Cloud technology is the key to personalise South Africa's travel experiences

By Chantel Troskie   26 Jun 2018

For the travel industry, the customer's experience is perhaps the most important variable in determining the long-term success of the business. Because of this, airlines, hotels and other travel-related operators are affected more by digital transformation than most.

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According to the most recent Stats SA's annual Tourism Satellite Account for South Africa report, the tourism sector directly contributed 2.9% to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016. The sector has 686,596 employees and of the 15.8 million workers that are formally and informally employed in South Africa, 4.4% or 1 in every 23 were directly employed in the tourism sector.

In his State of the Nation (SONA) address, president Cyril Ramaphosa said there is no reason why the tourism sector can't double in size. He referred to South Africa as the most beautiful country in the world with the most hospitable people and called on all South Africans to open their homes and their hearts to the world. Government is also enhancing support for destination marketing in key tourism markets and is taking further measures to reduce regulatory barriers and develop emerging tourism businesses.

Personalised experiences

According to Travelport's, The South African Digital Traveller Research report, 86% of South African travellers use travel booking sites while 82% consult review sites to help with ideas on which destinations to visit next. The report also indicates that mobile is a growing and important aspect of the booking experience with 35% of respondents using a smartphone and 38% a tablet to do their bookings.

With a wealth of information at their fingertips, customers now expect to coordinate their whole trip and make decisions regardless of where they are. Mobile integration is expected rather than desired – not just in the booking process but also during the trip.

Consumer expectations are changing significantly, and to thrive in today's competitive environment, delivering a seamless, unique, hyper-personalised customer experience is critical. Travellers want to travel the world in their own way and the ability to serve up holidays tailored to the individual's specific tastes can make a huge difference.

The industry is even beginning to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) and chatbots, which are reducing pressure on customer service teams and providing faster access to services for travellers.

Personalising the travel experience begins with understanding the traveller behaviour, and predicting what they want before they even begin the booking process. The key lies in better data management, utilising machine learning and AI to interpret user preferences in real-time, to serve up an experience unique to the individual, not just to improve conversion rates but also to offer a level of service that will keep travellers coming back for more.

Take Kenya Airways, for example, it knew that if it was to achieve its goal of becoming not only Africa's leading airline, but also a shining example of progress on the continent – it had to gain a more complete, individualised understanding of its customers. By using Oracle cloud-based tools the airline now knows a lot more about its guests based on data from multiple marketing, sales, and customer service channels; from booking to arrival including what their favourite meals are, what time of day they like to fly, as well as their wedding anniversary dates and birthdays. The airline is able to provide personalised offers that produce repeat business and prompt more feedback on its service levels.

Omni-channel interactions

Customers move in and out of the customer lifecycle fluidly and expect businesses to maintain the context of their previous interactions, regardless of the channel used. But, too often, businesses focus on separate experiences: in-store, online, and mobile. These distinctions create disconnected information, which leads to a disjointed customer experience. Instead, businesses in the tourism sector should integrate all of their customer data to give consumers more control and more convenient ways to shop, while seamlessly moving among their preferred channels.

KLM Airlines combines web search intent with the customer's complete profile, to route customer service inquiries to the channel that will best serve the individual's needs and the company's goals. For example, a high-value customer may be routed to a chat or phone agent instead of being directed to a web frequently asked question. With the help of intelligent chatbots that utilise natural language processing, KLM Airlines have increased online conversions by 30% annually.

Customers expect companies to know what they want, before they even show up. Price is no longer a differentiating factor for businesses and therefore the hospitality industry is under rising pressure to meet the needs of individuals rather than their customer base as a whole.

Emerging technologies based in cloud, such as AI and machine learning give customers a better experience across the

entire travel journey - from prepping for their trip to booking it so that they have the best time at their final destination. Providing superior, connected customer experiences is how to build loyalty and outdo the competition. South Africa's travel and tourism operators must create loyal customers who can't wait to interact with them again.

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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