

FLUX FULL CIRCLE

Digital Playbook for Online Sales

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Introduction

The adoption of the internet into everyday life is the single biggest event that has affected direct to consumer travel sales and marketing strategies over the last three decades.

It has fundamentally changed the way travellers engage and transact with products. Today, smartphones have overtaken personal computers and our connectedness to the digital world means travellers are now more informed than ever, able to research products themselves in seconds.

By 2030, a projected 80% of accommodation bookings worldwide will be made online. The way in which consumers move through phases of travel inspiration, research, consideration and finally, booking, has evolved with the new levels of digital connectedness and information on hand. In spite of this shift in consumer behaviour, much of the travel industry has struggled to keep pace with this rapid evolution.

The objective of this digital playbook for sales operations is to address why engaging with a new era of online travel consumer is so important, and share sales best practices, tools, and strategies to succeed in the fastest-growing sales channel for hotels, lodges and tour operators.



Why a Digital Playbook for Online Sales?

The days of a Jordan Belfort-esque sales approach of hard selling and creating demand where there was previously none in customers is outdated. The transactional nature of selling has changed over the years as buyers have become more discerning and educated. We have all experienced how off-putting the daily bombardment of generic emails, cold calling, text messages, or social “pings” can be. The rapid speed of change in the online travel industry has left many hotels, lodges, and tour operators still implementing outdated sales techniques in an online environment where these no longer apply.

The major reason for this is the shift in the buyer-seller relationship. It used to be that salespeople held power through knowledge - they held a monopoly of well-researched information around their product or service, and bolstered by confidence, charisma, and a well-rehearsed sales script, could deliver a compelling offer that would convince the consumer to purchase.



If you consider how companies such as TripAdvisor, Google, Expedia, Booking.com, or Airbnb have democratized destination, product, and experiential information, the shift in the buyer-seller relationship dynamic becomes apparent. In an era where customers are in the driving seat, reservations and travel consultants need to adapt their approach entirely in order to be successful in online sales.

“ Nobody wants to be bombarded by cold calls... Today’s effective sellers are more like consultants.”

Today, travellers are seeking personalisation and relevance. They aren’t looking to be sold to, they are seeking to be seen and heard and consulted and guided to the right destination, accommodation, or experience best suited to their unique individual needs.

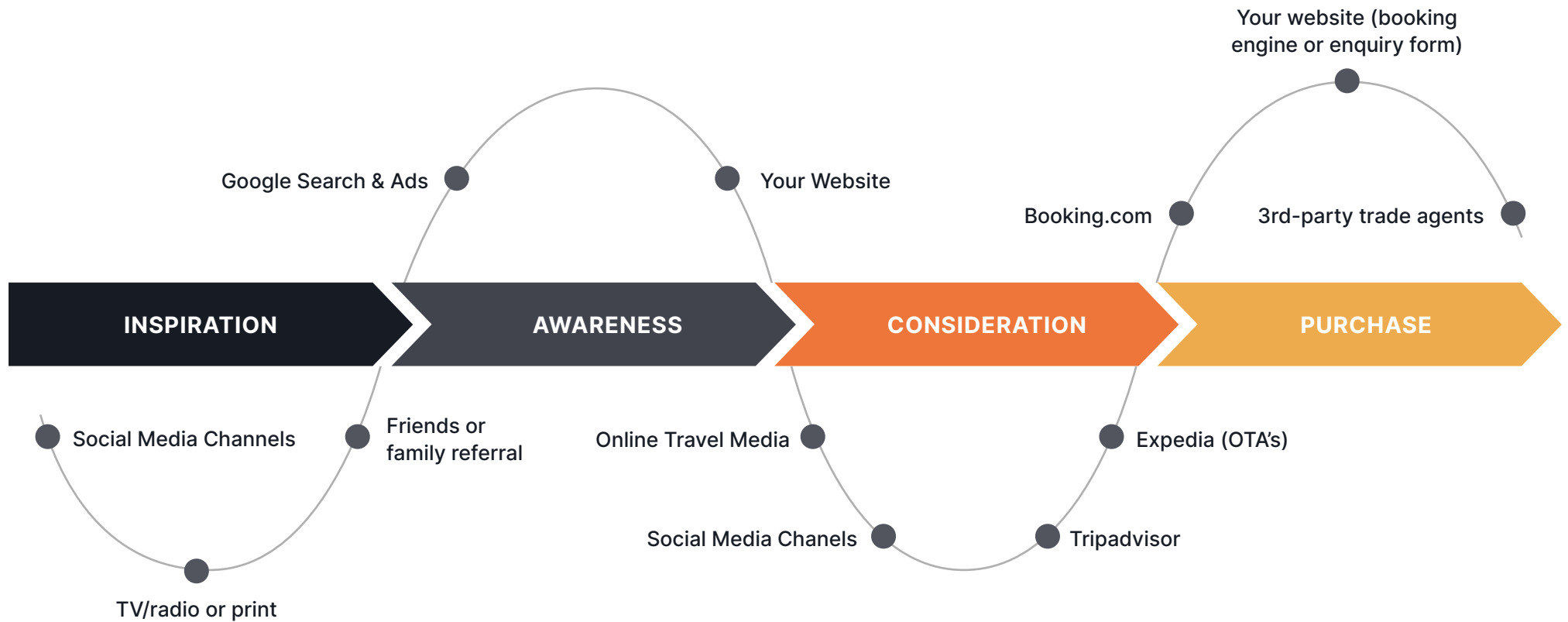
The strategies below are aimed at empowering you with the tools, techniques, and strategies needed to successfully engage with a well-informed consumer. Armed with your product knowledge and this playbook, you will quickly be able to help travellers discover whether your product is the right fit for them, and create real relationships that foster brand loyalty over the long term.

