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A Roadmap
To Traveler Attribution

A deep dive into the traveler purchase journey of hotel and air

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to consumers' browsing and purchasing behavior online, the travel industry boasts one of the most complex digital landscapes. Travelers are inundated with a multitude of seemingly unlimited resources when researching hotel and flight options for an upcoming trip, especially in the 45 days leading up to a purchase. This is the time when shoppers consume the most content—making, on average, 38 visits to travel sites, and 15 visits just in the week prior to booking—in an effort to satisfy their voracious appetites for intelligence on all of their potential purchasing options.[1]

Exactly where are travel shoppers looking, and which channels, be it a hotel or airline's website, an OTA, or meta search, are they visiting as they navigate from inspiration to purchase?

For the answers to these questions, marketers must look to the important and complex concept of attribution to understand a customer's full journey to executing travel purchases online. Utilizing an attribution model can help marketers identify which factors at various points along the road—from look to book—influence where a travel shopper ultimately makes a purchase.

THE ATTRIBUTION DEBACLE

The storied retailer John Wanamaker once famously said, "Half of my advertising is wasted, I just don't know which half." This quote perfectly embodies why it is so important to recognize which attributes of a travel consumer's online shopping journey ultimately influence where they end up purchasing a flight or hotel. The IAB defines attribution as:

The process of identifying a set of user actions (events) that contribute in some manner to a desired outcome, and the assigning of value to each of these events.

While this extremely important concept may sound vital for all marketers to understand and optimize, a recent Forrester Study found that a full 15% of digital advertisers don't use any form of attribution to assign credit to channels or partners.[2] Among those who do study attribution, many are only using very simplistic attribution models, with 34% of advertisers using first-touch, and 27% studying only last-touch attribution to learn more about a customer's purchasing journey.[3]

When one considers the complexity of the online research process, and the variety of factors that ultimately influence travel purchasing decisions, it becomes obvious that there is a need for a deeper understanding of consumer behaviors and interactions with influential touchpoints leading up to a purchase, in order to better measure attribution.

1 Millward Brown Digital (Commissioned by Expedia Media Solutions), "The Traveler's Path to Purchase", August 2013
2 Forrester Research (Commissioned by Google), "Cross-channel Attribution is Needed to Drive Marketing Effectiveness", May 2014
3 Forrester Research (Commissioned by Google), "Cross-channel Attribution is Needed to Drive Marketing Effectiveness", May 2014

The Traveler's Purchase Journey (continued)

Given how involved the travel consumer's journey to purchase can be, it's important to break down and define the various phases—inspiration, research and consideration, and purchase—in order to better understand this journey.

Inspiration is simply where the consumer begins. This is the first site visited on their travel shopping journey. Next comes the middle phase of Research and Consideration, the most complicated part of the journey. Consumers are taking multiple pathways through this middle phase, and can visit various kinds of sites in between inspiration and the final point of their journey: Purchase. This is where shoppers transact—where the booking is actually made. As with inspiration, there can only be one point at which a customer completes a purchase.

Just as there are multiple parts of the consumer journey, there are various categories of online destinations a shopper visits throughout this timeframe. The three main clusters of sites involved in the travel consumer's journey to purchase are travel brand sites, meta search, and Online Travel Agencies, or OTAs.

THE TRAVEL SHOPPER MARKETPLACE

In sizing the market of the above referenced travel booking sites, the travel industry market share can be defined by the percentage of unique visitors and bookers. Hotel and airline sites account for approximately half of all travel shoppers, and receive just over 60% of the purchases (see Figure 1). OTAs reach around one-third on both. Meta has the smallest reach for visitors and direct purchasers, with 14% of unique visits and only 9% of purchases.

Travel brands, in both the air and hotel spaces, are getting many of the transactions on their sites, receiving 61% of the bookers. The remaining share of bookers go 30% to OTAs and 9% to meta respectively.

While one might infer the focus should be on shifting transactions from one category to another; the multi-attribution approach for an airline or hotel brand should involve bolstering marketing strategy across channels to retain and shift share, as people cross-shop categories.

