entrants to travel distribution. Retail distributors looking to succeed with niche tourism products may consider the lessons learned from industries with significant long-tail activity.

Examining the success of the long tail in the distribution of books, CDs, and other retail items provides a useful baseline for the application of a long tail strategy in travel sales, though certain limitations, described in the following paragraphs in more detail, exist.

Despite the challenges, many travel retailers are focusing on tourism's long tail, hoping to experience the successes of other industries. Tourism retailers hoping to build their own long tail success stories may consider the following four guidelines:

1. **Aggregate long tail inventory**
2. **Identify and cultivate "powersellers"**
3. **Use traditional channels and technology to reduce perceived risk in purchasing**
4. **Leverage search**

Lesson 1: Aggregate Long Tail Sellers

The success of Amazon, Netflix, Apple (iTunes) and others indicates that one of the keys to market dominance is aggregating a vast inventory of long-tail products. When a vendor provides sufficient information and enough choices, buyers have confidence that they can make optimal decisions.

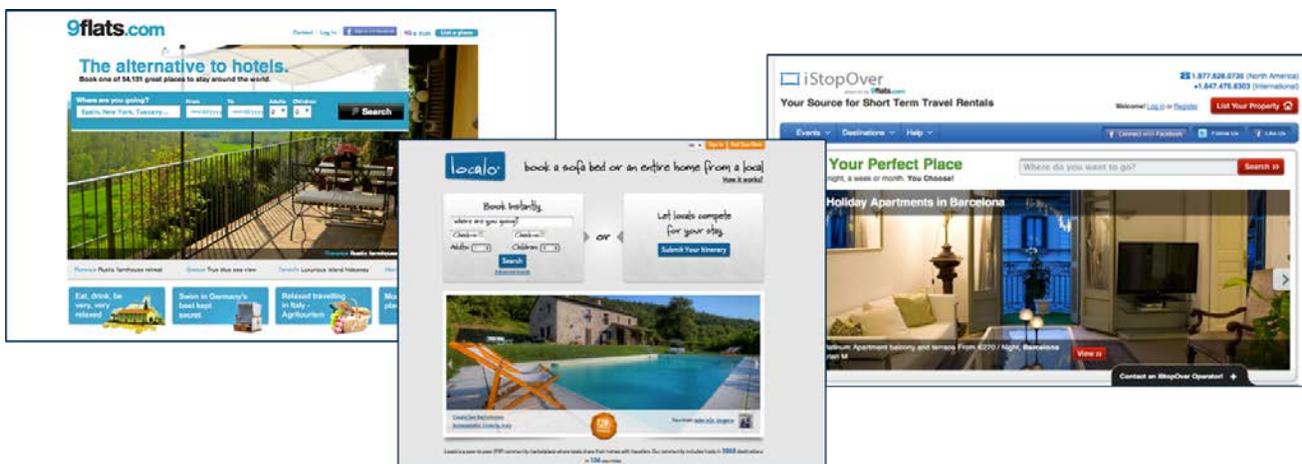
When a vendor provides sufficient information and enough choices, buyers have confidence that they can make optimal decisions.

Challenges to Aggregation

To be successful in aggregating niche tourism products, retailers will need to consider and address certain challenges. For one, today's new entrants to the world of online travel distribution are competing with global distribution systems and their retail partners whose vast inventories have been organized for decades. These global distribution systems (GDS) enable bookings for nearly half a million travel agents around the world and generate more than \$9.6 billion in revenue from more than 1.1 billion transactions.^{viii} They handle airline bookings and an expanding inventory of hotel properties, car rentals, tour operators and cruise lines. The four largest online travel agencies – Expedia, Orbitz, Priceline and Travelocity – together with their affiliates, represented 96% of all online travel agency sales in 2008.^{ix}

In contrast, the global inventory of niche activities and accommodations is vast, disorganized, and changing. Many long-tail tourism activities or services have not been formally inventoried; many do not maintain a website because of their remote location, limited marketing expertise and difficulty in accessing the Internet.

