

55 travel ecommerce tips

for specialist tour operators,
travel agents & activity companies

by

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www.SmallFishBigOcean.com

Discussion forums and help for small tour operators and niche agents



Tour operator reservation system

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WHO IS THIS eBook FOR?

This eBook is for specialist tour operators, travel agents & activity companies looking to setup a new website or improve their web presence.

These tips are here to make you consider whether you have the right approach and give you something to chew over. Just because they are documented here doesn't make them 100% correct in all situations. You must make your own judgements on how to run your own business. One of our aims is to highlight areas where you may be making a fundamental decision because you are unaware alternate approaches exist.

TourCMS

TourCMS is a web based reservation system with a global customer base including tour operators, ski chalet / jungle lodge companies, activity providers and other travel websites. It helps manage your office (including controlling availability, taking online bookings, customer databases, agent balances and commission tracking) as well as provides the tools to help you market and distribute your products to your own partners, agents and leading travel websites.

Many of the tips come directly from lessons learnt from working with TourCMS clients and their projects. Other tips come from working on larger airline, hotel and business travel projects the author has been involved with.

Further information about TourCMS from **www.TourCMS.com**

SmallFishBigOcean

Small Fish Big Ocean (sometimes referred to as SFBO) is a web based community of small tour operators, travel agents and activity companies.

If you have any questions about topics you have read in this book, come to the forums and ask. You will find other companies in a similar situation to you and you will find a friendly answer to your questions.

Go take a look at **www.SmallFishBigOcean.com** , create a profile and join in!

#1 Are you a small company that wants to grow big or a small company that wants to remain small

The key difference will be how you spend your pre-launch period. Companies that want to stay small should focus on getting trading as soon as possible (doing the least work that is required). Companies aiming for bigger things may choose to spend more time building solid foundations first in order to sustain rapid growth.

Perhaps a good goal would be to achieve a company size that removes any individual as critical from the day to day running of the business – but no larger. For small tour operators that can mean 5 or so staff (excluding tour leaders).

#2 Decide between direct sales and reselling your products via 3rd parties (agents etc)

Third party distributors / agents can require up to 25% commission (and a guarantee that you won't undercut them via your own direct website). This forces an early decision as to whether you are going to use this style of sales or not.

The trade-off is between large volumes at low margin and lower volumes (perhaps) at higher margins.

If you increase your prices to take into account agent commission you may find regional competitors with similar products going solely the direct route. This gives them the opportunity to be more price competitive. It is this price competition that makes going direct and taking a distribution based strategy almost mutually exclusive as who wants to be the first in a region to increase their prices to try out a new big travel agent website that has approached you?

For third party sales think about travel products that can be sold without significant pre-sales questions and that have few variables. These are the easiest to enable third parties to sell. Remember they may only be selling your products once or twice a month so won't have much opportunity (or desire) to master your more complex products. Keep them simple.

If your product is the style of product that attracts plenty of questions prior to booking (e.g. a scuba diving course) then choose your agents carefully. You don't want to give away 10-15% commission and then still have to answer all the customer questions but this time with an intermediary who slows down the question and answer phase.



Over the TourCMS system 5-10% of all bookings are via an agent where the agent is taking the money on behalf of the consumer. Many tour operators trade well at 0% of sales via agents. Building up an agent network doesn't have to be an early start-up priority.

#3 Consider a web affiliate marketing strategy

Agents and affiliates are similar concepts. Both are paid based on success only (for example commission % based on total sale value of a travel booking).

The difference between an agent and an affiliate is who deals (and contracts) with the end customer.

Agents tend to make the end legal contract, collect the money, and then pay you the balance of the money (minus their commission). Affiliates tend to send you the customer – who books with you directly – and affiliates are then transferred their commission subsequently (perhaps monthly).

Key point is the money flows in the opposite direction.

You can run an affiliate scheme yourself. This involves having a tracking system that both you and your affiliates trust.



The TourCMS system includes capability for you to setup your own affiliate scheme. It includes ability to vary commission by affiliate, an affiliate login (so they can see clicks and commission owed), product information via XML and independent tracking.

The knowledge required to market a product (i.e. to suggest to a potential customer that it exists) is significantly lower than that required to sell the same product. e.g. a local hotel may know your products sufficiently well to say “go and speak to XYZ” but don’t wish to actually take the sale itself.

Key decisions

How many affiliates?

If you recruit hundreds you will be dealing with them without any personal support or individual relationship building. Each individual affiliate is unlikely to be worth that much to you however taken in their entirety their volume could be substantial. Alternatively if you recruit 10 well performing ones you can adjust your offering based on their requirements and help them do much more with your products.

Should you use an affiliate network?

One issue with taking on many smaller affiliates is that you will be constantly (hopefully!) paying out small commission payments every month. One way to solve that is to use an affiliate network. These services are setup to provide independent tracking and payment solutions. You make a single payment to the affiliate network. They make all the small payments to the affiliates themselves. This service will incur a cost however many affiliates prefer to work via networks as they trust the tracking and they themselves only have to deal with one incoming payment per month (rather than dealing with all the companies they work with)






How much should you pay an affiliate?

As much as you can afford! The more you pay, the more they will work for you. Seems obvious but many tour operators just pluck a small % out of the air and then are surprised when affiliate marketing doesn’t work for them.

Web affiliates tend to get 5% less than you give to agents for a similar sale. This is because they are not handling the customer and secondly not handling the money (hence not incurring any credit card transaction fees).



An example of a widget you could use to feature your tours / activities on an affiliate's website. Traffic sent through to your site for direct dealing with the customer.