Figure 1: Travel Shoppers Industry Market Share

OTA 33%
Supplier 53%
Meta 14%
% of unique visitors

OTA 30%
Supplier 61%
Meta 9%
% of Bookers
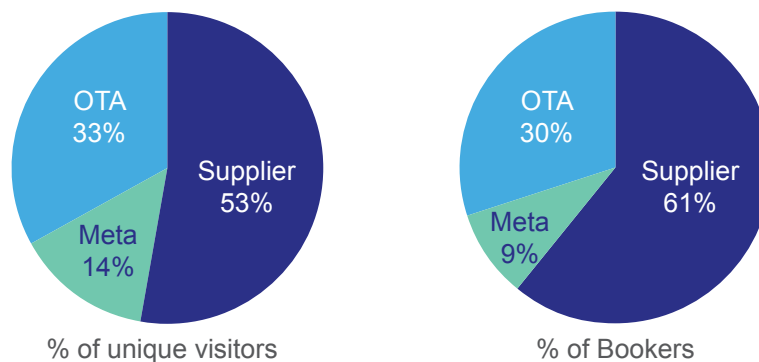
SOURCE: Millward Brown Digital clickstream data for 75 million shopping journeys in the 45 days prior to booking a flight and/or hotel

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ATTRIBUTION ROADMAP: HOTEL

Delving deeper into the hotel booking journey specifically, examining the top level share of each stage results in some key themes:

- Where people begin their shopping journey has the least variation of share between OTAs, meta, and hotel sites
- OTAs play a significant role in the middle phase of a hotel shopper's journey
- Hotel sites have the majority share in the purchasing phase

Throughout all parts of the travel consumer's hotel shopping journey, meta had its largest share at 21% in the inspiration phase, during which hotel websites accounted for 40% of consumer journeys, while 39% were OTAs (see Figure 2). This finding illustrates meta's diminishing reach, from inspiration to purchase, as its share tends to shrink as consumers get closer to the purchasing stage.

Garnering nearly half of all site visits in the middle phase of the travel consumer's hotel shopping journey, it appears that OTAs—heretofore traditionally thought of a purchase channel—can influence at the inspiration as well as researching stages, when nearly half of all site visits were to OTAs at 49%. During this same phase, hotelier sites and meta received 36% and 14% of visits, respectively. When it came time to actually book, hotel sites dominated, accounting for 51% of purchases, followed by OTAs at 40%, and meta sites at 10%.
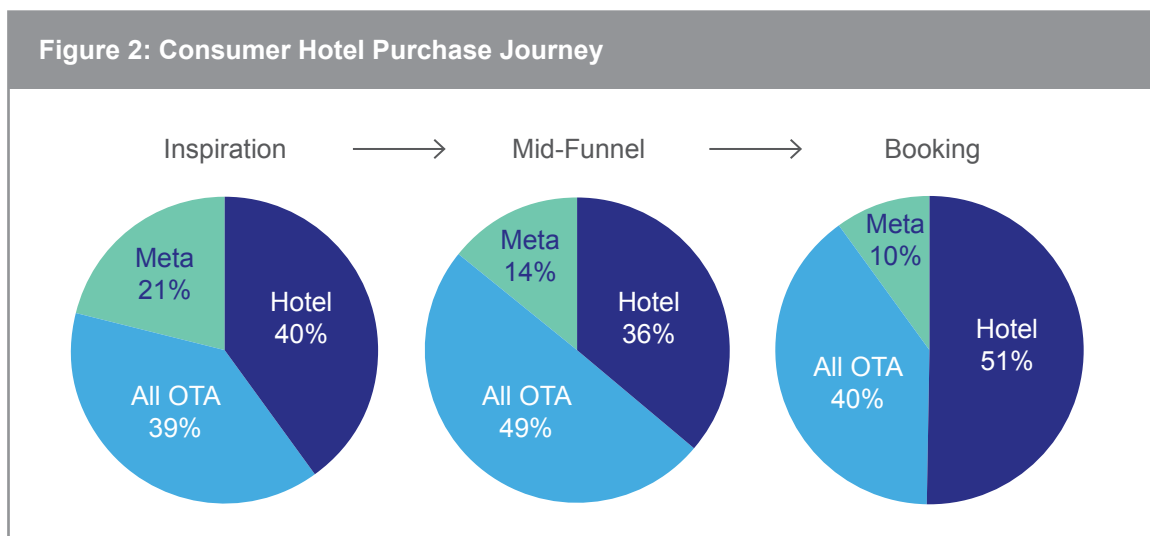
Figure 2: Consumer Hotel Purchase Journey

SOURCE: Millward Brown Digital clickstream data of 29 million instances and 144 unique booking scenarios

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Attribution Roadmap: Hotel (continued)

In drilling down further and examining the most prevalent hotel shopping scenarios—where consumers most frequently initiated, researched, and transacted—there were ten paths travelers took that accounted for nearly 40% of the scenarios and 11M individual paths (see Table 1).