In the accommodations segment, companies such as airbnb.com, wimdu.com, 9flats.com, localo.com, couchsurfer.com, homeaway.com, istopover.com and many others match tourists with local sellers – sometimes just a person with an extra room (or a couch).



Travelers now have the option of swapping homes or apartments, couch surfing, living aboard a boat, staying with locals in cities or on a farm, in a forest hut, or on the steppes of Mongolia. While all of these types of lodging can be found on an increasing number of competitive small-scale aggregator sites, no service has yet risen to prominence in the accommodation segment.

The activities segment is similarly fragmented, and no single online retailer has yet become the “go-to” service for niche travel experiences. Industry research has shown that, even in the U.S. and Europe, up to 30% of tour and activity operators do not have a web presence, and less than 8% of revenues are generated from any form of retail distribution.^x

Furthermore, long tail activities present a challenge to aggregation:



- Activities occur irregularly, with scheduled departures that depend on the number of participants and changing weather conditions, animal migration patterns and transportation difficulties.
- Activities are frequently canceled due to unforeseen circumstances, which can range from weather to terrorist events.
- Sellers vary in their application of and comfort with technology and the more remote the product, often the less likely the information online is up to date.
- While a song or electronic product can be produced once and downloaded infinitely for little additional cost to the producer, niche tourism is still a manual business and rarely physically scalable on an individual company basis.

Adventureus.com, gidsy.com, localyte.com, lonelyplanet.com, peek.com, tourdust.com, tourradar.com, vayable.com, xola.com and whl.travel are just a few of the many sites aggregating niche travel experiences and activities. A niche tourism industry association- the Adventure Travel Trade Association - even has joined the game with an aggregation of hundreds of operators and tours via its membership and partnerships.

Approaches to Aggregation in the Long Tail

In both the accommodations and activities segments, online retailers may consider a range of different approaches to identifying and organizing the long tail:

- Creating tools that allow sellers to list services themselves;
- Recruiting sellers through focused research and direct outreach; and
- Attracting travelers to the website’s content, which in turn draws sellers to publicize their unusual, hard-to-find, long tail inventory.

Examples of retailers which are aggregating long tail sellers by creating tools to allow them to list their services easily can be found on websites such as Vayable.com and Gidsy.com, where links to “Offer an Experience” or

“Organize an Activity” leads prospective tour guides through the process of creating an account or linking through Facebook to advertise their specialized services. Vayable has grown to approximately 1500 guides and continues to expand. Similarly, sustainable, cultural and adventure travel vacation retailer StepUp Travel offers a link to “Post an Ad” and has attracted more than 6000 activities offered by approximately 4000 providers. For accommodations providers, airbnb offers prospective sellers a quick and easy way to “list your space” through an online form that can also be linked to a seller’s Facebook account.

Attracting sellers through focused research and direct outreach is an approach used by retailers such as tourdust.com and whl.travel, who do not offer an easy way for providers to list their offerings themselves. Whl.travel began as a rural tourism development project in the Mekong before evolving into a network of local providers who become members. The whl.travel team continues to work through development agencies and local teams to connect directly with local sellers of long tail travel services. Service providers not already in contact with a whl.travel representative must connect through a local owner/operator in their destination and request a listing. Tourdust.com “hand picks” the expert sellers in their marketplace.

Retail distributors looking to win in the niche tourism segment will need to:

- **Implement a cost-effective means of collecting, maintaining and reviewing seller data;**
- **Become known as a reliable and accurate source of information about specialized travel activities;**
- **Monetize the provision of that information through subscription fees, commissions, advertising, and sponsorships typically paid by the activity sellers when travelers purchase;**
- **Curate their marketplaces closely and inspire enough confidence for travelers to book their uncommon, specialized travel online;**
- **Maximize the opportunities presented by mobile services for search and sharing. Travelers increasingly expect to access information even in remote or obscure travel destinations and want to share instantly their experiences with friends and family through social networking and online communication tools;**
- **Mitigate the risk of poor customer experiences as they open the gates to a vast range of non-traditional service sellers; and**
- **Support their inventory with compelling marketing campaigns to build awareness and draw travelers to their sites.**

Marketplaces that aggregate a sufficient number of sellers will become reference points for consumers.