	1/2 Day Sonoran Tomcar Tour New River, Arizona 1/2 day self-drive Tomcar tour into the Sonoran desert	from US\$145 More information
	Annapurna Circuit Annapurna trekking region A classic long trek right around the Annapurna range in Nepal.	from £795 More information
	Annapurna Sanctuary Kathmandu, Annapurna region A fabulous trek up into the heart of the Annapurna mountains, with time in Kathmandu and Pokhara	from £720 More information
	Atlantic to Atoplano Brazil, Argentina, Chile & Bolivia Motorcycle Tour	from US\$8100 More information
	Best of Armenia Yerevan, Southern and Northern Armenia Classical Armenia Tour	from €890 More information

#4 Work with a focused group of suppliers rather than spreading suppliers too thin

I used to work on a hotel distribution company and we were achieving 50,000 bookings a month. Sounds great. But we also had 30,000 hotels listed.

Although the hotels were important to us - we were not important to that many individual hotels (as we only averaged 1 or 2 bookings a month for each hotel – although it wasn't as evenly spread as that).

You need to make sure you are as important to your suppliers as they are to you (or at least significant enough to come up on their radar).

Just remember not to cut your number of suppliers too thinly otherwise they will gain more strength when it comes to pricing negotiations 😊

As with a great deal of business, it is a balance.

#5 B2C sales for travel easier to launch than B2B

Quick glossary:

- B2C – Business to Consumer (e.g.. direct sales)
- B2B – Business to Business (e.g. business travel – or selling employee incentive products e.g. top salesman awards)
- B2T2C – Business to Trade, who then sell to Consumers (e.g. consumer sales, but via a third party such as travel agents)

Businesses normally look for the best they can afford in any category based on multiple scenarios. Consumers look for what meets their needs on an individual occasion.

Therefore it can be easier to launch a B2C business than a B2B business.

However, once you have reached a level of company maturity it may be easier to maintain position if you are selling repeat trade to businesses rather than new consumers.

#6 Sell a new product in a market that already exists

In the past I have run failed travel ecommerce projects where we have had to build desire for the entire concept as well as market our own product.

For example if your destination is known for trekking you may consider setting up photography tours – but if the market exists for trekking – probably best to start in that sector - unless you are absolutely sure you know how and where you are going to promote your photography tours.

Once you have got a base business built at that point you can start trying a few new ideas. In the first instance probably best to sell something that you know sells already – as with a good website you can soon catch-up established competitors.

#7 Don't take on a single full time web designer

Individual designers / developers rarely have the right balance of skills to do everything you need. Instead find a small web design agency with multiple staff that you can work with that cover all the skills.

If you grow larger you can start taking on dedicated staff. At that point you probably have more than 40 hours a week of a specific skill requirement. Very few tour operators ever get to this point.

Use an agency that is geographically close to you because the best way to have a design meeting is face to face.

If you are going to take on a web designer / developer we suggest recruiting a developer first. Most developers can just about design (although my colleagues wouldn't say that about me!) but very rarely can designers undertake a good customer facing code / database development. Freelance designers can be easily sourced, developers are much harder to find on a few hour basis (when asked to work with someone else's code)

Glossary – a designer is like a house architect / interior designer. A developer is like your builder, plumber, electrician etc.

#8 Don't put price / date information in your brochures

Brochures tend to be sent out many weeks in advance and contain photos, product descriptions and price panels. They are expensive to print and can age badly (due to having to maintain the latest pricing / date availability information contained within them). Obsolete brochures tend to end up being thrown away – not good news for anyone.

Consider removing the full date / price information from your brochures – and place the detailed price information a PDF document that can be downloaded from your website. Retain approximate pricing in your brochure (e.g. seasonal lead in prices)

This changes the brochure from being about generating specific product interest to about building initial desire. Let your website convert that desire into the specific product interest.

Advantages

- The *brochure* will last several seasons rather than having to be reprinted several times a season (hence less waste)
- Less pages so less expensive to print
- Drives traffic to your website (hence may be able to convince the potential customer to book online – saving you more administration)
- You can ask your customers to sign up for your email newsletter at the same time
- An opportunity to promote your special offers – or inform potential customers of last minute availability information
- Retains agility to change your schedule (and prices) so you can be much more reactive to market conditions

Product leaflets don't follow the same logic. Firstly they tend to be used mainly in a destination (for example placed in hotels and tourist attractions). Secondly they are less expensive to print in the first place.

Leaflets should always contain price information!

#9 Understand ROI and PPC mathematics

For each investment you make in to your website and technology you ought to be calculating a return on investment (ROI). ROI can be calculated using the following equation:

$$\text{ROI percentage} = ((\text{Return} - \text{Investment}) / \text{Investment}) \times 100$$

e.g. if a project will cost 2000 GBP and return 5000 GBP (for example produce sales of 5000 GBP) then you would calculate ROI as:

$$(3000 / 5000) \times 100 = 60\%$$

Normally you would calculate return over the period the investment is producing a return for. As a guide here are the periods we use on client projects:

- Search engine optimisation (organic) – 1 year
- Web design & development – 3 years
- Backend changes (reservation system etc) – 5 years

Pay Per Click advertising (such as Google) also requires some mathematics e.g.:

- Website conversion (bookers to visitors) – 2%
- Repeat booking factor – 10%
- Booking revenue you are willing to spend on marketing – 100 GBP per booking (or, including repeat booking factor, 110 GBP per newly received booking)

Due to the 2% conversion it takes 50 visitors to attract a new booking – or expressed as a PPC budget – this calculates at 2 GBP per click (or 2.20 GBP including repeat booking factor). This is the maximum you should spend on PPC advertising for that specific tour.

You should change your repeat booking factor if you know you will sell many repeat bookings. You may find that as a niche tour operator you may have to attract a constant stream of new customers – rather than market to your existing customers.

#10 Travel agent aggregation and curation

An aggregator tends to exhaustively collect every product into a single place.