The most common scenario was a full hotel site journey, representing 7.2% of all consumer journeys. Five of the top ten hotel purchasing journeys started on a hotelier's site, while four of these ten began at an OTA, and one out of the ten most popular journeys initiated with meta. The data infers that meta's peak influence is during the inspiration phase, after which it drives customers to other categories. Although 70% of purchases were made at hotel sites, while 30% were with an OTA, it is interesting to note that a full 70% of the top ten shopper journeys included OTAs at some point in the middle.

Fully understanding consumers' hotel shopping experiences remains a complex undertaking, even when one considers a full hotel site journey. Since a travel consumer can move from one hotel brand site to the next throughout their shopping experience, this traveler will not necessarily book with the same hotelier on whose site they initiated their journey.
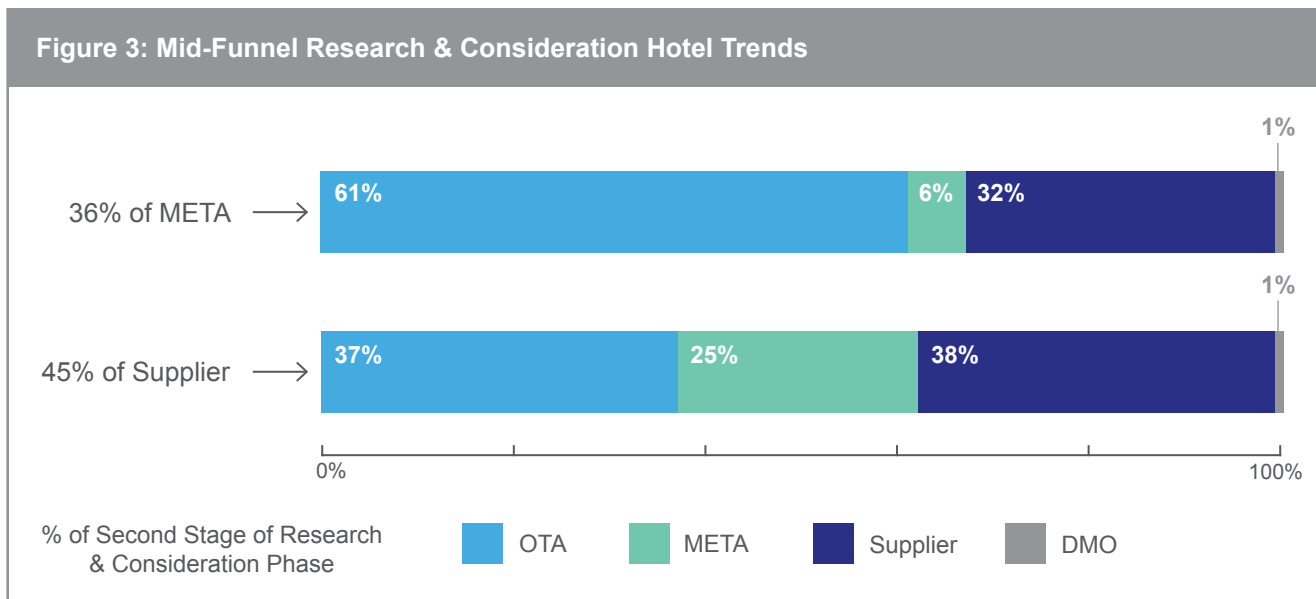
Table 1: Top 10 Most Common Paths for Hotel Bookers				
Rank	Inspiration	Mid-funnel Research		Booking	Share of All Scenarios
1	Hotel	Hotel	Hotel	Hotel	7.2%
2	OTA	Meta	OTA	OTA	4.5%
3	Meta	Meta	OTA	OTA	4.4%
4	OTA	Hotel	OTA	Hotel	3.6%
5	Hotel	Hotel	OTA	Hotel	3.4%
6	OTA	Meta	OTA	Hotel	3.4%
7	Hotel	Hotel	Meta	Hotel	3.2%
8	OTA	Hotel	Hotel	Hotel	2.8%
9	Hotel	Meta	OTA	Hotel	2.8%
10	Hotel	Meta	OTA	OTA	2.8%

SOURCE: Millward Brown Digital clickstream data accounting for 11 million instances

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RESEARCH & CONSIDERATION PHASE TRENDS: HOTEL

While first-touch and last-touch are two of the most common attribution models, it's important to understand the influential downstream touchpoints in the middle of the journey in the research and consideration phase. This complex stage provides invaluable insights into how shoppers navigate between categories, and how they ultimately arrive at their point of purchase.

