

Automation in the travel industry: Build lasting customer relationships

 By [Chantel Troskie](#)

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Tourism forms a vital part of the South African economy, outperforming many other key sectors in contribution to GDP and job creation, and SA Tourism is looking to capitalise on the opportunity by attracting an additional one million domestic and four million international visitors by 2021, as part of its five-million-in-five-years strategy.



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A tourism survey by Statistics South Africa shows however that domestic tourists have been cautious about their travel patterns, and are more careful about how they spend their money, due to the sluggish economy. The report highlights that instead of taking trips throughout the year, day travellers and domestic tourists have opted to travel during months in which there are school holidays such as September, December, the Easter holidays or June.

What has worked in travellers' favour is the wide choice of online travel agents and comparison sites aimed at providing them with the best pricing options. However, these providers need to offer a seamless travel experience, one that not only makes the process smoother but also anticipates what customers want ahead of time. This is the secret to delivering value that goes beyond price and building lasting customer relationships.

That's why airlines, hotels and other hospitality companies are turning to automated services to remove the bottlenecks that have traditionally stood in their customers' way and give people their time back.

Automate to solve pain points

The term 'automation' may conjure up the image of faceless robots and processes that don't understand our needs, but this is not the way to apply it when serving people directly. Businesses need automation that is supported by a deep understanding of customers. Only then can they deliver experiences that are not just efficient but also personalised.

The key is to not automate services for the sake of it. Airlines and hospitality companies need to step in their customers' shoes and apply their automation strategies to genuine pain points.

Understand customers and their data

Take Club Med for example. The company's challenge was to create a 360-degree view of customers and deliver a seamless interaction experience to an international premium clientele, aligning with Club Med's strategic shift to offer personalised luxury holidays. In addition, it had to enable agents in several countries to interact with customers across all digital channels via a single multichannel solution with an easy-to-use interface — increasing the productivity of customer service teams and raising customer satisfaction.

With Oracle Service Cloud the company saw an increase in customer loyalty by 2% thanks to optimised personal interactions across all channels, faster resolution of customer requests and premium customer service in tandem with Club Med's premium holiday offers. In addition, the productivity of agents jumped by 15% as they were provided with a unified 360-degree view of customers and their interactions across points of sale, social media, web self-service, and the contact centre.

Personalisation and automation aren't just reshaping hotels and hospitality players. Leading African airlines are reading digital body language to gain a more-complete, individualised understanding of their customers. Faced with the challenge of inconsistent internet and mobile communications penetration across the continent, these airlines' technology reach was limited. They embarked on a multi-year programme to automate and integrate the data collected from their marketing, sales, and customer service activities.

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As a result, they now know a lot more about their customers based on data from multiple marketing, sales, and customer service channels. From booking to arrival, what their favourite meal is, and what time of day they like to fly, as well as their wedding anniversary date and birthday, airlines are able to offer first class customer service.

At the heart of all these automated services is the consolidation and understanding of customer data. These hotels, airlines and travel agents pull valuable information together from the interactions people have across all elements of the travel ecosystem and into one centralised environment. This allows them to create detailed customer profiles that they can then use to differentiate themselves, delighting travellers with relevant and personalised experiences that put convenience above all else.

Today's travel industry is unforgiving, and standing out has never been harder in a market where value plays a major role in attracting customers. The challenge for businesses is to remind people that not all companies are created equal when it comes to serving consumers.

There is no shortage of pain points that need addressing in the travel experience, which means even a little will go a long way. By making the process just a bit smoother and more personalised, today's airline and hospitality players will deliver the ultimate value to their customers – more time and peace of mind to enjoy their holiday.

ABOUT CHANTEL TROSKIE

Troskie is passionate about guiding businesses on technology that will help them better understand as well as engage with their customers.

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