A curator groups just those products together that they believe are the best for their purpose. i.e. there is a human filtering process involved.

e.g. a hotel aggregator for a region may aim to have every single hotel and accommodation provider on their website.

A curator may choose just to have the accommodations that meet a certain quality standard – or those that are pet friendly – or those that have coach / bus parking for example.

One of the challenges of curation is that you tend to end up with less products on your website than the aggregator style sites. You need to address this directly with your site visitors otherwise they may believe, incorrectly, that you are not such a good place to do their research versus a competitor site with many more products.

Tips for a curated website:

- Ensure you explain that the site is curated. Use text like “We have handpicked these 100 hotels for you”.
- Give the background on who the curator is – and what experience they have with the products. Perhaps detail the evaluation process. Unless the consumer can feel empathy with the curator it is unlikely the consumer will appreciate the curation process.

With a curated website the consumer may feel more confident in buying from you without additional product research.

With an aggregated product website you may tempt the consumer to do their own independent product research (for example looking at a hotel review website such as TripAdvisor) hence you give an opportunity for a competitor to divert your potential client to your competitor’s site.

#11 Language specific tours

Running tours & activities is not the same as operating hotels or offering transport style products.

With tours, activities and excursions you may find your customers enjoy it more when they can all speak to each other in a single shared language. This is different to hotels / flights where customers don't have to speak to each other at all. For adventure tours or activities this can add to the safety of a trip as well.

Therefore if you are selling to multiple nationalities you need to consider not just translating tour descriptions on your website but about running separate trips.

You should make it clear which languages your trips will run in including which languages the tour leaders will speak and in which languages any attractions (such as museums) have guides available.

English can be a good default however if you have families taking your trips you shouldn't assume that their children's English is as good as their parents. Making sure that the children are enjoying a trip is key to making the parents have an enjoyable experience.

#12 Alter product descriptions by website

While setting up a single website may initially sound overwhelming, the most successful niche tour operators run multiple websites.

For example if you are running tours in Egypt that involve both a camel trek and a visit to the Pyramids you could create one site that focuses on historical / cultural side of your trips. Your second site could describe your tours by focussing on the adventure aspects (the camel trek).

Launch both websites and see which wins. Chances are both will convert different kinds of customers.

Ensure that both descriptions are correct so your clients don't feel misled. It is the emphasis you are changing, not the overall makeup of the tour (although you can feature variations of the same tour on separate sites – if you take this approach to its natural conclusion)



With TourCMS you can maintain separate language or product descriptions for the same tour/hotel on separate websites but sharing the same, central, availability. Can be useful for SEO purposes too.

#13 Create a range of products that generate sales all year

Even if your tours only operate in the summer, create something that people can buy from you over winter (like a book, video, webinar event etc).

Otherwise when you launch your website you may not understand it if is performing well until the main tour booking period starts - and then it may be too late to tweak the design for that season.

#14 Market more than one product

The aim is to have **at least** 3 or 4 products with a wide spread.

This will subsequently help inform you which style of products work best in your destination. Unless you are really confident that your single tour will be a success, don't launch with just one offering.

On the products you do launch with, launch with a few options (e.g. for accommodation just a couple of board basis types - you can add others later).

Whilst on the topic of products – a service is not a product. If you say on your website that you can co-ordinate any kind of travel within a destination you are unlikely to find major success (when selling to consumers). You may provide a service but in the end customers buy products.

Create sample itineraries with approximate prices. Create mini-tours that show your services in action. Do anything to come up with products people can compare and know the price of.

#15 Popularise your tours

If you are a botanist and want to run specialist plant and wildlife tours - great - however consider that there may be potential clients who are just looking for a guided walk with a few local wildlife facts thrown in. Broaden your appeal and create products that will work for them too.

Remember the old saying - there is always a niche in the market - but is there a market in the niche?

You are running a business and you may have to find other periods (off season or mid-week) where you can totally follow your passion.

#16 Learn about yield management

Yield management advises you to say no to a low value booking when it blocks the capability to take a subsequent high value booking. It is the confidence to say no because you predict (based on previous booking trends) that a subsequent booking will take place.

A straight forward example for accommodation – refusing a booking for a ski chalet for 3 nights – when this blocks out the ability to take a full 7 night booking or even a two week booking.

Yield management can also apply when you use the same asset to facilitate multiple tours. If you have a single minibus and you use this for two tours with the same transport needs. You may stop taking bookings on the low value tour but continue to take bookings for the more expensive tour.

You can also yield manage tour leaders who can run multiple tours – but not more than one at a time.

The decision comes down to the level of confidence that you are going to get the higher value booking after rejecting the low value (or blocking) booking. If you are running the booking diary for the ski chalet and the 3 night booking comes in for next week – the chances are you won't get a full 7 night booking at the last minute – so you should say yes to the 3 night booking. If that same booking had been requested 6 months before the answer would likely to have been a no.

Without yield management the alternative is to take a basic approach, perhaps by advertising both the high value and low value tours that use the same bus – and say yes to all bookings until the bus is full.

One way to do easy minibus yield management would be to allocate a certain proportion of a minibus to the expensive tour and the remainder to the low value tour. Reject low value bookings that go over the set proportion until, perhaps, 12 weeks before travel. Then permit any bookings that fit at the last minute.

More accurate yield management requires analysis of your individual tour profitability, how far ahead people book and whether additional scenarios are possible (for example can you hire another minibus?). You can then calculate

percentage chances that a high value booking will occur subsequent to rejecting the low value booking. You may find software better at this than trying to calculate everything manually each time you get a new booking request!

With a little tweaking you can use yield management to generate more profitability for your assets.

Yield or revenue management can also be used to adjust prices for specific dates depending upon leadtime remaining prior to travel. This is rarely used for tours and excursions (except perhaps by giving early booking discounts) hence it won't be covered here. Airlines are best known for using this style.