Lesson 2: Identify the “Powersellers”

A key lesson from the Amazon and Netflix success stories is that while aggregating long tail inventory and providing access to purchase online is important, this factor alone is not enough to sustain a business. The majority of sales still come from mainstream, popular items. At Amazon, 70% of sales come from titles that are available in major retail outlets. At Netflix, 80% of their rentals are titles that are among the 3,000 most popular titles. As Google CEO Eric Schmidt says, “We love the long tail, but we make most of our money in the head, just because of the math of the powerlaw. But you need both. You need the head and the tail to make the model work.”^{xi}

Marketplaces that aggregate a sufficient number of sellers will become reference points for consumers.

Whether a travel retailer is focused on selling destinations, accommodations, or tour experiences, recognizing the need for both the “head” and “tail” offerings is important. Even though a vast array of obscure options are becoming available, a set of powersellers with mainstream appeal, are still likely to make up the majority of revenues.

“You need the head and the tail to make the model work.”

-Eric Schmidt, CEO, Google

The powersellers of the new long tail travel marketplaces will have reliable, regular inventory (accommodations availability and trip departures) and they will have implemented standards of service on the part of their guides that are predictable, even as the people providing them are emotional, changeable and human. The new powersellers will emerge by providing experiences travelers feel as confident buying online as a book.

Each of the travel retail businesses mentioned earlier, set up to exploit the opportunity presented by increasing traveler interest in niche services and experiences, will have to identify a set of powerselling providers. The test for these long tail travel marketplaces will be identifying businesses that have mainstream appeal and accessibility.

Lesson 3: Use a Combination of Traditional Channels and Technology to Reduce Risk for Travelers

For the pioneering long tail marketplaces such as Amazon and Netflix, the mere use of the Internet constituted a revolutionary use of technology for the distribution of products. And what was initially uncommon – buying products online – has now become for most people a routine, low-risk experience. Travel lags well behind these sectors, however, and for most people buying a book, CD, shoes or a movie from an online marketplace populated with a vast array of niche items carries a much lower level of risk than buying a white water rafting trip through the jungles of Papua New Guinea. The book, CD or shoes can be returned easily if they are not satisfactory, and it is clear why a tangible product is defective.



With niche travel experiences, the diagnosis for why the trip was unsatisfactory, and the process of “returning” it, is significantly more complex. Travel experiences are both highly subjective and changeable. A naturalist river guide leading the Papua New Guinea rafting trip might perform well one day and poorly the next, leading to a vastly different experience for clients. And, clients play a significant role in the successful outcome of the trip; by participating they are co-creators as well as consumers of the travel experience. Travel experience sellers must contend with a range of emotions and limitations on the part of the consumer, which can drastically affect the outcome of the experience and the resulting review and confidence level for similar online purchases in the future.

Online travel retailers may educate and build confidence with consumers in a variety of ways:

- **Establishing programs that certify sellers and guarantee their quality**
- **Emphasizing referral-based search results**
- **Offering trip insurance**
- **Creating customer loyalty programs**
- **Partnering with established companies**

Another common technique for online retailers is to introduce their online marketplaces in offline environments. Successful long tail retailer Netflix continues to send CDs through the post, even as streaming is set to become the dominant channel for distribution. Likewise, in travel distribution, Expedia posts kiosks in key hotel lobbies, such as the Hilton Hotel in Hawaii, to market and sell its online experiences. Long tail marketplaces may need to work through traditional mass tourism channels until consumers build enough confidence and have a greater awareness of their offerings.

