

Selling your experience online

With travellers increasingly engaging with technology to plan and book their travel, it is important to ensure your customers can book your tourism experience online.

There are two key ways to enable your potential Ideal Customer(s) to book online:

- Sell your tourism experience directly from your website
- Work with online travel distributors to sell via their platforms

Selling your experience on your website

With most people turning to search engines as their first channel to start their holiday planning process, it is recommended that tourism businesses optimise their own tourism website as their primary sales channel. It is your own website that your customers will find in search engine result pages.

Key reasons to focus on selling your experience via your website include:

Full ownership

You have full control and ownership of your website. This is important, especially in an era of heightened cyber security, and other digital threats.

Data insights

You can track the movements of users on your website. Tools such as Google Analytics enable you to identify where your users originated from, and the steps they took to making their booking. This information can help you to refine your marketing investments.

Customer confidence

Customers still trust and prioritise a business' own website. Consumer confidence in booking direct with tourism businesses is high, especially post-COVID.

Top Tip



Profiling your Ideal Customer(s) and understanding their travel purchase journey can help to determine how best to reach them online. Refer to the [Understanding your customers](#) guide for more information.

Selling your experience online

Using an online booking system

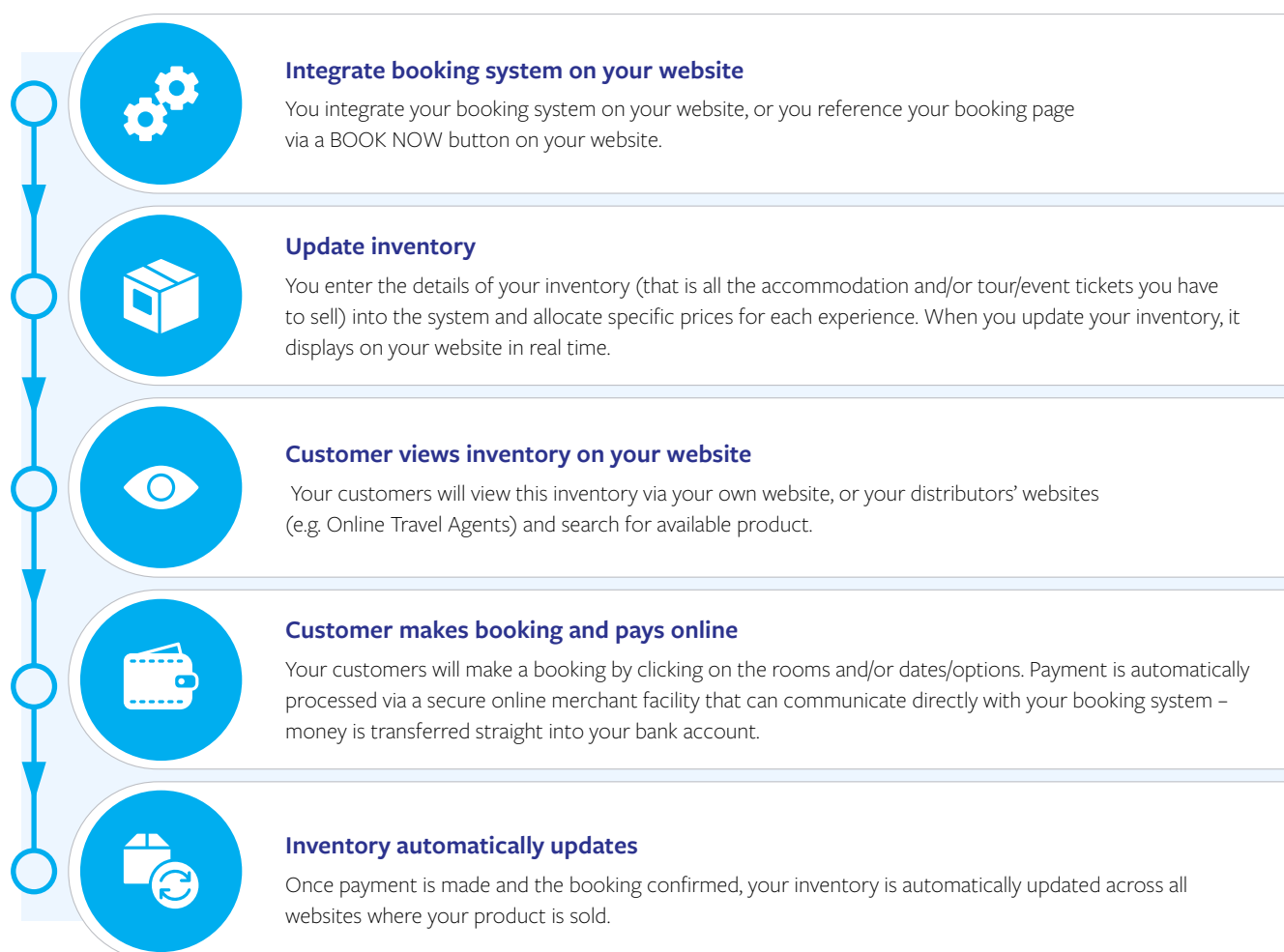
Many tourism businesses use an online booking system as a cost-effective way to take bookings, manage inventory and process payments online.

