

Duff on Hospitality Law

Online Travel Update: *Skift* pays tribute to Marriott CEO Arne Sorenson; Kayak says meta search is still influential; Tripadvisor updates their subscription model

By Greg Duff on 2.25.21 | Posted in Online Travel Update

This week's Update features a number of stories highlighting last week's *Skift* Online Travel and Distribution Summit, as well as Marriott CEO Arne Sorenson's incredible impact on Marriott and its view on online travel. Enjoy.

A Tribute to Marriott's Arne Sorenson

("Marriott's Arne Sorenson Upended Travel Distribution," February 17, 2021 via Skift)
(subscription may be required)

Last week brought the horribly sad news of Marriott CEO Arne Sorenson's untimely passing. As many in the industry offered their heartfelt condolences and shared personal stories involving Mr. Sorenson, *Skift* Executive Editor, Dennis Schaal, offered his own unique look at Mr. Sorenson's many contributions to Marriott's distribution efforts. For Dennis, highlights of Mr. Sorenson's nine-year tenure as Marriott CEO include:

- A first of its kind for U.S. companies to debut a store-within-a store model on Fliggy's travel distribution platform
- White label package and later wholesale distribution agreements with Expedia Group
- Together with other major lodging companies, the launch of a second industry-owned and operated distribution platform, Roomkey
- And most recently, the exploration and ultimately successful launch of Marriott's homegrown short-term vacation rental platform, Homes & Villas. Contrary to the firmly held beliefs of many of his industry peers that online travel agents (OTAs) represent everything wrong about distribution, Mr. Sorenson believed that by leveraging Marriott's ever increasing number of properties to partner with these OTA adversaries, Marriott could better avail itself of the many tools and other benefits that the OTAs could provide.

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Is Meta Still Relevant?

(“Kayak CEO Says Metasearch Still Has Clout Despite Travel Industry’s Direct Booking Push,” February 17, 2021 via Skift Travel News) (subscription may be required)

For me personally, the two most informative sessions from *Skift’s* Online and Travel Distribution Summit last week featured Kayak CEO, Steve Hafner, and Tripadvisor Chief Brand and Experience Officer, Lindsay Nelson. During his session, Kayak’s Steve Hafner was bullish on the long-term prospects of meta search, though he acknowledged some of the lingering short-term challenges associated with the pandemic (i.e., reduced advertising budgets for both OTAs and suppliers). Hafner also used his session to informally announce Kayak’s planned roll out of a lightweight property management system for independent hotels. Responding to questions posed to nearly every presenter at the Summit on short-term rentals, Hafner firmly believes that there is an important role to be played by metasearch sites like Kayak in assisting providers other than Airbnb to promote their independent short-term rental portfolios.

An Update on Tripadvisor’s Subscription Model

(“Behind TripAdvisor’s Bet on a Subscription Model for a Pandemic Recovery,” February 17, 2021 via Skift Travel News) (subscription may be required)

During her session, Tripadvisor’s Lindsay Nelson offered Online and Travel Distribution Summit viewers an insider’s perspective on Tripadvisor’s recently launched subscription service, Tripadvisor Plus. Those who pay the \$99 per year subscription fee receive discounts on hotel stays, activities/experiences and other member benefits like early check-in. Tripadvisor is using the launch of the subscription service (and the feedback that it continues to receive from its early subscribers) as an opportunity to re-define and improve user’s online travel purchasing experience. Look for this service to continue to evolve as Tripadvisor seeks to further leverage this important new subscriber group in the post pandemic world.

Other news:

United Can't Ditch Passengers' COVID-19 Refund Suit

February 12, 2021 via Law360 - Class Action

An Illinois federal judge said last Friday that United Airlines can't use the force majeure clause in its contracts to entirely evade claims that it improperly denied passengers full refunds for flights that were canceled amid the pandemic, saying most of the passengers' claims can move forward.

Record Levels for Rental Bookings But Current Revenues Way Down

February 16, 2021 via Phocus Wire

New bookings in the United States for vacation rentals were at record levels in January, according to data from AirDNA. The analytics and trends service for short-term rentals found that pent-up demand for trips among travelers is fast becoming a reality, with January's figure

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some 22 percent higher than last June when a similar eagerness to get on the road kicked in after the first wave of stay-at-home guidance.

Google Fined €1.1m for Deceptive Hotel Ratings in France

February 16, 2021 via Phocus Wire

Google has agreed to pay a €1.1 million fine levied by authorities in France over misleading star ratings for hotels. In 2019, complaints from hoteliers prompted France's Directorate General for Competition, Consumption and the Repression of Fraud (DGCCRF) to launch an investigation into Google's rating practices in its search engine and in Google Maps.

Emirates to Unveil Exclusive Content for Travel Advisors

February 19, 2021 via TravelPulse

Beginning on July 1, Emirates said it will provide travel advisors with "rich content and differentiated ticket pricing" through Emirates Gateway, the carrier's New Distribution Capability (NDC)-enabled platform, and add surcharges on bookings made through the GDS on the same day.

Health Passport Standards, Interoperability Critical for Revival of International Travel

February 12, 2021 via Phocus Wire

Multiple digital health passport solutions are in development from companies including the International Air Transport Association, AOKpass, Airside Mobile, Yoti, Daon, Ink Aviation and the Commons Project - all aiming to facilitate the resumption of international travel since it came to a virtual standstill due to COVID-19. But these passports are just one piece of a much larger, more complex puzzle that will need to be solved if there are hopes to return to a world when people can freely move across borders.