#17 Use your small size to your advantage

Buy freesale when you need it (i.e. when you get a booking, buy the associated services at that point).

At some stage you may take advantage of the commercial benefits from buying allocations ahead of time. However you can worry about that later.

Buying freesale keeps you more agile and able to react to changes in market conditions.

#18 Selling flights is complex so sell land only

Land only means advertising prices without the flight element included.

Selling land only gives the following advantages:

- You can market the same destination to a global audience
- Customers sometimes believe they can find the best flight deals themselves via global flight sales websites. This is often true until you have sufficient volume to negotiate fares yourself.
- Your initial technology requirements will be much less complex – keeping your company setup price down
- You can evaluate how many flight sales you could have made if you had them integrated with your products. This gives you good data to approach various flight sales technology systems with as you can be sure of what kind of flights would work with your customers.

There are very few situations where launching land only will hold you back.

#19 Reduce product options and variations

Limit your variations. Do you really need to have complex quantity based pricing over 30 price points? Just because your supplier has a complex contract with you doesn't mean you need to expose that complexity to your own customers.

Reducing variations will help with

- Taking online bookings (much simpler for consumers and they will be confident they are booking the correct thing)
- Taking agent bookings (for same reasons as above)
- Reduce your technology investment cost as less complex reservation systems are required
- Reduce the time it takes you to setup and get trading

Keep your product simple!

#20 Launch then tweak rather than tweak then launch

Entrepreneurs like completing a task the best possible way. Those who don't strive for perfection don't tend to become business leaders in the first place.

However, setting up your website and bookings management system is a complex project. You can quickly find areas that sap all the time out of your diary.

Therefore it is critical that you bear the following mantra in the front of your mind – Do the least you can in order to get trading.

Tasks that can be safely undertaken after launch:

- Configuration of letters, email templates etc – write them manually for the first couple of weeks until you find what regular communications could be made more efficient
- Agent and marketing setup (although you need to think about how you are going to market ahead of time)
- Writing the detailed tour description for every single tour you are going to feature – when in the first few weeks post launch you aren't going to get many enquiries anyway. Write them afterwards.



Choose a reservation system that you can grow into. This gives you confidence that you can safely leave aspects of your launch project until you are up and trading.

#21 Adjust scope not time

A website is just launched – never completed. If you are running out of time, do less on a few selected areas – rather than completing all areas but at only three quarters quality.

Once you have launched – if you know the areas you haven't given full attention to yet – then you know which areas to focus on next. However if you have completed all areas to 75% quality you are going to have to redo everything.

Also it is better when people are initially reviewing your offering that what you have got is really good. It is probably easier to recover from the impression that you don't have a great number of tours than the impression that you have a lot of rubbish.

#22 Time & Materials or Fixed cost?

When working with your technology suppliers and web designers they will tend to come up with two styles of quotes for their work:

- **Time & Materials (T&M)** – where you are paying for time spent on a project at a pre-agreed hourly or daily rate
- **Fixed cost** – where your supplier outlines what they are going to provide and at what price

Both have their attractions. On one hand it is helpful for budgeting purposes to understand exactly how much a project will cost but fixed cost projects tend to end up more expensive than Time & Materials ones.

Notes on fixed cost projects:

- Project risk is retained by the service supplier (e.g. web design agency). If they have misunderstood the scope it is their problem (at least initially!)
- Overall project prices tend to be higher than Time & Materials as a result of the supplier taking the risk. (They will overestimate to be safe)

- Quality of work can tail off near the end of the project when the supplier realises that they have underestimated the amount of work required and are looking to cut corners to complete the project.

Notes on Time & Materials projects:

- You retain the risk that the supplier understands what the scope of the project is before they gave the time estimate
- Suppliers tend to quote a high daily / hourly rate and under state (on purpose) the time it will take. This enables them, subsequently, to increase the time estimate for future projects whilst retaining their agreed rates.
- Don't use a T&M time estimate directly in your project timelines without increasing by a factor.

Time & Materials projects work well when you don't have a strong set of documents explaining exactly what will be delivered as part of the project.

If you are going the fixed cost route you can break the project down into phases with separate contracts perhaps with separate suppliers – hence maintaining quality throughout the project from start to finish.

#23 Multiple quotes are best

Try to source 3 quotes from web designers / developers before selection

- If you have 1, you never know if it is right or not
- 2 – and both are different, you don't know why they are different
- 3 – sufficient to see a theme and understand what you get for your money (and whether a single quote is wildly different to other 2)

If you have 3 completely different quotes, get a 4th (and continue until you understand why the prices are as they are).

#24 Don't underestimate product loading time

One of the largest shocks to a travel company looking to trade online for the first time is how long it will take to load products into a reservation system.

You need full and accurate product loading in order for your customers to make online bookings for a specific date at a correct price.

Depending upon complexity, we would suggest you estimate fifteen minutes to an hour per product. (tour etc) (not per trip). Once the product is successfully loaded you won't have to repeat it again the next season – hopefully your reservation system will have a mechanism to copy dates & prices from a previous season to the new season (and then let you make tweaks for the new prices).

An alternative is to put up approximate products (e.g. sample itineraries) and instead of taking online bookings – take enquiries or quote requests instead. This will vastly cut down on the amount of product loading required before you start trading. You could always load more detailed information later.

#25 Define your quality objectives upfront

By defining your standards upfront it ensures that designers and developers have a shared understanding regarding to what quality level is expected to be delivered at the end of the project.

If you become over prescriptive with your standards it will make both development and testing cumbersome so keep them short and sweet.

Areas to cover:

- Should your website be usable with a mobile device?
- What web browsers must be supported? Should be supported?
- Will the site be tested on a Mac?
- Must the site comply with various accessibility standards? (for example navigable without a mouse – or should it work with an aural browser?)