No matter the point of a shopper's inspiration, 36% interacted with meta during their research and consideration phase in the 45 days leading up to a hotel purchase. On average, 61% of shoppers went immediately to an OTA next, versus the 32% who went directly to a hotel brand site. During this same timeframe, 45% of people interacted with a hotelier's site. A shopper's immediate proceeding destination was an OTA 37% of the time (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Mid-Funnel Research & Consideration Hotel Trends

36% of META → OTA 61% | META 6% | Supplier 32% | DMO 1%

45% of Supplier → OTA 37% | META 25% | Supplier 38% | DMO 1%

0% ——— 100%

% of Second Stage of Research & Consideration Phase   ■ OTA   ■ META   ■ Supplier   ■ DMO

SOURCE: Based on share or volume, these account for nearly 40% of the possible scenarios and 11 million of the 29 million individual paths.
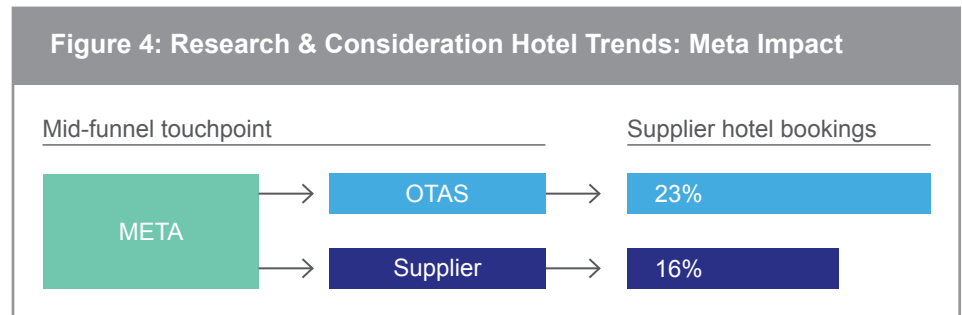
RESEARCH & CONSIDERATION PHASE TRENDS: META IMPACT ON BOOKING

Drilling yet further down into the minute details of the research and consideration phase, the question arises of what, if anything, the order of categories that people visit reveals about where they ultimately end up making a purchase. Does the sequence of categories visited throughout the middle part of a shopper's journey have any prescriptive attributes?

When examining this theory through the lens of meta as the first influential middle phase touchpoint, shoppers ended up purchasing through hotel sites 23% of the time when they went from meta, immediately to an OTA, and then on to a hotel site (see Figure 4).

In contrast, shoppers booked through hotel sites only 16% of the time when they went directly from meta to a hotel site. Thus, shoppers are 44% more likely to book on a hotel site when navigating from meta to an OTA prior to the brand site, than if they proceed directly to the hotel site from meta.

Figure 4: Research & Consideration Hotel Trends: Meta Impact

Mid-funnel touchpoint		Supplier hotel bookings	
META	→ OTAS →	23%	
	→ Supplier →	16%	

SOURCE: Millward Brown Digital clickstream data of 29 million instances and 144 unique booking scenarios

INSPIRATION'S IMPACT ON PURCHASING TRENDS: HOTEL

The complete hotel purchasing journey, from inspiration to booking, is deeply complex, with the potential for myriad factors in the middle phase to affect a consumer's eventual point of purchase. By removing the complicated research and consideration phase, there are valuable insights to be gleaned from examining the direct correlation between where hotel shoppers find their initial inspiration and where they ultimately make a purchase.

Table 2 shows that 44% of hotel shoppers who started on an OTA, also booked on an OTA. Similarly, 46% started and ended on a hotel brand site.
Further, while it is important to maintain a high-quality brand site experience in order to retain shoppers, less than 50% of consumers start and end in the same category. This underscores the value in considering how to best reach those shoppers who start in another category altogether. Namely, people who book hotels on brand sites are 70% more likely to have initiated their research on an OTA (34% of the time) than the 20% who start on a meta site.

