Guide to Digital Marketing for Tours, Activities, & Attractions

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Attractions, tours, and activities marketers face unique challenges within the travel space. As a travel vertical that often deals with last-minute bookers and walk-ups, and still invests heavily in out-of-home advertising solutions, online marketing can seem daunting, time-consuming, or unnecessary. **However, there is a massive opportunity to capture online bookings: operators sold $44 billion worth of experiences through their own websites and online travel agencies (OTAs) in 2019**[1], indicating that there are more dollars for the taking, and more ways to engage with your potential visitors.

At Sojern, we work closely with hundreds of tour operators, in-destination experiences, activities, and attractions, helping them with digital marketing and driving direct bookings. We know just how difficult it can be for the attraction marketer to do it all: keeping up with the latest marketing trends while also answering phones, putting together new tours, balancing budgets, and ensuring visitors are satisfied. **To help, we've put together a digital marketing guide, with tips and advice from experts in the industry.**

In this guide, you'll learn:

- The importance of direct, advance, online bookings and how marketing can help you capture more
- The basics of digital marketing and how to get the most out of each channel
- How to take your current marketing efforts to the next level

The Advantage of Direct (& Advance) Online Bookings

With online digital advertising, you can find people looking to come to your market and introduce them to your offering with ads. Those ads influence them to visit your website, and if your online experience is top-notch, they'll book right there. **Digital advertising, then, is key to direct, advance, online bookings.** These types of bookings remain a top priority for 41% of attraction marketers.[2]

Today, more than ever, consumers are researching, shopping, and booking their experiences online. Globally, 85% of travelers search for attractions 78 days before their trip.[3] Thus, reaching these travelers and winning their business directly, ahead of their trip, is imperative. This allows you to:

- Generate higher net profit per ticket sales
- Win the direct relationship with your customers, and upsell your packages
- Build and generate more awareness of your brand
- Have more control over offers and promotions
- Continue engaging with customers after their trip

Having a digital presence and online marketing strategy is a must in order to capture your travel audiences' interest and encourage them to book early and directly with you.

Digital Marketing 101

In traditional advertising—think radio, tv, or magazine ads—you buy ad space where you think your ideal consumer will be and will see your ad. You then hope that view turns into a phone call or a website visit, but you don't always know which (if any) outreach generated a lead.

On the other hand, with digital marketing, your efforts are easily tracked. You see exactly what campaigns lead your potential visitors to complete a desired action, be it visiting your new website, contacting you to learn more, or purchasing a ticket. This is an important topic to get up to speed on because more than half of all operators do not engage in standard digital marketing activities, have limited or no performance tracking, and remain unsatisfied with their marketing efforts.[4]

With digital marketing, and perhaps most importantly, programmatic digital marketing, you find audiences based on certain criteria, advertise to them, and then see if after they viewed or clicked on your ad, they visited your website or booked with you. Instead of using content to guess what website your ideal traveler is on, and serving ads there, you use data science and advanced algorithms to find and market to the exact audience you want, no matter where they are online, either on desktop or mobile. Even better, you can limit your ads being served until that traveler has shown intent to come to your destination, through either a flight or hotel search or booking (for example), creating greater efficiency with your marketing dollars.

Simply, programmatic advertising (also referred to as real-time bidding (RTB)) uses technology to buy and sell ad inventory through an automated and data-driven process. **Programmatic advertising represents most types of ad spaces on all screens today,** and increases effectiveness and efficiency of your marketing campaigns, while maximizing your return on investment (ROI).

Whether you're a tour operator, major theme park, or local museum, programmatic advertising benefits everyone, regardless of time, resource, or budget constraints. Now, let's go through the basic channels of digital marketing and how to put each to best use.

THE TOUR AT NBC STUDIOS
30 ROCKEFELLER PLAZA

The Tour at NBC Studios team marketed 'The Tour' experience through various outlets in the past, and sought a better way to measure the impact of their spend by shifting to a more digital presence. "We want to do things that move the needle for us. Proving results that we can track back to a campaign is key."