It is particularly important to define quality standards for fixed cost projects prior to the initial cost being agreed.

You should also agree with your web team whether you are responsible for testing that the site meets the standards or whether they are.

#26 Think about page templates when scoping project size

A page template is a design that can be applied over and over again.

The number of templates you need will give you a good indication as to how much a web designer will cost you to design and build your website.

For example you may have 7 tours hence 7 tour description pages. You would just need one page template to be fully designed. That page template can then be applied to all other tour description pages. If you have a website content management system it should do this automatically.

At a minimum you need the following 5 page templates:

- Homepage (Always design this last as it acts like a book index)
- Tour description page – photos, itinerary, approximate price
- Tour dates & prices page – showing available dates & prices
- Multiple tour page (summary overview page) – short descriptions for each of your tours in that category with perhaps a small image (known as a thumbnail). If you have over 20 tours you need multiple overview pages and probably a search mechanism.
- Text content page (About Us, Contact Us, frequently asked questions etc)

Extra page templates you may want to consider having designed professionally:

- Landing pages for use with your Pay Per Click advertising (PPC). You may want multiple of these depending upon your advertising strategy. Good to get these done by a web marketing expert.
- Booking engine process (perhaps supplied by reservation system provider so you may have little control on this)
- An example HTML form style – for example a tailor-made tour enquiry form. Once you have a single form designed it can be easily applied to other forms you have on your site
- A blog page

One cost cutting approach may be to ask an expensive, professional, web designer to design the 5 primary page templates. Then you can take those HTML templates (and graphics) to a less expensive designer / developer to build your actual website.

A leading airline website may have 30-40 unique page templates including booking engine (to give you a sense of scale).

When someone asks you how big your website is the most useful answer (in terms of project scope size) is to give the unique number of templates you have. The total number of pages (rather than templates) is useful to know for search engine optimisation purposes so just check if you are asked how big your site is why they want to know.

Separate page designs for each product

If you have distinct product types you may want to consider a separate template design for each product. Larger travel companies with thousands of products can't afford individually designed pages for each product but, over time, you should be able to.

This approach also reinforces that you are a specialist. You may want to leave this until you have launched (although tell your web team this is in your plans so that they can lay the correct foundations to permit this later).

#27 Plan lots of small steps rather than a few large ones

Rather than plan your project in a few major steps consider breaking each large step down into much smaller, bite sized, pieces.

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

Advantages of small steps:

- Momentum can be built up when constant progress is visible
- More rewarding as you can see (and track) progress constantly
- If you are working without significant documentation outlining what the overall plan is, by completing lots of small steps (and making completed work visible to everyone) people can see where the work they are doing fits in within the overall scheme.

If you like you can call small steps inch pebbles rather than mile stones!

#28 Put the project status on the wall in your office

Create an information radiator - so colleagues - when walking past - can see how the project is progressing. List the key tasks for the week and who needs to do what in order for the tasks to be completed.

Once you have finished your project you can use the same concept for your sales data (or other similar data).

By having everyone sharing the same understanding of how the project is progressing it makes everyone feel much more part of the team. Colleagues can also see when to offer assistance and when to stay clear!

#29 Keep a scrap book

If you see a design or layout you like - get a nice print out of it and keep it filed away (you can't just bookmark web pages as sites change over time and next year you may not be able to find the example again).

Then when you are talking to your designers you can bring out some nice examples and say you want it like this or that.

When printing out take a screen shot and print that out. Otherwise your web browser won't print out the images or may have a separate print style sheet. Record the date and time you printed it out and also scribble a note on the print out reminding you why it was of interest in the first place.

#30 Personality vs brand lead websites

If you are a small tour operator then present yourself as a small tour operator to your consumers:

- Write sections of your website in the first person "I suggest" rather than "we suggest"
- Give a background as to what you are about and why you should be trusted to advise them on what they should book with you
- Demonstrate that you are passionate about your chosen destination or activity

Many small tour operators look at larger competitors who hide their staff behind big corporate websites. Don't copy that look!

If you are a slightly larger company the personality you wish to use on your website may not necessarily be the overall company boss. You may also have a team of 2 or 3 personalities to ensure that no individual becomes wholly associated with your brand making it difficult for them to change roles or leave.

Social media is also easier if you have a personality lead website rather than a brand one as social media gives you an opportunity to show your character and passion.

#31 Agent vs tour operator website design

Agent and tour operator websites are not the same.

Don't try to copy functionality from one type of website for another. If you are a tour operator the last website you want to copy is Expedia (but still we get emails saying that is what people want!)

Agent websites

- 1 potential customer arrives on the website
- The goal of the website is to find a matching product for that 1 potential customer
- The key features of the website are a powerful search mechanism and many product contracts and connections so that whatever the potential customer searches for at least a handful of products can be presented back to the potential customer.

i.e. search functionality is key

Tour operator / activity company websites

- Start with the assumption that only have a handful of products to promote
- The key challenge is a marketing challenge – to find customers who want the style of products you offer
- As you don't have so many products you can probably have a basic filter style search (rather than complex date based search). Some sites don't need search at all as with just a handful of products you can list them all on one page

i.e. marketing and getting your products out onto 3rd party websites is key

Large tour operator websites with extensive product ranges, however, should be designed to look and act more like agent websites.

#32 Ask your customers for post travel feedback

A couple of tips to get more responses:

- Send it out early – so they receive it on the day they get home – not 1 week later
- Use a subject line such as “welcome home” rather than anything to do with feedback

These two changes alone increased response to one tour operators welcome home email by 200-300%.

#33 Form a marketing alliance

Some tour operators are now joining up with similar, non-competing, tour operators / activity companies in their destination or featuring the same activity.