Regardless of where shoppers end up booking their hotels—be it on a meta site, an OTA, or a hotel site—OTAs are the point of inspiration nearly twice as often as meta sites, and even more often than hotel brand sites in some cases. Thus, having a strong presence and comprehensive marketing strategy across channels can make a considerable impact on whether a shopper ultimately completes a purchase on a hotelier's site.

While the findings demonstrate that hotel sites receive the largest share of bookings, these channels should not focus myopically on transactions. Rather, marketing efforts should be geared toward influencing consumer behavior throughout the complex research and consideration period of their journey, in order to steer them toward booking on a specific channel.

Table 2: Hotel Bookers Inspiration Stage

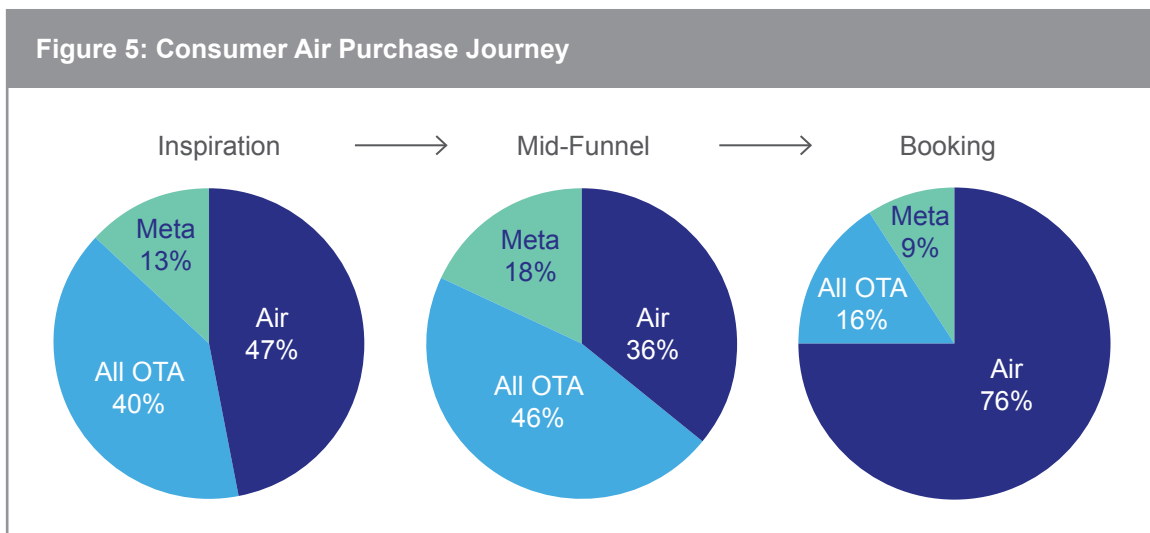|		Site where hotel was booked		
		OTA	META	Supplier
Hotel inspiration point	OTA	44%	42%	34%
	META	23%	25%	20%
	Supplier	33%	33%	46%

SOURCE: Millward Brown Digital clickstream data of 29 million instances and 144 unique booking scenarios

ATTRIBUTION ROADMAP: AIR

In examining the air booking journey, we see more distinct behavioral traits (see Figure 5):

- When looking at air shoppers, airline sites are more heavily utilized at the point of inspiration
- OTAs were the inspiration point for shoppers in 40% of cases, and served as an influential downstream touchpoint during research and consideration 46% of the time
- Air sites have the majority share of bookings at 76%

The data set of the top ten full consumer journey scenarios in the air shopping space captures 56% of the 46 million instances studied, making it a much more compressed landscape than the hotel space (see Table 3).

Figure 5: Consumer Air Purchase Journey

Inspiration ⟶ Mid-Funnel ⟶ Booking

Inspiration: Meta 13%, All OTA 40%, Air 47%

Mid-Funnel: Meta 18%, All OTA 46%, Air 36%

Booking: Meta 9%, All OTA 16%, Air 76%

Source: Millward Brown Digital clickstream data of 46 million instances and 144 unique booking scenarios