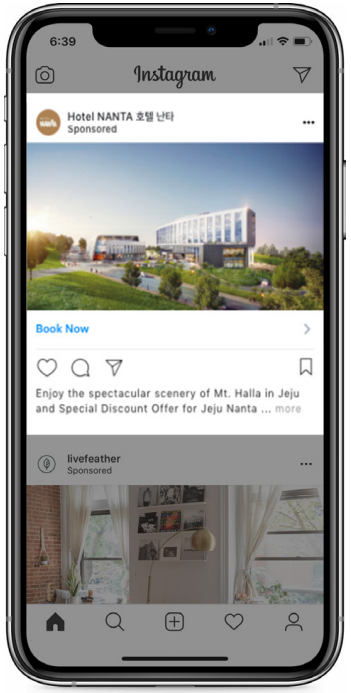
Ryan Michaelsen
Director of Tours and Marketing
Learn More

Facebook & Instagram

Reaching your Audience on Platforms that Drive More Engagement

With over 3 billion monthly active users, Facebook and Instagram offer a massive opportunity for attraction marketers to showcase their unique experiences and drive engagement. Many marketers claim to 'do' Facebook, by boosting their social posts or monitoring likes and comments. **But there is a substantial difference between using Facebook and Instagram as a social channel, and using it to drive brand awareness and direct bookings with paid advertising.** Defaulting to organic reach is not a viable solution to reaching the billions of users on these platforms, and does not help you deliver your message to the right audience at the right time.

In addition to Facebook's many products and solutions, it is inherently cross-device, which means you can reach users throughout the path to purchase, as they jump from desktop to mobile to tablet. Trip Consideration helps you identify or prospect new travelers within the Facebook and Instagram ecosystem, and influence them to go directly to your website. Custom Audiences can also be used to retarget or remarket to an audience who already know your business, and have previously visited your website.



Facebook & Instagram in Action

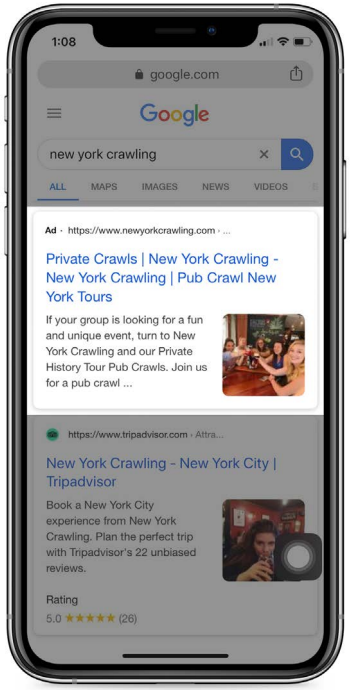
To increase brand awareness, website traffic, and direct bookings, Hotel Nanta turned to Facebook, Instagram, Display, and SEM. In just 10 months, the property in South Korea **doubled overall direct bookings, and increased homepage traffic to an average of 1,100 visits per day.** Learn More.

Search Engine Marketing

Winning Against the Competition

Search Engine Marketing (SEM, also known as paid search) increases the visibility of your website in search engine results pages through paid advertising. Simply, it is every link at the top of a search engine page marked as an 'Ad'. Search is one of the most important channels that travelers use, so a strong SEM strategy is imperative for attraction marketers. Last year, eMarketer estimated that advertisers spent $5.84 billion on search [5], and attraction marketers allocated 17% of their digital budgets to SEM in 2019.[6]

SEM also protects your brand. Chances are, third parties are bidding on your branded keywords and phrases to drive potential bookers to their site, rather than yours. **If you've interested someone through your display efforts, for example, and they search for your experience, those people will likely be driven to third party sites to book with them—unless you have a strong search strategy.**



SEM in Action

"We differentiate ourselves by providing visitors with the hidden history of New York, so a strong SEM strategy is vital for my tours. There's a lot of competition, with a lot of things to do and see in the city, and I want to make sure that if anyone is looking for a pub crawl, I'm at the top of the list. With this SEM campaign, we were focused on brand awareness, and in a short amount of time, **our website traffic increased by 8%.**"

Bobby Heaney
Owner & CCO, New York Crawling

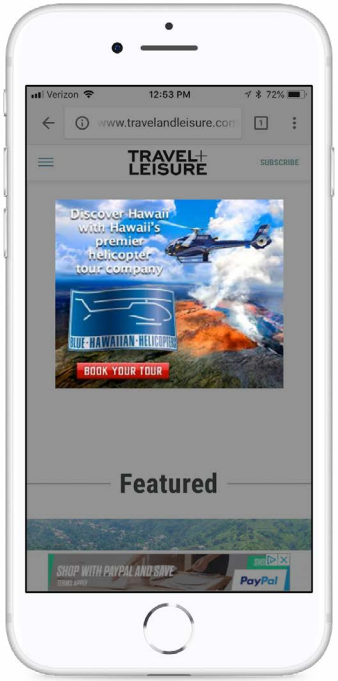
Display

Showcasing Your Brand Around the Web

Display Ads (or Banner Ads) are an established channel in the digital marketing landscape.