An Inbound Sales Approach & the Buyers Journey

Inbound sales is a philosophy applied to online sales. It encourages salespeople to adapt to the new buyer-seller relationship, by applying principles of empathy, holistic insight and guidance throughout the online buyer journey. It requires personalizing the buyer's experience via research and strategy as they are educated, supported and guided to purchasing from you. Although these principles require a great deal of work and effort on the part of salespeople, the rewards are truly qualified leads with lasting goodwill and relationships.



Key is understanding the stages of a buyer's journey:



Inspiration

Definition:

Prospective travellers become inspired to travel.

Key considerations:

- How prominent is your brand across inspirational touchpoints in the online client journey?
- Do you have a repeat or referral incentive in place to spread the word around your travel brand?
- Do you have triggers in place to activate repeat business within your sales cycle? (i.e. client database with newsletter outreach)
- Is the content across these inspirational platforms 1) relevant 2) on brand and 3) creating trust and credibility?

Brand touchpoints:

Google Search & Ads, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, TV/Radio or print, TikTok, Pinterest, friends or family referral.

Awareness

Definition:

Prospective travellers are becoming aware of the different travel options available to them.

Key considerations:

- How do your prospective travellers describe their desires/goals/challenges for travel?
- How do they educate themselves on their desires/goals/challenges for travel? Example: Tripadvisor
- What are the consequences of inaction by your prospective traveller not travelling with you?
- Are there any common misconceptions prospective travellers have about addressing their desires/goals/challenge? Example: "Africa is a dangerous place to travel to"
- How does your prospective traveller decide if their desire/goal/challenge should be prioritized?

Brand touchpoints:

Your website, Google Search & Ads, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, TV/Radio or print, TikTok, Pinterest, friends or family referral.

Consideration

Definition:

Prospective travellers are gathering information to make an informed decision that best meets their unique travel needs.

Key considerations:

- What sources of information do travellers investigate?
- How do travellers educate themselves?
- How do they decide on the pros/cons of each product or destination?
- How do they decide on what's right for them?

Touchpoints:

Your website, TripAdvisor, Online Travel Media (Conde Nast, Travel & Leisure), Booking.com, Expedia, friends or family referral, your social media channels (Instagram, Facebook, Youtube).