The inspiration point among the top ten scenarios was split: five initiated on airline sites, and five on an OTA. Surprisingly, meta did not play a role in the inspiration phase among any of the ten most common air shopping journeys. Not surprisingly, the air landscape is more supplier-heavy as the supply of airlines is more consolidated than the hotel industry. There are fewer OTA offerings in this space, and airlines have a strong draw to get consumers to book on their sites, with check-in capabilities, ancillary purchase options, and well established frequent flyer programs.
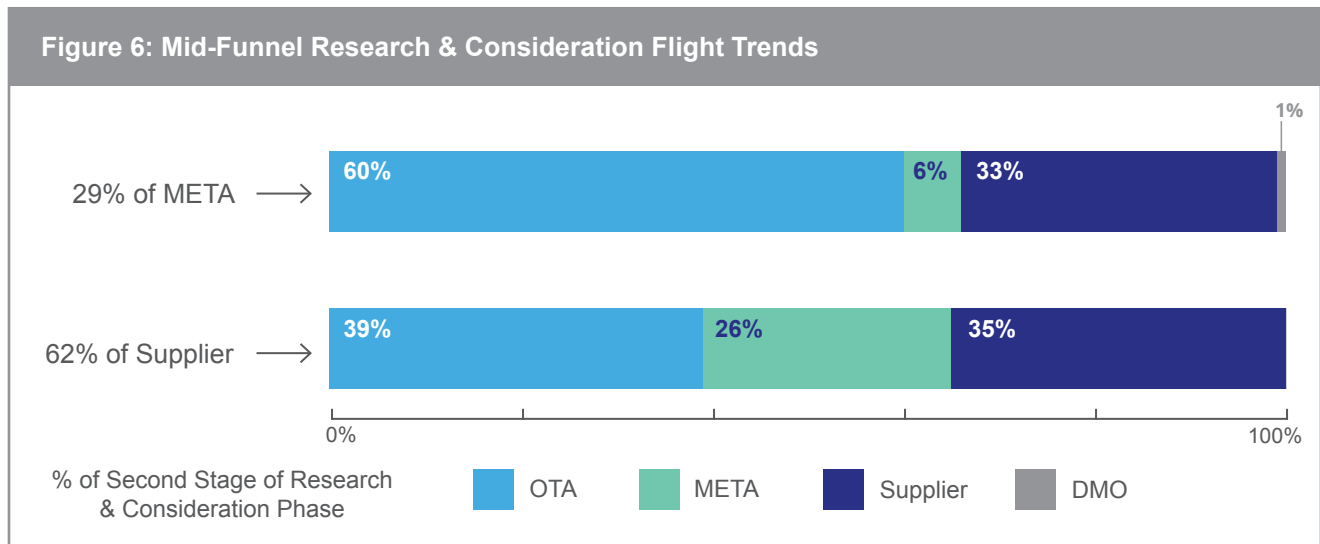
Because not all air shoppers start and end with the same airline, a memorable site experience is integral to bringing consumers back and encouraging purchases. OTAs, meanwhile, play a vital role as a prevalent and influential touchpoint in the inspiration and research and consideration stages along a travel consumer's air shopping journey. Airlines looking to shift share and influence behavior should consider how to effectively utilize this channel.

Table 3: Top 10 Most Common Paths for Air Bookers				
Rank	Inspiration	Mid-funnel Research		Booking	Share of All Scenarios
1	Air	Air	Air	Air	10.2%
2	Air	Air	OTA	Air	6.9%
3	OTA	Air	OTA	Air	6.5%
4	Air	Air	Meta	Air	6.2%
5	OTA	Meta	OTA	Air	5.7%
6	OTA	Air	Air	Air	4.9%
7	Air	Meta	OTA	Air	4.4%
8	Air	Meta	Air	Air	4.2%
9	OTA	Air	Meta	Air	4.0%
10	OTA	Meta	Air	Air	3.4%

Source: Millward Brown Digital clickstream data accounting for 26 million instances

RESEARCH & CONSIDERATION PHASE TRENDS: AIR

In the 45 days leading up to an air booking, 29% of all researchers interacted with meta in the middle phase. On average, 60% of those shoppers immediately visited an OTA after leaving the meta site, compared with the 33% who went next to an airline site (see Figure 6). Among the 62% of shoppers who interacted with a brand site during the research and consideration phase, visiting an OTA was the most common next step of this journey.

Figure 6: Mid-Funnel Research & Consideration Flight Trends

29% of META → 60% | 6% | 33% | 1%

62% of Supplier → 39% | 26% | 35%

0% ———————————————————————————— 100%

% of Second Stage of Research & Consideration Phase

OTA | META | Supplier | DMO

Source: Based on share or volume, these account for nearly 40% of the possible scenarios and 11 million of the 29 million individual paths.