These websites collectively pool together their products, build a larger marketing budget and then promote the central site as a larger website. Often this approach makes it easier to deal with other travel websites who find it hard to work with a company with just a small number of tours.

Historically marketing alliances occurred when companies themselves merged into a single legal entity. Nowadays, with the web, alliances can be formed with individual companies maintaining their independent ownership, operational protocols and staff.



The TourCMS Marketplace system enables products from multiple TourCMS accounts to be featured on a single, central, website. Each company maintains their own business processes and booking database. Alliances can technically be formed without significant development.

#34 Keep the humans behind your website busy

You want to build as many opportunities for your potential customers to contact you as possible (and you to be able to contact them)

Only when the phone is ringing off the hook and your email inbox is bulging should you begin to consider how you may hide your contact details in a place that requires potential customers to check your website for answers first.

Unless you have a big budget with experienced web designers the chances are you and your staff are better at selling your products than your website is.

However you don't want lazy website visitors to send you 1 line emails as then you are not able to pitch back an interesting solution to their needs as you are likely to find that some item of critical information is missing.

You need to think about how you are going to get contact from your website visitors that you can actually action and turn into business.

An idea could be to have a tailor made tour builder that suggests potential products based on what requirements they enter. Ask them for their email address / phone number and whether they want a call (or email) back to discuss their requirements in detail.

Now you have sufficient details (which you need to store somewhere) you can get a good conversation going with the potential customer.

Or use a booking engine to take a *quote request* – which doesn't have the same level of commitment from the potential customer as making an online booking.



The TourCMS enquiry system enables you to connect your website forms with your customer database. A great way to build up your marketing database. Each enquiry has a workflow and can be assigned to individual staff until completed & onus is back on customer to respond

Telephone

Don't put customers off from phoning you!

Make your phone number big and obvious. Where you do put your phone number ensure that office hours (including timezone information) is alongside. Consider putting your email address next to your phone number too.

This HTML will make it easier for a user on a mobile phone to find your phone number and select / click to start a call:

```
<a href="tel:0123456789">call me</a>
```

#35 Use video and photographs

Categorise your media as follows:

- **Destination** – the sights that people may see if they travel with you
- **Product** – what are people buying? (Make sure the photos / video is an accurate reflection of the product though!)
- **Imagine yourself here** – photos that potentially represent the customer actually on holiday. Careful though, if you use a family in your photograph and you also sell to couples, you could end up putting off couples
- **Show you are a real company with real staff** – for example photos of your welcome meeting, your safety briefing etc.

Ensure that if you are using media of customers on your website or in your promotions that you ask them first (or at least alert them to the fact in your terms & conditions).

Any likeness of you secured or taken on any of our trips may be used by the Company without charge in all media, for bona fide promotional or marketing purposes, including without limitation promotional materials of any kind, such as brochures or the Internet

#36 Keep the originals for photos and video

Keep the originals for content you put on your website. Store them in a separate place to all the originals of photographs / videos you haven't featured on your website at this point (then you can find them again!)

Over time web technology is getting better and better and, especially for video, you may want to go back to the original and create an up-to-date version using new tools.

#37 Content goes stale

Add a date on content (video, photos, text) for when last checked to be accurate. You could even make this date visible to your customers.

If you are going to make a video to promote your products then distinguish between destination and product video. Your destination videos won't go stale as quickly as your product ones.

#38 Don't bore with descriptions people have seen before

Website visitors will be reviewing your competitors' websites as well as your own. If you are selling tours to France don't publish endless information about France - it won't be read as your website visitors will have seen it on other sites already.

Instead focus on your product and your style of product delivery. For example, do you do cycle tours? Lets see some close up pictures (with all the detail) of the cycles you use. Lets see the bikes left outside of a local bar - this gives you an opportunity to incorporate that local information - and information about France - while at the same time adding a little more interest to your general approach to product delivery.

#39 Content copyright

If you are using 3rd party content writers (like for travel guides etc) get your copyrights sorted out. Ensure everyone is clear what happens if you put the same content on another site or if you decide to put into a book etc.

Get agreements in place as later, when you want to change how you use the content, you may either not be able to contact the original author or perhaps it will take too long and you will lose all your flexibility.

#40 Don't panic about low website conversion statistics

Website conversion is either described as a % (percentage of website visitors who subsequently book) or a look to book ratio (number of clicks required to generate 1 booking). Both are common measures. Unless you have expertise in this area don't worry too much about your overall conversion numbers. It can sometimes be shockingly bad but you can still have a good, well performing website.

Remember that conversion % isn't solely a measure of your site design but about understanding at what stage of product research / booking lifecycle a website visitor is at. It is also about attracting the right visitors in the first place.

For example a website visitor may have already booked with you and is visiting your site for post booking , pre travel information - a perfectly valid visit reason. The more information you add to your website, the lower your conversion will be. It is preferable to convert 2% of 30,000 visits than 4% of 10,000 visits.

Do keep an eye on conversion for Pay Per Click advertising as you are paying for those visits. Typically it could take 100 to 500 visits to generate a single booking for a specialist tour operator.



TourCMS has a system to track individual Pay Per Click campaigns and report on conversion. As TourCMS knows your costs and sale price TourCMS can calculate your profit margin per click hence give you a maximum price you should be paying for PPC advertising

#41 Don't worry too much about your online booking engine

Two factors to consider

- Do you mainly have single transaction relationships with your customers? (or do you get many repeat customers)
- Are you the end point supplier for the products you are selling or are they (or very similar) products available elsewhere?

If you are an agent of the ultimate supplier you are probably competing with a number of other travel websites to sell exactly the same product. This makes your booking engine (and your website) a critical part of your business. If this doesn't apply to you then read on....

If you are the end point supplier the worst that can happen with your website is that a customer, frustrated with booking online, changes channel and phones / emails. i.e. it is not a lost sale to you just a loss of efficiency.