There are a range of providers offering online booking systems for different types of tourism business. Deciding on how you will process transactions online will depend on the type of tourism experience you are selling e.g. accommodation, tours, dining or events. You will need to investigate online booking systems that can best support your business model.

What is an online booking system?

An online booking system is digital software that streamlines your reservations and payments for your business so that people can book and pay for your experience 24/7 without human intervention. An online booking system can help improve the customer experience and can also save you time and money.

How online booking systems work



Selling your experience online

What are the benefits of using an online booking system?

There are many benefits to using an online booking system to sell your product/service online, including:

1

It is a cost-effective way to sell your tourism product online. Using an online booking system is likely to be cheaper than investing in a customised reservation and payment gateway for your website.

2

It offers a quick and easy way for customers to view, book and pay for your product. Customers expect to be able to book your experience instantly, and without human intervention.

3

It saves you time and money in phone calls, emails, and manually managing your bookings. This means you can spend more time focusing on delivering the actual experience you offer.

4

It can help you achieve more direct bookings and sales. This means you are paying less commission to third party distributors.

5

It can widen your distribution and allow bookings on multiple websites. If your booking system has a channel manager (see below) it means more exposure and potentially more sales.

6

It can speed up your cash flow. Once customers book, their money goes straight into your account and there is no payment lag time.

7

It offers trust and authority. Some customers are cautious about sharing payment details online, however online booking systems are secure, offering greater reassurance.

8

It is easy to manage and update. Online booking systems are designed to be intuitive, simple and easy for business owners to manage.

Selling your experience online

Key considerations when choosing an online booking system

Identify your selling needs

Before commencing research into online booking systems, it is important to evaluate your business needs and consider your resources on hand. This way, you have an idea of what features you need and what budget you can afford to allocate to the software.

Once you have identified your requirements and resources, start by brainstorming your key functionality requirements.

The following questions are a great starting point:

- How many experiences/rooms/tours do you have to sell?
- Do you have optional extras that you want to sell on top of these?
- Do you have packages to sell?
- What payment options do you want to offer or be able to accept from customers?
- How do you want to sell your experience (e.g. on the go in person, online?)
- Who do you want to sell your experience (e.g. just you, Online Travel Agents, Visitor Information Centres?) This will require a Channel Manager as part of the booking system (read below).
- Do you want to use voucher codes and offer gift vouchers?
- Does it need to integrate with other third-party online software (e.g. mobile apps, accounting software, email marketing software etc?)
- How many people will need to access the system? Consider the scalability and flexibility required from the software.

Identify your software integration capabilities

As well as being able to take reservations and payments for your business, it is also important to consider potential integration capabilities. These functionalities help provide a seamless experience for your customers, allowing you to service your customers before, during and after a booking has been made.

Integration capabilities to consider:

- Point of sale options - selling items in person in the business.
- On the go sales.
- Multicurrency and multilingual options - depending on your Ideal Customer(s).
- Integration with Google Maps and social media - potential to sell through social media platforms.
- Dynamic packaging options - create and distribute packages.
- Support for user reviews - draw in reviews from multiple sites.
- Cancellation, rebooking and rescheduling management - ensure a seamless experience for customers and create efficiencies in customer servicing.
- Google Analytics integration - to track the referrals and sales on your website.
- Microsoft Excel CSV file download - for accounting purposes.

Customer support and service

Reliable and fast customer service support from the online booking system provider is an important consideration. As well as resolving issues faster, they will also provide continuous updates for your software to improve performance and add more features.

This is especially useful for small businesses since it can help reduce costs in the long run. The extra support means you do not have to worry about outsourcing to IT specialists when problems arise.

