Don't Make Your Guests Wait on Line

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This report compares hotel reservation website load times to best practice. Long load times can cause users to abandon websites, resulting in lost revenue. Results from our research indicate load times for hotel reservation websites exceed best practice times for both desktop and mobile devices. Site design must consider load time with competing design requirements.

Are your guests waiting on line?

No one likes to wait for service; whether in person, on the phone, or online. Consumers have expectations for how long they are willing to wait. When hotel companies fail to meet those expectations, the brand can be devalued in the consumers' eyes. Hotels encourage their staff to provide fast, friendly service for exactly this reason. But what about the guest's experience with the website, which is often the first contact with a hotel? The site might provide inviting images of guests enjoying the hotel's various amenities, but how long does it take the website to load? How long must the user wait to be able to interact with the site?

Slow loading websites are also a concern for search engines, such as Google and Yahoo. Search engines strive to identify the most relevant and useful sites that address the user's goals. Because of the importance they place on webpage load times, Google has indicated that starting in 2018 webpage load time will be considered when they decide how to rank search results [1]. So, improving the load time of a website could improve the placement of that site in search engine results.

This report addresses two questions. What is the state of web page load times across the hotel industry? And how do these times compare against hotel guests' expectation?

How we measured and compared wait times?

To study these questions we first looked at the prior research which reports that 40% of people abandon a website that takes more than three seconds to load. We also noted that the current best practice for web page load times specifies that sites should load in no more than three

seconds [2]. Using this as a bench mark, we measured the loading performance of over 260 hotel reservation websites using GTMetrix [3]. The tool GTmetrix (https://gtmetrix.com/) runs multiple performance tests on the specified webpage, and provides actionable recommendations on how to improve its performance. We looked at an international sample of hotel chains located in 30 countries. Information was collected on both desktop and mobile devices. We defined the page load time as the time to completely download the page.

How long do customers wait on line for hotels?

We found that page load performance failed to meet consumer expectations. Both mobile and desktop load times exceeded customers' expectations. The average load time on a desktop computer was nearly 12 seconds, with only ten percent of the sites meeting the three-second standard. The situation was worse when the sites were accessed with a mobile device. The average load time increased to 15 seconds, with less than one percent of the sites meeting the standard. Long load times can cause service dissatisfaction, which could cause potential guests to abandon the website for a competitor's site, resulting in a loss of current and future sales. There are many factors which impact the load time of a webpage, with a key factor being design decisions made when the site is created. We investigated if either company size or cultural factors influenced the website design in such a way as to impact the download speed. In both cases no such relationship was found.

So what can you do?

Consumers are increasingly using the internet and mobile devices to make hotel reservations. The website and its load time are becoming the consumer's first impression of a hotel. When the load time exceeds expectations, consumers will abandon the site and seek to make reservations elsewhere, resulting in a loss of revenue for the hotel. Load time is impacted by the design decisions for the website. Large panoramic images, animated slide shows, or other innovative features can be visually appealing, but also extend load time. Hotels should consider the impact of design decisions on site performance, particularly for mobile users. With the consumer use of mobile devices to make hotel reservations increasing, it is important for hotels

to evaluate that first point of contact, site load time. Hoteliers can use tools such as GTMetrix.com to assess load performance and the impact of design decisions. It does not matter how attractive and innovative the design is if the customer abandons the site. While attractive and innovative design elements are important, their use must be balanced against website load time.

Where do we go from here?

Consumers can book hotel reservations on a variety of sites other than the hotel website. Future research should compare load time of hotel websites to those of aggregator sites. This research was conducted from one location in the U.S. Given the global nature of the hotel industry and its clientele, future research should evaluate load times accessed from international locations.

References

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