Purchase

Definition:

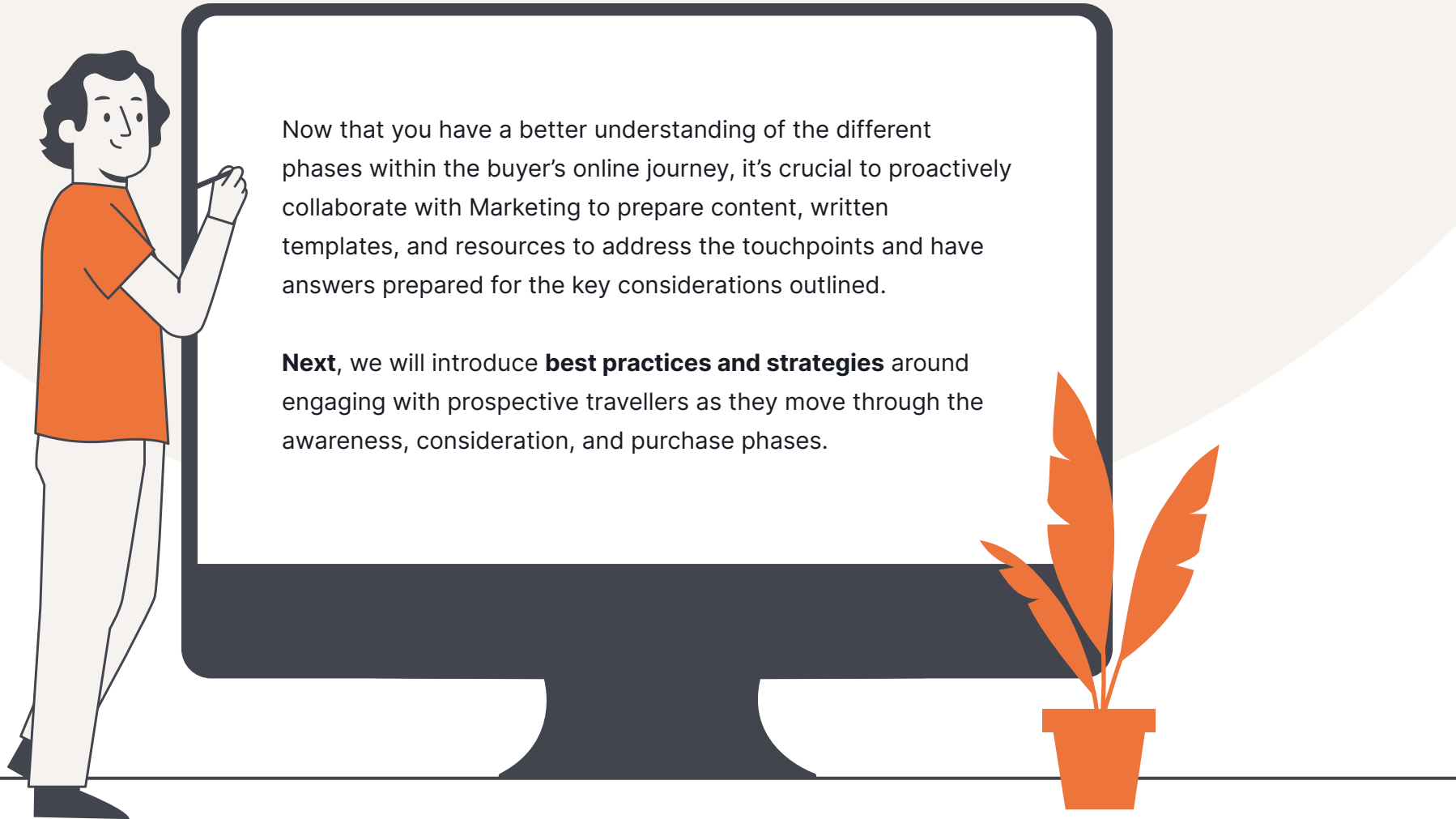
Prospective travellers have made a decision based on the information gathered during the consideration phase (note: key is connecting with prospective travellers before they enter the purchasing stage).

Key considerations:

- What criteria do prospective travellers use to evaluate available offerings?
- What do travellers like about your offering compared to others?
- What common concerns do travellers have about your offering?
- Who needs to be involved in the purchasing decision? How does each person's perspective on the decision differ? (i.e. kids vs parents vs grandparents in multi-gen travel)
- Outside of purchasing/booking, what additional preparations do travellers need when travelling with/to you?

