Welcome international travelers

Ready to take your travel business to the next level and start attracting international customers? Expanding to the international market is a growth opportunity for all travel companies, big and small. Companies that can meet travelers' demand for trustworthy, knowledgeable, and reliable service have the opportunity to develop a new source of revenue from a wealthy and well-informed international customer base.

Follow these steps to develop an international strategy that will help you successfully find an audience to target abroad, encourage international interest, and maximize your online presence.

1. Do your research
Before you start, research your target market thoroughly.

Customers
Before you can attract international traffic, you need to answer the basic question of who your customer is- road warriors, occasional business guests, leisure travelers, retirees, families with kids, etc. With this knowledge, you can develop a strategy that appeals to the identified groups.

Competition
Who are your biggest competitors? How can you position your company to take advantage of your strengths and your competitions weakness?

Routes to market
Consider whether it's best to use your existing website or an established online marketplace. Where does your target audience discover options and book their travel plans?

2. Accepting payments
The point of payment is when most transactions are abandoned. Customers need confidence that their payment will be handled securely and they need the comfort and convenience of paying in a familiar currency.

Reach
To give yourself flexibility with room to expand into new countries, consider a payment provider with global reach. For example, PayPal allows you to accept payments in 25 currencies across 190+ markets.

Currency
People prefer to pay in a familiar currency, ideally their local currency but possibly an internationally recognized one like US dollars. If not offering payment in local currency, make sure you give a currency conversion so that customers can see what they are paying.

Security
Although many customers are experienced online shoppers, they have a general concern about online fraud, which is
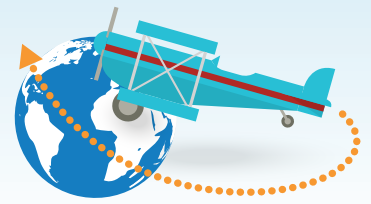
heightened when making a payment to an unfamiliar company. Look for a payment provider that is recognized and trusted by your target audience. In a 2012 study of international online purchasers, 65% of people surveyed said security was the main reason they pay with PayPal.

3. Get your website ready for international traffic

Things as simple as a grammatical error or a broken link can damage a potential customer's confidence and could lead them to abandon your site.

Build confidence and credibility
Pay scrupulous attention to detail, especially with translated text as issues with spelling and grammar can damage customer confidence.

Consumer generated content
By allowing consumers to post their thoughts and opinions, you will build credibility both with the search engines and with prospective guests.

Add photos
Turn "lookers" to "bookers" by adding engaging and high definition photos of your website. As a general rule of thumb the more photos, the better.

4. Great local customer service

The first step to great customer service is to proactively address the main concerns customers might have. The next step is to make it easy for customers to contact you, whether by telephone or by email. Having this information prominently displayed helps to give them confidence that any unexpected problems encountered with their booking will be easily resolved.

Email address
At a minimum, you should prominently display an email address that customers can contact with any concerns. Any emails you receive should be dealt with promptly.

Telephone helpline
Specify if you offer a telephone helpline, and whether it's available in local language.

- Have customers in North America or Europe? Give your customers an increased sense of security and convenience with a local customer number. Find out more on www.jaxtr.com/paypal/spiceroutes

Skype or instant messaging
Offering a "live chat" solution to help resolve questions can reduce cost for the customer and for your business.

5. SEO and online advertising

Communicating to travelers when they're looking to book a trip online can be incredibly effective – and even more so when you can target your ideal customer.

Use highly searched keywords in site copy
90% of people who first visit a website are directed from Google, Yahoo, Bing or another search engine. Use professional tools to research SEO keywords potential guests use when they search travel options and expertly weave those keywords into site copy.

Google Places

Don't forget to enter your hotel's information and keywords into Google Places, where listings show up before organic rankings.

Pay Per Click

Of all the internet marketing options available, Pay Per Click is perhaps the one with the most potential for instant gratification. This is a great tool to get through seasonality and/or other anticipated slow periods where you need an extra boost to business.

6. The value of social media

Social media's interactive medium presents a powerful new way to communicate with your customers, promote your company, and develop your brand.

Engage with guests

When guests take the time to follow your content or leave comments, go ahead and respond with your own. Join the conversation and engage with your fans. When they feel like their voice is heard, they are more likely to become a return visitor and to recommend you to their friends and family.

Provide a concierge service on Twitter

A "virtual concierge" service enables guests to ask questions before they leave for their trip. This kind of personal attention will make people remember you and encourage repeat bookings.

7. Manage your reputation on peer-to-peer sites

According to a recent MSNBC poll, 86% of respondents indicated that they rely on TripAdvisor and other travel sites to gauge sentiment before they make their travel decisions. Use this new trend to your best advantage by enhancing, managing and marketing your profile.

Update your primary listing photo regularly

Guests want to see what your property looks like today, and your primary listing photo can help you make a great first impression.

Encourage guests to write reviews

While it is against the policies of many peer-to-peer sites to offer guests incentives in exchange for positive reviews, it is perfectly acceptable to ask your guests to write a review. There are many resources to help you do this: you can use widgets, email links, and download flyers that offer your guests a friendly reminder to submit a review when they return home.

Monitor and respond to reviews

Responding to reviews – both positive and negative – shows you're paying attention and taking customer feedback seriously. According to a recent TripAdvisor survey, 76% of travelers said they have a more positive view of owners who respond to online guest reviews.

8. Be mobile-friendly

The importance of having a mobile website has skyrocketed in recent years due to the prevalence of smartphones and tablets. A 2012 study conducted by comScore found that 48% of people surveyed used a tablet or smartphone to plan their trip, and of those who have booked travel on a mobile device, up to 90 percent would do so again. To capitalize on this growing market, companies need to ensure their site can be easily displayed, navigated, and used on a mobile device. Below are three considerations to keep in mind when designing a mobile-friendly site:

Simple design and interaction

While your full website can be feature-rich, keep in mind that the design of your mobile website should be simple and to the point so customers can easily navigate your site. If you're displaying contact information, make it easy for customers to use this information by using click-to-call, click-to-email, and mapping functionality where appropriate. It reduces the steps a user needs to take, providing convenience and a better likelihood of this functionality being used.

Size the content for fingertips

Make navigation convenient! Always assume that users do not have a stylus to help them tap on buttons or links embedded in pages. With that consideration in mind, make sure all buttons are large enough to be easily pressed with fingers.

Make content responsive

While having a large variety of mobile devices to choose from is excellent for consumers, merchants must take care to ensure their mobile sites look excellent on all screen sizes.