

The changing face of travel

By [Carla Potgieter](#), issued by [Red & Yellow](#)

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Consider the following: in 2012, South Africa received over 200,000 online bookings, 9 million visitors, and online sales totalled more than R700m. These numbers, from the [E-tourism Africa Summit 2013](#) further reveal that 98% of travellers start researching potential destinations online, and reviews and referrals are the number-one driver behind people's choice of destination.

E-tourism is here to stay - and consumers' increased access to information and to the opinions of others (which they'll rather trust than those of brands and advertisers) are changing. Google's 2013 update of its [Traveller study](#), published last week, highlights the power of the internet when it comes to how travellers plan, research and book their trips, as well as where they gain inspiration for their holidays in the first place. The study, which considered the data from more than 5000 consumers across both the leisure and business categories, reports that when planning a holiday, 80% refer to the internet, as opposed to only 14% who consult travel agencies, and 7% who use travel agents.



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The way in which people search for information online and what drives their decision-making process is therefore becoming very important to understand, as search engines remain the number one choice for finding information, followed by brand websites (airlines and hotels), after which travel agencies only come third, closely followed by online map services.

What this means for tourism industry players: it is no longer enough just to ensure that you have an excellent, visible, accessible website, equipped with e-commerce facilities, which allows consumers to book online. You also need to start employing strategies such as search engine optimisation to improve your page's ranking in search engine results. Second, ask yourself: "Am I showing up in the right places with the right content?" Is your page likely to show up in consumer searches for the main sources of information listed above? Here a tool such as [Google Analytics](#) can be very useful to refine the picture of who visits your specific website, what content they are interested in as well, and what their online journey to your page looked like, even further.

Price remains the number one consideration for travellers (85%), and more than 60% of travellers indicated that they plan to spend more time researching before booking to find better value offers. Next to price, consumers rate relevant and varied activities (73%) as a key determining factor.

Here reviews and videos play a major role. Sites such as [Trip Advisor](#) consist of a community of online reviewers that rate and compare travel experiences all over the world - and can be integrated with Facebook to see how consumers are connected to other reviewers. This model is followed by a host of other booking websites such as [Hostelworld.com](#) and many others. And not only do travellers themselves read reviews, they become reviewers, as 42% report they are likely to write about their experiences online (not to mention share them in real-time with family and friends on social networks). Video consumption continues to rise, up by 5% across all traveller categories - plus 65% watch videos when looking for activity ideas at a particular destination. Travellers engage with videos from [various sources](#); 62% view those on branded websites, such as cruises, airline and hotel groups, and 37% look at those by friends and family.

What this means, is that it is crucial to ensure quality at all levels, leading to positive experiences, yet also to engage with consumer's negative feedback and manage your brand's reputation online. It might prove to be a very useful exercise to search your brand online and consider whether you would be likely to book, based on the kind of reviews that you find. SEO can be employed here to minimise bad results, but it would be far more important to see what can be learned from the feedback. It would also pay to invest in rich media - especially making sure that it is accessible from multiple devices.

One thing is clear: digital messages and online engagement plays a crucial role when it comes to attracting visitors, as well as in making sure that they will have a remarkable and fulfilling experience; one that they will want to talk about and share with their family and friends. The points above are an excellent starting place to ensure that your brand is not left behind.

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