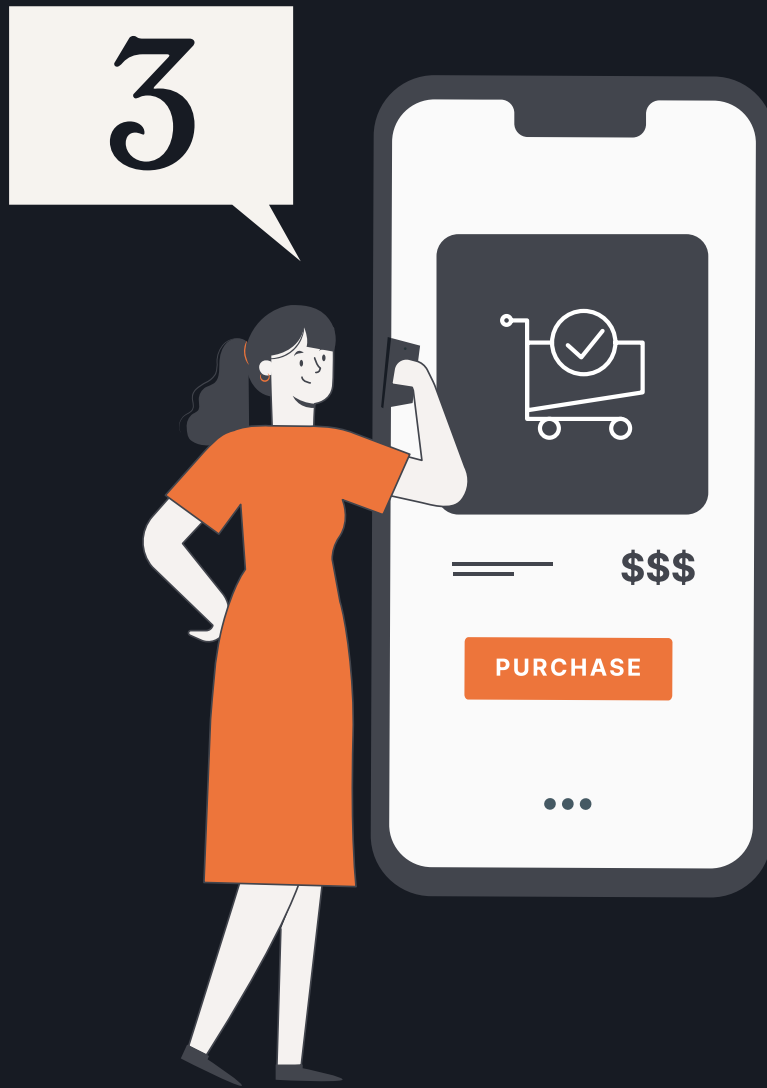
Brand touchpoints:

Your website (booking engine or enquiry form), Tripadvisor, Booking.com, Expedia (OTA's).



Now that you have a better understanding of the different phases within the buyer's online journey, it's crucial to proactively collaborate with Marketing to prepare content, written templates, and resources to address the touchpoints and have answers prepared for the key considerations outlined.

Next, we will introduce **best practices and strategies** around engaging with prospective travellers as they move through the awareness, consideration, and purchase phases.



Inbound Sales Strategy & Best Practices for Lodges, Hotels, and Tour Operators

The main objective of a reservations or travel consultant is to deliver the best possible customer experience as your prospective traveller navigates through their online buyer's journey. To do this you need an inbound sales strategy.

A sales strategy starts by outlining the rules of engagement when interacting with prospective travellers.

We break up these rules of engagement into 4 phases:



Identify phase:

Where you identify prospective travellers who you can serve, that could become leads.



Connect phase:

Where a prospective traveller decides to prioritize their travel idea or inspiration. They are then a “qualified” lead.



Explore phase:

Where you explore the leads’ unique travel requirements to understand if their requirements fit with your product offering. If it does, then it becomes a “sales opportunity”.



Advise phase:

If they decide your product offering is the best fit for their requirements, they become a customer.

Now you have a high-level understanding of the 4 phases of engagement, Let’s go a step further into each phase to outline your engagement approach.

1 Identify Phase

2 Connect Phase

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

Identify Phase

This is the most research-intensive phase of an online sales strategy and requires a lot of prep work. At this point, the goal is to obtain as much information around the prospective traveller as possible, in order to best serve them and reap the most reward in the following connect and explore phases. A key point to remember is they are already inspired to travel, and your priority should be increasing their awareness around your brand as they move through the client journey.