Efficiency is important of course but losing efficiency for a small company is not so bad as losing the sale.

Getting your customers to interact online is better than staff typed in bookings as errors are generally minimised. Also if you are doing advertising online (e.g. paying for Google advertising) then by getting the customer to book online you can collect the tracking information and therefore get a much better sense as to which of your marketing programs is actually performing for you.



Over all TourCMS customers about 40% of bookings are via the booking engine (vs staff entered bookings). Some tour operators are upto 70-80% but many are using TourCMS as a backoffice system only

#42 Alternative online booking engine strategies

Two other strategies to consider for online bookings

Use at end of phone call / email conversation

Consider you are in discussion with a customer. You are confident they have converted and will buy your product. At this point you can ask them to visit your website and book online. This will reduce the length of time to handle the booking.

Use as a starting point

Or, opposite to the idea above, you could re-label your booking engine to be a quote request or enquiry form. Tell the customer that by placing a date / product specific enquiry you will get back to them with a quote afterwards.

This reduces the commitment needed from the customer to start interacting with you. Many smaller tour operators use this approach. No need to collect credit card information or payment at this point if following this approach.

One advantage of this approach is that you then can issue a product / date specific quote to that customer. Where customers receive specific product / date quotes conversion to actual bookings is known to be much higher than when you just answer someone's detailed question about an individual product but don't issue a quote.

Issue as many quotes as you can and your bookings will soar!



The TourCMS system has 3 main stages of a booking – quote, provisional and confirmed. These must be for a specific product on a specific date. Quotes can be configured to close down new sales for those dates

#43 Usability testing your website design

Testing your website design is critical and needn't cost too much money. You will learn a great deal about how people perceive your company and what they are struggling with on your website.

As with all feedback and testing the goal isn't to find every issue but to assist you to prioritise what needs working on. Once you have fixed and tweaked you can do more like an onion - more layers will be revealed.

We suggest you use a service such as **<http://www.usertesting.com>**

This system enables you to find real consumers who will be recorded undertaking real tasks on your website. Run the same test 4 or 5 times.

Writing tasks and test instructions is a skill. The goal isn't to catch the testers out but you do need to make them realistic enough that they give you useful feedback.

For example this would be a good task to set for a tour operator selling Egyptian tours:

- Find two tours that include both the Pyramids and a Nile cruise
- How would you contact this company?
- Would you book with this company? Do they look credible?
- Select a tour and make a booking for 2 adults 2 children for a date in July 2010

This set of instructions challenges the people involved with the tests to understand how to search your website to find products, locate contact information, generate an impression of your company and make a booking (with challenge to find out whether children are permitted and whether any special child prices are offered)

#44 Asking for website feedback from local experts

Buying top level expertise costs real money and is often outside of the budget of smaller tour operators. Not using expertise is a false economy so how do you square this equation?

One answer is that experts like to help where they can if either of these are true:

- It doesn't take too long to help (not much longer than a courteous email reply to your out of the blue question)
- They can be seen to be helping (using social media etc) (as helping you builds their brand and builds their library of discussions)

For example you could email 10 people you respect (perhaps from the tourist board, your travel technology provider or other local travel companies). Ask them what one thing they would change on your site. Most people with a view will be able to come to that opinion within a few minutes and will likely reply to your email.

If you ask for a full review (which could be 2 hours or more work) you are unlikely to find any experts willing to give that much time up for free.

#45 Website analytics

There are many many ways to measure and analyse your website's performance and it is almost worth an entire ebook by itself!

- Determine what decisions you are likely to make on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual basis. Then decide what information you would need to inform those decisions. For example should your next advert promote Morocco or Egypt?
- Understand the difference between statistics that have to be accurate (for example travel agent commission statistics) and those that can be approximate (e.g. proportion of your visitors that are interested in a certain country). At some point getting additional accuracy on the "business decision" statistics isn't worthwhile

#46 Check your website after any major change

Creating a key functionality checklist that should be checked after each major (and minor) code tweak to your website.

For example – search for a tour, click to all pages and make a booking.

We have seen people make serious changes to their website without testing other areas that they didn't think were going to be impacted. They only realised something was wrong when they noticed a downturn in incoming email & bookings.

#47 Black site

Bad things like minibus crashes etc happen unfortunately. They also always tend to happen at just the wrong moment (when your one web person has gone on holiday for a week).

Therefore ensure you have details such as your content management system login, FTP details etc in a known place that everyone can access in an emergency.

Airlines tend to have sites already built that can be used in case they lose a plane and need to start displaying operational information in a prominent location. These can be put live (replacing their existing sites) at any time under the direction of their operational teams (rather than by the web teams that may only work 5 days a week, office hours).

While you don't need to go quite this far several people in your company should know how to add a new page to your website and add a message to your homepage without needing your web team to be present. They should test this knowledge regularly.

Put instructions for this process in an obvious place in your office.

#48 What a tour operator reservation system does

Reservation systems are complex software systems. Generally they cover the following core functions:

- Take online bookings / quote requests
- Control availability to stop overselling
- Maintain customer balances and payment record
- Produce templated documents / emails (including accommodation vouchers)
- Customer detail collection post booking pre travel
- MOBILE: Customers book via mobile
- MOBILE: You can access bookings from out of office
- Multi office access
- Track PPC advertising and affiliate marketing
- Multi-lingual capability (take bookings in multiple languages, send bookings to suppliers in multiple languages)
- Yield management - sell same products at different prices dependent upon demand
- Work better with existing agents / partners
- Distribute product to big 3rd party travel websites (XML interfaces)
- Pull in flights / hotel / other product availability from 3rd party systems
- Customer CRM & Marketing (newsletters etc)
- Manage your website (text, images etc) and products on your website reflect your existing product database (e.g. if it is off sale, it is off your website)
- Co-ordinate suppliers (so they can see customer / booking information) and accounting cost ledgers
- In resort operations - send email / sms to all in resort etc
- Business automation (run your business from a beach!)
- Check in process for use on the day the customers arrive
- Separate customer database to booking database (so repeat customers recorded as having multiple bookings rather than having multiple customer records that represent the same person)
- Integrate with payment gateways to take credit card payments

You can build your own system and whilst that initially looks attractive (your initial requirements are met 100%) after a couple of years custom built system will have stayed at it was.