Display is effective for every stage of the traveler path to purchase, as travelers move from research to booking, across desktop and mobile, targeting customers where and when they are online. The average traveler spends 13% of their time online conducting travel-related activities[7], and in the 12 weeks leading up to a trip, there are three times more experience searches than hotel searches.[8]

If you'd like to take your display efforts one step further, consider using an HTML5 ad. This eye-catching format combats 'banner blindness' and as such, can result in higher engagement and conversions. When we tested static ads against HTML5, we saw a 13% increase in clicks, an 8% increase in converters, and a 13% increase in the search rate on the customer's website.[9]



Programmatic Display in Action

With a newly designed website and stunning video assets, Blue Hawaiian Helicopters knew they needed to diversify their marketing spend outside of print and Search Engine Marketing (SEM). **With an eye to increase their brand awareness and drive direct sales, they used a programmatic display campaign that drove an 8X ROI while scaling spend.** Learn More.

Video

Standing Out and Immersing Your Audience in Your Experience

Video immerses you in the sights, sounds, and movement of an experience in ways that other mediums cannot. By 2021, it's estimated that the average person will spend 100 minutes every day watching online videos.[10]

Attraction marketers are uniquely positioned to benefit from video, because it shares their experiences in a quick, consumable, and immersive way. Video can be used to provide a glimpse into what visitors can expect from your attraction as they research their trip, target them to upsell a specific package while they are in-destination, or as a way to share their experience and recommend to their friends and family afterwards.

Additionally, many attraction marketers edit their videos down into smaller, bite-sized chunks, and then overlay different Call to Actions (CTAs) to test and see what drives a visitor to engage with their website and/or book.

Video in Action

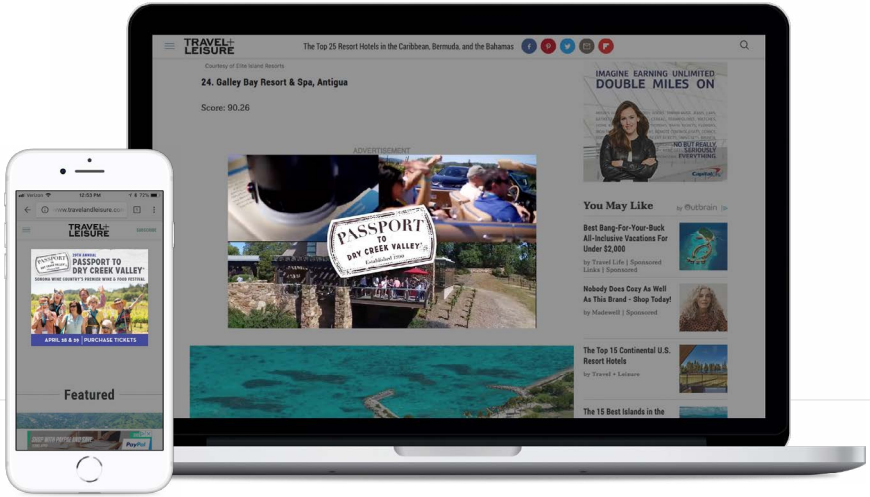
Overland Ireland, a tour operator across the Emerald Isle, helps hundreds of visitors discover and explore Ireland in ways they never could on their own. Seeking a way to inspire travelers to book tours with them, Overland Ireland added video to their existing always-on marketing campaign with Sojern, **resulting in over 97K video views, and a 10X higher video CTR than the industry average.** Learn More.

Going Multi-Channel

Why Not Have It All?

Multi-channel campaigns are vital for connecting with online travelers because of the fundamental shift in the way they plan trips—with demand for travel occurring 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, on multiple devices.

Having a mix of some or all of these channels provides greater opportunities to reach and engage your audiences, as they jump from device to device, website to app to social platform. And with the right partner, a multi-channel strategy doesn't necessarily mean increased budgets and resources.



A Multi-Channel Strategy in Action

Winegrowers of Dry Creek Valley® launched a multi-channel marketing campaign to promote ticket sales to their annual Passport to Dry Creek Valley event. Using display, video, and native ads, they saw a **55% View Through Rate** on YouTube (double the industry benchmark), a **0.13% Click Through Rate** with the native ad format, and inspired high-quality customers to attend their event. Learn More.