In order for you to correctly identify customers, start by identifying your brand's ideal customer or persona(s). For the best results, brainstorm this with your marketing and operational teams, and form a profile around who your ideal customer is. Considerations to give when creating an ideal customer profile:

- 1 Are there economic factors that make them ideal or not (income/education/household size)?
- 2 Is there a certain timeframe where your product may be more appealing (ie seasonality)?
- 3 Are there market segments that are ideal or not ideal to market to (interests, occupation, aspect of their lifestyle)?
- 4 Are there geographic locations that are ideal or not ideal?
- 5 Are there legal standards that might exclude them from purchasing from you?

1 Identify Phase

2 Connect Phase

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

If your travel brand has never done any ideal customer/persona work, simply answer the above questions with your ideal customer in mind to start forming a profile. In time with consistent engagement with a variety of leads and the types of travellers who book your product, you'll quickly gain insight into who your ideal customer is.

After you have broadly identified your ideal customer, start segmenting this further by creating buyer personas within this profile. Personas add detail to your ideal customer by creating typical characteristics revealed through data points and your engagement with customers. Considerations further to the ideal customer profile should include:

- 1 Demographic details, including age, gender, and nationality
- 2 Their common interests, likes, dislikes (including brands they enjoy)
- 3 Familial structures
- 4 Past travel history

Once you have a buyer persona in place, move down the buyer's journey relevant to that persona (inspiration, awareness, consideration to purchase) and document cues that would make these persona's easily identifiable.

1 Identify Phase

2 Connect Phase

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

“

Up to 70% of the buyer's journey is complete before they even reach out to reservations or a travel consultant”

F

Here are a few common examples of generic personas found in travel:



Honeymooners/Romantic travellers

- Couples travelling, usually younger to middle-aged
- Usually celebratory in nature
- Seeking romantic, private settings, activities and accommodation



Multi-gen travellers

- Multi-generational family members travelling together
- Seeking accessible accommodation with a broad variety of activities for all ages
- Child friendly

Also, noteworthy mentions include **solo travellers, retired travellers, adventure or active travellers, and environmentally-conscious travellers.**

Once you have defined your various persona's, you can start identifying leads within that profile and better address their needs as they navigate through the buyer's journey.

Fortunately, most reservations and tour operator consultants are receiving the leads in a state of “active buying”, where they are already aware of your brand and have reached out to you to connect with them. Be sure to enrich the lead information on your CRM with the information you have researched, and stack conditions in your favour as you progress to phase 2: Connect.

1 Identify Phase

2 Connect Phase

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

TOP TIPS

- ✓ Automate your CRM, have all leads sent to your CRM in real-time
- ✓ Set up a CRM alert when you receive a new lead
- ✓ Identify if this lead matches your ideal customer
- ✓ Don't disqualify leads based on names, email addresses or social handles
- ✓ Focus on how well they compare to your ideal customer
- ✓ If not "ideal", move lead to "unqualified" on your CRM so marketing can work that lead over time
- ✓ Majority of potential buyers that visit your website will not identify themselves
- ✓ Make every effort to engage with these potential buyers

TAKEOUTS

- ▶ To help identify your best leads, define your ideal customer profile
- ▶ Once you have an ideal customer profile, segment this further with traveller personas
- ▶ Curate your outreach efforts based on the buyer's context ie assign the persona to the leads you received and adapt your communication according to that persona's likes, dislikes, and context

1 Identify Phase

2 **Connect Phase**

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

Connect Phase

This is where the rubber meets the road. We all know how important first impressions are, and in today's online landscape, you have to earn the attention of the empowered buyer. In order to do so, you need to reach out to buyers in a truly helpful way. The objective is to help your lead transition from the Connect to the Explore phase.

Here are your “Connect” best practices to follow:

- 1 Direct phone calls to the lead is the best qualifier. Faster is always better. Ideally within *5 minutes of receipt of lead (**You are 10x more likely to have a conversation with a lead within the first 5 minutes of lead receipt, than within the first hour*)
- 2 Use the information gathered from the identification phase to dive into the content relevant to their enquiry.
- 3 Use your first engagement to schedule a time to discuss their travel arrangements, unless they have sufficient time on your connect call.
- 4 Always introduce yourself and remind them of their enquiry. Use the opening 30 seconds to mention who you are and why you think it's a good idea for you and your prospective traveller to talk.
- 5 If they don't answer, leave a voicemail, and drop them a follow-up email notifying them of your attempted call and voicemail. Enquire as to when would be convenient to speak with them.