Compare software providers

There are numerous online booking systems available for purchase, all with different capabilities and specialities. These systems have been proven over time, and can offer the stability, integrity, security and integration capabilities you need.

Some online booking systems are designed specifically for accommodation businesses, and some for tours and events. Research and due diligence are required when it comes to selecting the most appropriate system for your business.

Selling your experience online

Some examples of online booking systems include:



Accommodation

Front Desk, Guestpoint, Little Hotelier, Resonline, RezExpert, RMS



Attractions & Tours

Bookeo, Booking Boss, Fareharbor, Gateway Galaxy, ResPax, reZBox, Rezdy, Rezgo, Trekksoft

When comparing systems, it is recommended that you talk to other businesses who sell similar experiences. This will reduce research time and help you narrow the shortlist to those offering the best fit for your business. Reading online reviews by businesses who have used the software first-hand is also recommended.

When you have narrowed down your choices, it is recommended that you contact each company to request a demonstration and further details as they relate to your business requirements.

Integrating your online booking system into your website

Once you have selected an online booking system, there are three main ways you can integrate your booking system into your website.

Book Now button

A 'Book Now' button can be displayed on your website which takes customers to an external URL (hosted by the online booking system provider) where visitors can book and purchase experiences online.

✓ Pros

- Popular and cost-effective way to take online bookings (popular for this reason)
- Simple set up process (may not require additional budget for website developer)
- Proven ability to convert users into bookings
- Ability to track website conversions (in some cases this may not be seamless)

✗ Cons

- Website user is directed away from website (could lead to cart abandonment)
- May be restrictions on branding that could impact user trust and/or conversions

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Partial integration

This is where an online booking system is integrated into an 'iFrame' or 'Widget' in a page on your website. This means that your booking system will display in a portal in your own website, instead of redirecting visitors away from your website to make the booking.

✓ Pros

- Seamless customer experience
- Potential for lower cart abandonment
- Ability to track website conversions (in some cases this may not be seamless)

✗ Cons

- Integration could be costly (may require website developer to integrate HTML Code)
- Maintenance could be costly (may require attention from a website developer in some cases)
- User experience could be compromised (depending on the online booking system chosen)

Full website integration

Full integration of your online booking system into your website so that the functionality becomes part of your website.

✓ Pros

- Seamless customer experience
- Potential for lower cart abandonment
- Ability to seamlessly track website conversions

✗ Cons

- Integration could be costly (generally requires a website developer to integrate HTML Code)
- Maintenance could be costly (may require attention from a website developer in some cases)

Selling your experience via online travel distributors

If you also want to sell your experience through the online travel distribution system (e.g. through partners such as Online Travel Agents or Visitor Information Centres) then you will need to consider an online booking system that also has channel management functionality

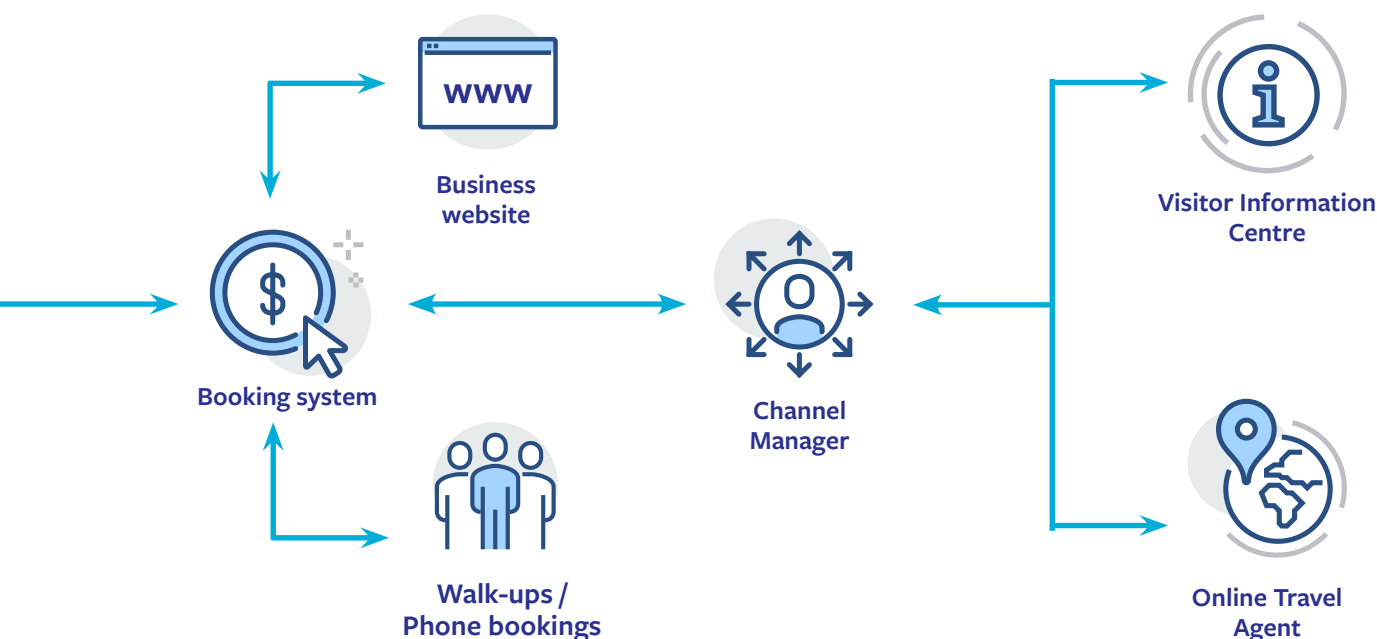
What is a Channel Manager?