New technologies will also provide many ways for travelers to get more information and reduce the level of risk they feel in purchasing niche travel online. By making the best use of interactive technology, travel sellers can make great strides in setting the appropriate expectations with travelers, helping them gather all the information they need to make the best, most informed decision possible about the seller and destination before they book online.

Applications such as Spreecast, which streamline and enhance video chat and video conferencing may hold special promise for the sales of niche tourism online. Likewise, mobile, location-based services that opportunistically “grab” travelers once they’re already in a destination allow the traveler to investigate sellers and pay online with a credit card. Though connectivity challenges in emerging markets remain an impediment, the situation is changing. Eighty-five percent of leisure travelers report using their smart phones while traveling; 15% have downloaded mobile apps specific to upcoming vacations.^{xii} Rezgo’s CEO Stephen Joyce remarked that the number of travelers accessing tour operator websites to book trips increased from 8% to 18% between 2010 and 2011, providing his company with all the validation it needed to direct more investment to creating a very mobile-friendly interface for tour operators who use its system. Social networking is also a key element in reducing perceived risk in purchasing, as it enables travelers to book trips their friends are taking, and access reliable recommendations before making a decision. Ninety-two percent of consumers around the world say they trust “earned” media, such as word-of-mouth and recommendations from friends and family, above all other forms of advertising.^{xiii}

The successful marketplaces in the new class of long tail retailers will be those from whom travel consumers feel confident enough to buy repeatedly, and which have a sufficient mix of “head” and “tail” products and services on offer. Expect to see travel retailers using technology in new and novel ways to ease the risk for travelers, encouraging them to explore deeper into their long tail inventories.

Lesson 4: Leverage Search

The importance of leveraging knowledge of travel search trends cannot be overstated. Understanding and taking the best advantage of how travelers search for information allows retailers to craft an easy, intuitive experience with well-filtered and categorized travel opportunities. Careful design of the site, providing travelers with a meaningful way of framing their options, will help them make decisions.

The collection, analysis and use of new and previously unavailable data, presents an enormous opportunity for travel retailers.

“Big Data,” or the collection, analysis and use of new and previously unavailable data, presents an enormous opportunity for travel retailers. As the volume, variety and velocity of data increases, companies can go beyond traditional Internet search optimization to develop new insights and support sales through cell phone data and credit card purchasing history. Especially relevant to promoting niche travel sales through search will be “recommendation engines,” which allow travelers to see the other selections made by people with similar requirements.

Conclusions and Forecasting

The emergence of long tail marketplaces in tourism is already having an impact on the overall travel distribution landscape. Existing online travel agents and marketplaces are beginning to reach into the long tail and enliven their current offerings with niche services to keep their inventories fresh. To keep pace, multinational hoteliers and other accommodation providers will need to incorporate obscure offerings and making them available within their lodging portfolio. Similarly, mass tour operators may consider diversifying their itineraries to include a broader mix of mainstream activities and niche experiences. For people in the business of selling destinations, this will mean finding ways to incorporate new, under-utilized areas. And because many of these areas will involve rural communities and wilderness areas, this also strongly necessitates careful planning and the management of tourism development, a serious issue that places an additional burden on emerging economies interested in taking advantage of the trend in niche activities and destinations.

Tourism provides an inventory limited only by seller’s imaginations and their ability to communicate their offerings. As today’s niche activities and destinations continue to gain prominence, it is plausible that the destinations, accommodations and activities that make up the long tail of travel today will eventually be as easily bookable online as mainstream destinations. Places such as Peru’s Inca Trail or Ecuador’s Galapagos Islands provide examples of this phenomenon – previously ‘niche’ destinations which are now quite accessible and commonly booked online. Despite the challenges of aggregating seller offerings and the purchase risks that consumers perceive, it is the long tail of tourism that is actively refreshing and expanding the way travelers experience the world. ■

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