



Booking Hotels via the Web

You see the advertisements on just about all cable and network television: Websites that promise to deliver the lowest hotel rates. Finding a hotel in an unfamiliar city can be a daunting task. Many criteria play vital roles in the search: safety, cleanliness, location, and price to name a few.



In the first quarter of 2011, Topaz International set out with a study to determine how well some of the sites actually deliver on their promise of low rates. As with all of the internet studies we've conducted, time and patience is required to have satisfactory results.

Ultimately, a consumer would still need to do a substantial amount of research to determine the quality and location of hotels before determining if the property is worth the price. Almost all of the hotels chosen in this study resulted in a good map of the location requested and references and ratings through Trip Assist.

Methodology

The methodology was fairly simple. Topaz chose 138 major cities in the United States and Canada as well as other countries throughout the world. In each of the cities, location played an integral role. We looked for hotels located by the airport and within the city center for a total of 276 searches.

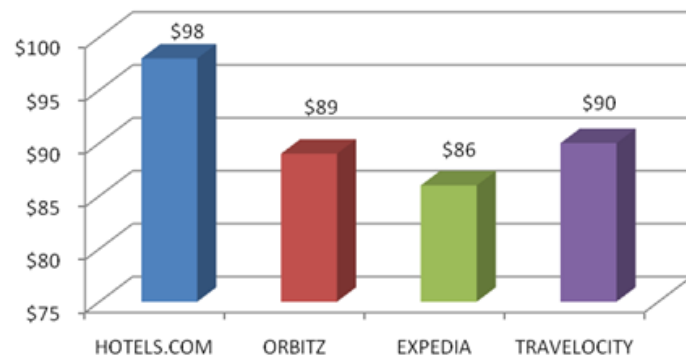
Four popular websites were used in this study: Hotels.com, Orbitz, Expedia, and Travelocity. The hotels requested all had a similar star rating. For instance, only three or four star rated hotels were selected.



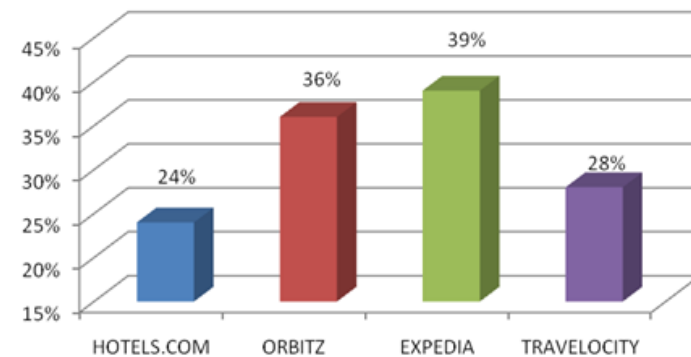
Results

In the initial study, Topaz chose the lowest rate returned by each website based on our inputted search criteria. If a website returned a low nightly rate that was not in the requested parameters due to a deficiency of the search tool, the hotel was still included in the results. This accounts for some of the fluctuation in prices between the systems. Hotels.com on average produced higher hotel rates overall for both domestic and international. Of the 276 searches, the average rate was \$9 over Expedia. The lowest rate was returned only 24% of the time.

Average Hotel Rates



Percent of Low Rate Returned



Expedia had the lowest average nightly rate of \$86. The site returned the lowest 39% of the time. Expedia also performed best in the overall international category, returning the lowest 51% of the time.

Domestic US and Canada

Domestically, Orbitz performed the best overall by returning the lowest 50% of the time.



This study initially was based on the overall search results based on specific requests. That being said, all the websites had inconsistencies in search results. The biggest inconsistency in search results was in regard to the location requested. As a consumer searching for a hotel in a specific location, extra diligence would be needed to verify the hotel meets that requirement. In multi-airport areas, this was especially true.

- When a request was made for the Oakland, CA city center area, Hotels.com returned a hotel by the San Francisco Airport.
- In a request for city center Newark and by the JFK Airport, Hotels.com returned the Ravel Hotel in Manhattan.
- A request for a city center hotel in Hartford CT on Orbitz returned a hotel in East Windsor which resulted in a savings of \$235 over the other websites.
- In New Orleans, Travelocity returned a rate of \$85 for an airport hotel when city center was requested. The difference was an average of \$110 off the nightly rate.

In most cases, when the search results offered the same property, the rates were equal. However, occasionally a savings could be found. For instance, in Baton Rouge a rate of \$49 on Orbitz priced at \$65 on Travelocity.

Out of the 122 domestic searches (61 cities checked once for a city center and again for an airport) used in the study, the same hotel was returned on at least 2 sites 80 times.

Of the 80 cities where the same property was returned, Orbitz and Travelocity tied and beat out the other sites by returning the lowest rate 11% of the time. Hotels.com and Expedia only offered a lower rate on the same hotel 2.5% of the time.

International Results

Having the ability to research and book hotels internationally on any one of these websites is a huge convenience to a consumer. Although a good deal of time is required to find a hotel that meets specific criteria, there are many resources that can be utilized to make an informed decision including customer references and details on amenities and location.



One of the biggest problems in the Topaz study was in the search for hotels in international locations. Apparently, a three star hotel in some locations has a very different standard than what an average business traveler would expect. Many times, hostels were returned instead of hotels. Some hotels, although very inexpensive, lacked the amenities that many hotels in the United States would consider a quality of a three or four star property.

Based on these results, Topaz dove a little deeper into the study and chose hotels we felt were the most appropriate to a corporate business traveler. Safety and cleanliness as well as amenities such as a private room and bath became a priority.

Overall, Hotels.com and Orbitz tied with the percentage of lowest rates returned at 25% of the time.

However, there were exceptions in many situations. For instance a request in Aberdeen Scotland for an airport hotel resulted in the same hotel for all four sites with the lowest rate offered by Travelocity.

In 45 cities, the search results offered the same hotel in at least two of the four sites. Of these results, Orbitz offered a lower rate 10 times. Hotels.com and Expedia tied at four times and Travelocity came in with three lower rates.

Summary

All of the websites used in this study were deficient in providing hotels within the requested area. A consumer would need a good map to determine if the property is in the desired location. International properties would need to be scrutinized even more diligently. A three star rating does not necessarily mean the amenities a business traveler has come to expect would be provided in that category internationally. Bottom line: Even though the internet has provided many tools to determine the best hotel for a traveler, it may still require substantial research before a good decision can be made in picking a top quality hotel for a good rate.