1 Identify Phase

2 **Connect Phase**

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

6 If the lead responds via a call, launch into the connect call and aim to establish an exploratory call at a convenient time for the lead unless they have enough time on the connect call.

7 Should the lead remain unresponsive to calls or your follow up email, schedule your email sequence (see sequence best practices below) relevant to the persona identified in the lead.

8 If you can't identify a need you can help the prospect with, don't push!

Bear in mind, not all leads will be ready to transition to the explore phase - don't be disheartened by this. Rather maintain your service orientation and the relationship and make a note to reach out from time to time to see when they may be ready.

Here are your **Connect Outreach Sequence (aka follow up) best practices to follow:**

1 Don't use wording like "just checking in" in your email communications. It offers no value. Ensure you are sending a sequence of communication that offers content or information that is personalized and helpful.

2 Aim to build credibility with the lead by educating them on your product.

1 Identify Phase

2 **Connect Phase**

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

3 Inventory your existing content and curate a sequence that would educate your lead on your product or service

- Example: Any relevant blog posts worth sharing, past traveller testimonials that match their persona, videos that speak to their interests

4 Keep your communication messages short, for example:

- Voicemail less than 15 seconds
- Email less than 200 words

5 Reference the lead at least twice as much as you reference yourself

6 End emails with a question, for example:

- “When do you have 15 minutes to speak?”

7 Personalize email subject lines

- 3 words or less than 30 characters (mobile view will cut off the subject line)

8 Use your personal voice and style

- Try not to sound robotic or scripted. And don't regurgitate *content
*(*if your travel brand does not have content speak to your Flux Account Catalyst on how Flux can assist in providing high-quality content around your brand)*

9 An outreach sequence of 5 times is the law of diminishing returns.

1 Identify Phase

2 **Connect Phase**

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

10

Use technology to automate your outreach, for example:

- Email templates
- Customer Relationship Management platforms (Hubspot), that auto-enrich lead profiles (ie social platforms the lead is linked to)
- Meeting schedule tools (Calendly)
- Email sequencing tools
- Avoid: mail merge, auto-dialers

TAKEOUTS

- ▶ First contact. Introduce yourself to buyer. **Make it clear you understand their context!**
- ▶ Make a comment you are aware of the stage of the buyer's journey/context
- ▶ Offer content or consultation
- ▶ Be there to guide them for the rest of their journey
- ▶ Show genuine interest to solve/accomplish goals/challenge

- 1 Identify Phase
- 2 Connect Phase
- 3 **Explore Phase**
- 4 Advise Phase

Explore Phase

At this phase, your objective is to understand the prospective traveller’s context to the best of your ability so you can convert them into a sales opportunity. In order to understand their context and whether they are the right “fit” for your product, a qualification framework is used.

There are multiple frameworks available, but the BANT sales qualification framework (or NTBA for travel) has proven to be most effective in rapid lead qualification for lodges, hotels and tour operators. The acronym stands for:



To understand this framework let’s elaborate on the NTBA’s in detail. When setting up your exploratory call, or alternatively if you are corresponding with the prospective traveller via email, establishing **Need** comes first. At this point of the buyer’s journey, you should have insight into which buyer profile/persona they apply to, and you would have established some level of rapport when you connected with them. In addressing **Need**, probe the prospect for what needs and challenges they would like to address in their travel plans.

1 Identify Phase

2 Connect Phase

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

Through active listening, you can switch out their challenges to goals you can help them achieve by travelling with you. Importantly, if they don't actively share their travel goals/challenges or desires, introduce examples of travel goals and desires you have helped others realize who shared a similar profile/goal/challenge to theirs.