Channel Managers (or sometimes called 'Booking Managers') manage your inventory across multiple distribution channels, which can reduce the potential for double bookings.

For example:

If someone books a room at your accommodation property via an Online Travel Agent, that room is instantly removed from the available inventory across all of your other online distributor websites, including your own website.

Likewise for cancellations, if that same room has been cancelled and refunded via an Online Travel Agent it becomes instantly available again across the online distributor websites in which it is able to be booked.



Selling your experience online

Choosing a Channel Manager

It is important to undertake due diligence when selecting your Channel Manager as they all offer slightly different features and functions.

Think about the following questions to assist you in selecting the most appropriate Channel Manager for your business:



Which distribution partners would I like to be booked through?



What are their requirements from businesses?



What pricing structure am I willing to pay? (e.g. fees and commissions)



Is it compatible with my existing online booking system? Or, what online booking system does it integrate with?

Some examples of Channel Managers used across the industry include:



Accommodation

D-Edge, EzyYield, Hotellogix, Little Hotelier, My Allocator, Resonline, Siteminder, TXA.



Attractions & Tours

Experience Bank, Fareharbor, Galaxy Connect, Rezdy Marketplace, Rezgo, Trekksoft, TXA.

Note that many booking software options can provide both your online booking system and channel management functionality.



Tips to optimise your online booking system

It is important to optimise your online booking system to meet the needs of your customers and increase your ability to convert bookings.

Some key reasons why customers abandon online bookings include:

- Long and confusing checkout process
- They are not ready to buy (still researching and comparing options)
- Not enough payment options
- Technical issues

Consider the below ways to optimise your online booking system to help avoid abandoned bookings:

- **Mobile experience**

With many people using smartphones to plan and book travel experiences, it is important to ensure your customer's path to purchase (and post-purchase) is seamless. It is recommended you undertake a test booking on a smartphone to ensure a smooth process for customers booking via mobile.

- **Inventory**

Double check your inventory is being managed correctly, and there are no bugs in the system. Also ensure you have your inventory distributed correctly for the various distribution channels (if you are using a Channel Manager).

- **Branding**

Ensure it directly reflects your business brand as closely as possible, to ensure seamless look and feel. This helps maintain trust with the customer throughout the purchase process.

- **Product descriptions**

Ensure they are up to date with the correct features and customer benefits.

- **Professional photos and videos**

Where possible, include high quality photos and videos of your experiences. Rich media is one of the most influential ways to describe your experiences, along with testimonials.

- **Customer reviews**

Where possible, share testimonials within the system (particularly if you are using the 'Book Now' button integration on your website) as these are highly trusted endorsements that help convert new customers.

- **Google Analytics**

Ensure Google Analytics is connected to your system so that you can attribute bookings and sales to relevant website traffic sources (such as social media or search engines) and accurately measure conversions.

- **Customer support**

Ensure your potential customers can easily request support with their booking (if needed). This can help you to close a sale while they are ready to purchase.

- **Customer confirmations**

Ensure your 'Booking Complete' and 'Confirmation' emails are formatted and written effectively and are as personalised as possible.