When it comes to the middle phase impact of meta, the trend in the hotel space regarding OTAs' role in the purchasing journey was exaggerated among air shoppers. When OTAs were immediately downstream from meta sites, shoppers were 25% more likely to book their flights on an airline site than if they had gone to an airline site directly following meta (see Figure 7).

Air shoppers who navigated immediately from meta to an OTA during the research and consideration phase comprised 25% of all airline site purchases. In contrast, those who went directly from meta to an airline site only booked on the latter 15% of the time.

Here again lies tremendous opportunity for airlines to influence where shoppers ultimately make purchases by having a thoughtful presence on OTAs. After encountering meta in the middle phase, more consumers who ultimately book on airline sites are spending time on OTAs than those who bypass the important channel on their air purchasing journey.

Figure 7: Research & Consideration Air Trends: Meta Impact
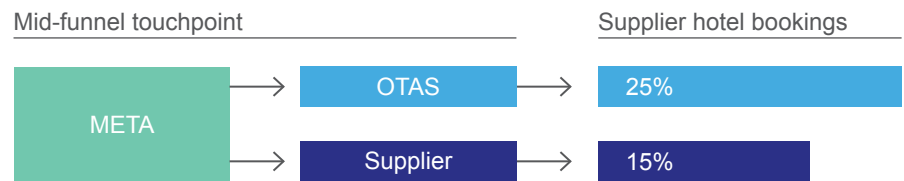
Mid-funnel touchpoint

Supplier hotel bookings

META → OTAS → 25%

META → Supplier → 15%

SOURCE: Millward Brown Digital clickstream data of 46 million instances and 144 unique booking scenarios

INSPIRATION'S IMPACT ON PURCHASING TRENDS: AIR

The relationship between inspiration and purchasing in the air space mirrors that of hotel shopping journeys, with nearly half of all shoppers who complete OTA and airline site purchases starting in their respective same categories (see Table 4).

Even more so than in the hotel space, regardless of where shoppers ultimately made their air purchases, OTAs were the point of inspiration nearly three times as often as meta sites. And in some cases, OTAs even surpassed airline sites as the point of inspiration among air shoppers. When compared with meta, where only 14% of airline site purchases originated, shoppers were 38% more likely to start on an OTA as the point of inspiration before ultimately purchasing on an airline site.

Table 4: Air Bookers Inspiration Stage

		Site where flight was booked		
		OTA	**META**	**Supplier**
Flight inspiration point	**OTA**	45%	42%	38%
	META	14%	16%	14%
	Supplier	41%	42%	48%

SOURCE: Millward Brown Digital clickstream data of 29 million instances and 144 unique booking scenarios

KEY FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

Travel advertisers should consider developing a multi-phase approach to optimize user engagement and purchases, and to reach consumers at every stage of the travel consumer journey to help influence the final and most important stage, purchase.

- **Consider a full-funnel media approach through partnerships.** Shoppers use partners like OTAs and meta search throughout all phases—inspiration, research and consideration, and purchase—of the travel consumer journey.

- **Because airline and hotel brand sites drive the most purchases, create partnerships that provide efficient and scalable influence on this channel.** Meta sites are commonly leveraged as influential touchpoints, but meta drives more traffic to OTAs than to any other category, including travel brand sites. Thus, OTAs play an important, influential role in eventually leading consumers to book on a specific airline or hotel site, and should be considered when thinking about full attribution models and building marketing strategy.

- **Bring shoppers back—give them a reason to remember and return.** Shoppers who start their research on a hotel or airline site are more likely to make a purchase on this kind of site, but not necessarily where they initiated. Hoteliers and airlines must provide a strong, satisfying, and sticky site experience to keep consumers coming back to book with them every time.

CONCLUSION

None of these learnings would be possible without the vital tool of attribution. Through the lens of assigning and evaluating the value and efficiency of each marketing category during the full travel consumer journey to purchase, travel brands get the clearest picture of where to most effectively direct their marketing budgets and strategic partnerships. Armed with a comprehensive attribution model, travel marketers can greatly improve the reach and impact they have on the millions of people who book travel every day, and who will continue to do so in an increasingly complex online shopping landscape for many years to come.

We invite you to learn more about the topic and download the full study

TRAVELER ATTRIBUTION STUDY
DOWNLOAD THE FULL STUDY: bit.ly/travelerattributionstudy

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