Once **Need** is established and what the prospective traveller's goal is, help them quantify it. **This is where you want to motivate them to take action.** By understanding their Need, introduce what are the downsides of not realizing that travel goal or desire? Help them to see the downside of not progressing with you. Share how you are uniquely positioned to help them achieve their goal, and what the positive implications are for them in achieving their travel goals. This will motivate them to take further steps toward discussing the nuts and bolts of their travel plans like **Timeline**. How are they planning logistics, and if they are open to new ways of approaching their plans based on your expertise and the goals they have shared with you? Ensure you work with your prospective traveller to ease any concern or challenges around the timeline and logistical considerations.

In ending your exploratory call, the key is to have the prospect leave the call or communication understanding what next steps to take. Now is the appropriate time to discuss **Budget** and **Authority**. Budgetary discussions should include the cost to execute their travel plans holistically, not just your products portion of their plan. This is your opportunity to ask direct questions like what they have planned to invest to achieve their travel goals. If this is out of alignment with the amounts required to reach their travel goals, guide and advise them on what the shortfall is or alternatives better suited to their planned investment amounts. Don't push your product! At this point, they should clearly recognize your value proposition.

1 Identify Phase

2 Connect Phase

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

Questions around who the **Authority** is in deciding the approval of the budget should be raised at this point. Questions such as are they convinced your recommended travel plans best meet their travel goals? And whether there are any additional decision-makers who need to be included in final approval (ie multi-gen family members travelling together)? And finally, asking whether your call or communications have been helpful in helping them reach their decision?

You may be wondering why follow this framework systematically? Why not just get straight to lead qualifying, and ask prospects direct questions around their need and budget? The reason to avoid this approach is it is not consultative in manner but again moves toward a hard sales approach that will quickly put off prospective travellers. They would also likely have received the very same hard-lined generic sales approach by multiple other properties or tour operators, and your opportunity lies in providing authentic and truly helpful guidance. **By using this framework you will also ensure you are:**

1

Creating shared understanding: making sure you don't miss important details to understanding your prospects' context.

2

Communicating effectively: through a structure for communicating your prospect's story back to them, helping them know what you have heard.

3

Advising them effectively: helping you best position your products and services that are unique to your prospective travellers' challenges.

1 Identify Phase

2 Connect Phase

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

TOP TIPS

In an exploratory call, there are 3 things to ensure you do:



Build rapport

- Research the contact, review their history, and use cues from social media (for example are they a millennial, baby boomer, and how will that shape my approach with them)
- Start with open-ended questions about them - where they are from, what do they do for a living, how did they find out about your product?
- Don't waffle in your efforts to build rapport. Respect their time.



Set an agenda for the call

- Use what you learnt about what you know about the prospect
- Recap what prospect shared with you
- Suggest setting an agenda and the goal for the call: how I can best help you?



Recap what you learnt in your connect call

- Initial call should have set expectations and gotten some buy-in. Use previous comms to setup on expanding more on the challenges they face.
- Follow up questions, repeat issues (keep the prospect talking)

1 Identify Phase

2 Connect Phase

3 **Explore Phase**

4 Advise Phase

TAKEOUTS

- ▶ Provide an expert consultation experience
- ▶ Use the buyers initial interest and own credibility to dive deep into their context.
- ▶ Through value proposition and right questions, guide buyers to the right conclusions (could mean they don't buy from you!)
- ▶ By consultative approach, you are able to move through lead quality faster.

1 Identify Phase

2 Connect Phase

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

Advise or Quotation Phase

The final decision making phase for your prospective traveller, where you consolidate all information they have shared with you and distil this into a proposal for them to either purchase or reject.

One of the most common mistakes made in this crucial phase is the regurgitation of past quotations or going into “autopilot” when presenting your proposal or quotations to your prospect. Key is to provide the same quality advice uniquely tailored to your prospects’ set of goals and travel desires. If at all possible, don’t let them go through your written proposal or quotation alone the first time. Establish a call with them and walk them through the proposal.



1 Identify Phase

2 Connect Phase

3 Explore Phase

4 Advise Phase

Aim to cover the following points:

- 1 Recap their goals and challenges which informed the proposal/quotation you are about to share, **ordering these by what the prospect values most**
- 2 Bring their attention to the ways the proposal/quotation achieves their goals or overcomes the challenges they initially had in their travel plans
- 3 Confirm their budget, the decision-makers in process, and their timeline
- 4 Ask for a verbal indication that they understand and are happy with the proposal/quotation
- 5 Close by communicating next steps and actions, they need to take to secure their travel arrangements (and achieve their travel goals)

TAKEOUTS

- ▶ Come prepared with a personalized proposal or quotation
- ▶ Your proposal or quotation should state why you're uniquely positioned to help
- ▶ It should speak to the prospects goals/desires and use personable terminology
- ▶ Don't give them generalized content around your product!