Website Optimization

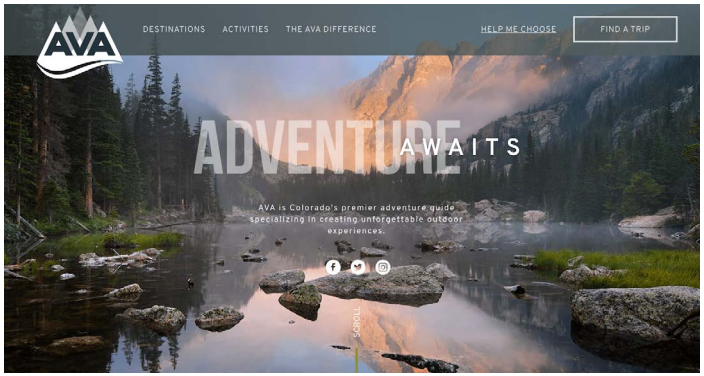
Making it Easy for Visitors to Book Direct

You've done all the advertising on all the relevant channels and a traveler is now on your website thanks to those efforts. But if it's not simple to book or find the information they need, they'll give up and go elsewhere. **Knowing the potential impact of a poorly optimized website, OTAs and large attractions make every effort to ensure booking online is a breeze.**

When it comes to booking experiences online, we've found that large attractions have the shortest average number of search steps to complete a ticket purchase: just three![11] This is, in part, because these larger attractions are the reason a traveler is taking the trip in the first place (think of your major theme parks) and they know what experience they're booking. But it is also due to the fact that these larger attractions have invested the time and resources into making a purchase as easy as possible for their visitors.

With the shift to more advanced bookings occuring online, people are used to an easy check out experience and will abandon you for someone else if they can't get it. For example, make sure your CTA button can be found without scrolling. Consider guiding your visitors through the booking process. Think about your mobile booking process as well. Is it easy on your mobile phone to make 'finger bookings'?

55% of high-value travelers consider an easy-to-use website when choosing a brand for booking travel.[12] What's more, for smaller attractions, a lot more comparison shopping happens before a booking decision is made, typically taking around 17 steps.[13]



Website Optimization in Action

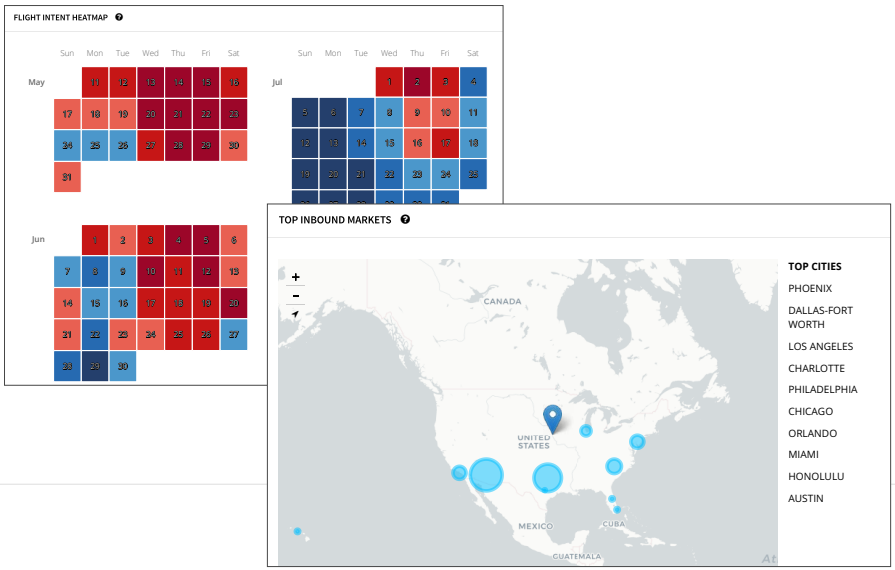
"We are people people. We're in the service industry, we like to talk to people, but if they want an easy booking process we're going to give them that. So our website allows us to be really strategic about that selling and booking process so that we're able to provide them with the information that our agents are so great at providing. The less clicks someone has to make to book is what they're looking for."

Jocelyn Criswell
Director of Sales & Marketing, AVA Rafting & Ziplining
Learn More

When a customer finally decides to book with you, if your website is difficult or confusing, you will potentially lose them to competitors or third parties. **Take the time to invest in your own website and ensure your booking process is as easy and straightforward as possible.** Keep it exciting and fresh. Use beautiful imagery, remove the distractions and the pop-ups, and have a trusted source take a look with fresh eyes to give you feedback.

Insights

Using Data to Inform Campaigns



Marketers who effectively utilize data and insights to engage travelers across multiple channels maximize the ability to understand travelers' online behaviors and influence them at exactly the right time. It is one of the reasons Sojern invested in our Insights Dashboard within our Sojern Online Account—to assist clients in understanding where and when their visitors are traveling, their top inbound markets, and their audience demographics.

Attraction marketers need to make every dollar count, and access to real-time campaign performance, paired with these insights, can inform future campaigns, optimize performance, and maximize ROI.

"To be effective in digital, you have to constantly monitor the ads, and we don't have someone specifically devoted to it. Most importantly, we needed to optimize spend–every dollar counts in the non-profit space."

Rachel Grace
Marketing & Communications Director, Maha Festival
Learn More

Summary

Reaching travelers and driving them to book with you ahead of their trip helps you increase your revenue, build a direct relationship, and manage your visitor expectations. A digital marketing strategy is crucial to driving these direct and advance bookings. Additionally, remember these key takeaways for sucess:

Use Social to Drive Engagement: A Facebook page and organic reach does help you establish your brand, but it is not a viable solution to reach the billions of users on social platforms. A paid advertising strategy is essential in order to deliver your message to the right audience, at the right time.

Reach Travelers Where They Are: While you don't need to use all the digital advertising channels out there, we do suggest a multi-channel mix to reach your potential visitors no matter the device, platform, or website. A multi-channel marketing strategy grabs travelers' attention when they start planning, and keeps you top-of-mind when they are ready to book.

Optimize Your Website for Direct Bookings: Travelers expect a seamless path to purchase. Long page load times, hard-to-read font, or poor navigation lead to immediate abandonment of their purchase on your site. Spending the time and resources to make your booking process as easy as possible can increase your direct sales and enhance your brand.

Find a Digital Marketing Partner: We understand the challenges of having a small team and an even smaller marketing budget. Digital ad experts like Sojern bring you high tech solutions that don't break the bank. Using our 350 million traveler profiles and real-time intent data, we'll place your ads in front of travelers looking for an experience in your destination, encouraging them to go directly to your website and book with you.

Developing a killer marketing strategy now will allow you to grow your brand and cultivate direct relationships while giving you the time to focus on doing what you do best, providing an incredible experience for your customers.

Sojern's Digital Marketing Solutions for Attractions

Sojern has a full spectrum of solutions to meet the needs of any in-destination experience. Based on your campaign goals, we offer flexible pricing models to help you drive brand awareness, engage with travelers most likely to convert, and generate direct bookings:

Programmatic Media

We offer managed-service advertising to meet your brand and performance goals. Using our predictive data science and real-time search and booking intent signals, you can find and market to the exact audience you want, no matter where they are online.

Pick Your Plan

An always-on, multi-channel, subscription-based solution that fits your marketing budget and advertising needs. We have a three-tier pricing system, so select the channels and price point that work best for you.

Endnotes

1 Arival, The Experience Revolution: The Global Operator Landscape, 2020.

2 Arival, The Experience Revolution: The Global Operator Landscape, 2020.

3 Sojern, Jan 2019 - Dec 2019.

4 Arival, The Experience Revolution: The Global Operator Landscape, 2020.

5 eMarketer, Ad Spend on Travel in the US Is Growing Faster than Other Verticals, 2019.

6 Sojern, State of the Travel Industry Survey, 2019.

7 Google/Bain, Infinite Paths to Purchase, 2019.

8 Google/Greenberg, Global, Travel Tours and Activities Survey and Behavioral Study, 2018.

9 Sojern Creative A/B Testing, 2019.

10 Marketing Charts, Online Video Consumption Continues to Rise Globally, 2019.

11 Google/Bain, Infinite Paths to Purchase, 2019.

12 Google/Greenberg, Global, Travel Tours and Activities Survey and Behavioral Study, 2018.

13 Sojern Creative A/B Testing, 2019.

Sojern provides digital marketing solutions for the travel industry. Powered by artificial intelligence and built on more than a decade spent analyzing traveler intent data, Sojern activates multi-channel branding and performance marketing solutions to drive direct demand. More than 10,000 hotels, attractions, tourism boards and travel marketers rely on Sojern to engage and convert travelers around the world.

www.sojern.com