Metrics You Should Track

Fortunately the further down the “funnel”, the fewer metrics there are to track, however, the ones that remain are arguably the most important metrics to any online travel business. These metrics have an element of shared responsibility and requirement for close collaboration between sales and marketing.

For most sales functions (ie reservations teams or travel consultants) the key metric is if the lead **converts to a booking**. And for marketing, it's **lead volume** and crucially **lead quality** in supporting sales in conversion.

On the next page you will find our at a glance glossary with industry benchmarks you should be aiming for. Equipped with these key metrics and an indication of industry benchmarks, you should quickly be able to identify where in your sales process you are excelling, and where areas of improvement exist.

Lead Volume

Definition: Amount of qualified leads received online (captured via website or your social platforms).

Lead Quality

Definition: Determined by the level of intent/need the buyer has expressed or indicated upon receipt of the lead.

Look out for: Completed long-form fields in forms (details they have written about their travel plans), celebratory events (indication of high intent), urgency in tone/written language, origin of lead (high-value locations), and lead occupation.

Lead to Booking Conversion Rate

*(aka Enquiry to Booking Rate
aka Opp-to-win Rate)*

Definition: Percentage of bookings converted against the total number of leads received.

Look out for: Lead quality and sales application of best practices and approach. Cue's for lower lead quality would be low click-through rates on ad creatives, low visitor numbers to campaign landing pages, low lead volumes relative to historical data, and leads not understanding your product. Sales cues are low conversion in spite of all the above marketing cues.

Benchmark: 8-15% On paid social campaigns for travel brands, 13-18% for paid search campaigns. >18% On organic search leads or direct.

Sales Revenue

Definition: Booking numbers multiplied by booking values.

Look out for: The value of upselling and its impact on average booking size and, resultantly, sales revenue.

Gross Profit

Definition: Sales revenue less cost of sales.

Look out for: Average booking size's relationship to your gross profit.

Average Booking Size

(aka ABV)

Definition: Value of total bookings made divided by the number of bookings.

Look out for: ABV's relationship with gross profit and revenue.

Turn Around Time

(aka TAT)

Definition: Speed of response from time of lead receipt to first contact.

Look out for: The relationship between non-conversion and slow turnaround time.

Benchmark: < 5 minutes

Avg Lead to Booking Time

Definition: Time from lead first contact to lead confirmation of booking.

Look out for: Long average lead times could suggest existing operational tools, approach, or technologies are not allowing for faster turnaround on phases identify through to booking conversion.

Avg Lead to Travel Time

Definition: Average amount of days from time of booking until client's travel.

Look out for: Avg lead time to travel is helpful in showing travel intent over certain times of year (seasonality) and can inform marketing and sales strategies to capture that high travel sentiment.



Bonus Top Tips

1

When it comes to converting a prospect into a booking, certain content carries more weight than others. Build a **content library** filed against your brand's travel persona's, to quickly access and present to contacts during appropriate phases of their buyer's journey.

2

Record when identifying patterns emerging where prospects are being lost, lead quality through form entries, or where possible content gaps exist. Establishing a **feedback loop** with your Flux Account Catalyst will ensure corrective measures can be put in place to continually improve conversion rates.

3

Your freedom to customize communication and content for your prospects' unique travel needs is key. Creating **templated content** pieces or communications with easy editing access will ensure you serve relevant content with the fastest turnaround possible.





Conclusion

We hope this sales best practice playbook proves to be a useful tool as you engage with online travellers hoping to be guided to their dream travel experience. As we maintain at Flux, travel is not simply the movement of people. Travel has the ability to transform and expose you to different perspectives and environments. It serves as the perfect catalyst for positive change and we wish you every success in connecting more travellers with that positive change.





Online travel defines us, empowers you

Flux Full Circle specialises in online performance marketing and building digital platforms that deliver results for the world's leading luxury travel brands

For more information, visit fluxfullcircle.com

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