Any reservation system that you have integrated with will have had several rounds of serious improvements that you will have benefitted from for free.

If a reservation system was just for taking online bookings then this could just about be built by a developer and a small budget. However, as you can see from the list above, the functionality delivered by a reservation system involves so much more.

You can use an offline reservation system (e.g. one you build yourself in Access or Excel) however you will soon have difficulties taking online bookings and are likely to suffer overbooking issues as your online system won't automatically stop sales on overbooked dates.



TourCMS has the majority of functionality as outlined above. In particular marketing, product distribution tools, multi-lingual capability. It isn't right for everyone but if you are a specialist tour operator it probably is!

#49 Don't pay a % revenue for online bookings

Reservation systems are priced in all sorts of ways. Generally the costs come down to 4 elements:

- **Software license** – maybe based on number of “seats” or staff users – either total or concurrent
- **Provisional services** – configuration, training, consultancy, web design
- **Booking fee** – performance based – either fixed per booking – or % of transaction revenue
- **Bespoke development costs** – for custom development (based on Time & Materials perhaps)

Quite a number of reservation system providers charge a % of revenue for online bookings. This can range from 2-10% of your transaction revenue, generally just for online bookings (staff entered bookings normally not charged for)

We consider this pricing approach really bad for several reasons:

- **Business process inefficiency** - imagine you are on the phone to a prospective consumer. This conversation so far has taken 2 minutes of your time – and the consumer indicates they are ready to book. The best approach would be to ask the consumer to go to your website and complete the booking. End of phone call. Instead, as you know that will cost you 5%, you end up taking the booking manually over the phone. Reservation systems are meant to help you become efficient. If they price by % of revenue for online bookings they lock you into keeping your business processes inefficient.
- **Unfair pricing for low volume high value bookings** – why should an angling tour operator selling 10,000 USD bookings pay significantly more for their booking system than a city tour provider selling 150 USD afternoon walking tours?
- **Training bookings, test bookings, spam bookings** – can you ensure these are excluded from the % revenue calculations?
- **System providers end up enhancing system around transactions only** – if you as a technology provider earn all your money from transactions that is all they will think about.
- **Using your booking engine for agent bookings** – now you end up paying 15% to your agent and 5% to your reservation system provider. Quick way not to make any money on your bookings at all!

Slightly better is paying a fixed transaction fee per transaction (rather than %). That seems quite common practice in more established software providers. New kids on the block are all trying to tell you that % of your transaction is the only way to go. No it isn't!



The TourCMS system is priced based on number of staff users (not number of bookings or % of transaction value). Simple predictable pricing everyone understands & no need for any professional services or setup fees.

#50 Focus on booking efficiency rather than automation

Large travel companies and systems designed for them focus on automation. They aim to remove all humans from the product selection advice and booking process. Whilst that sounds ideal smaller tour operators should focus on efficiency rather than automation.

e.g. instead of automating all your post-booking pre-travel email communications send manually created email. But instead of that email taking 10 minutes to write each time – use a template system so that the email can be created in 30 seconds.

Humans have common sense. Software needs extensive configuration to apply the same common sense. The human element (and personal service) is what most customers are buying from specialist tour operators in the first place so don't try to remove that from what you offer.

#51 Don't over engineer your first website / system

Imagine you have a budget to employ a web designer / developer for 3 months. Two approaches

- Build what you believe is a great solution
- Build a minimal solution, hold back your budget and your emotional investment, see what your customers want, then invest in phase 2

We have seen at TourCMS companies do really complex integrations and spend a great deal of effort creating what they believe are perfect solutions. Often these are new companies with no customers yet.

ALL companies who have launched with an over engineered website and no existing trading record have failed to build consumer momentum. ALL.

We believe that it is important it is to build something small that you can do well, start building consumer momentum and then start looking to build more complexity into your business. If you already have a trading record it is slightly easier to launch with more complexity up front as you are more likely to have a complete understanding as to what your customers actually want you to help with.

#52 Running an RFI / RFP process

If you are looking to evaluate a reservation system and want feedback from potential system providers start with a two step process – RFI followed by RFP.

- RFI – request for information
- RFP – request for proposals

First create a short list of system providers that may meet your requirements.

- <http://www.genesys.net/publications.htm> - buy a report from Genesys listing system providers
- <http://software.tnooz.com> – a directory of travel industry software

Then create an RFI document. Key details to include

- Company name
- Number of employees
- Project time frame
- Bookings per year (online, offline, via agent)
- Your key problems you want solving
- Any 3rd party distribution (incoming / outgoing) that you want to support
- If you have a system already or are a new company
- Sample products (i.e. do you do group trips, tailor-made, sell by the week etc)
- Languages you want to communicate in

Send this around to the short listed companies.

Once you have received responses (you won't receive responses from everyone) then come up with a much more detailed set of requirements to send to a much shorter list (probably 3 or 4 companies). This set of requirements is the basis of an RFP.

At the RFP stage, if people ask questions, make sure all questions (and answers you have given) are sent to all companies left in the process. Tell them before hand that this will be the case.

#53 Credit card payments

Taking payments from customers is quite straight forward except for four challenges:

- Getting authorised from your bank in the first place (banks don't like travel companies with long lead times between booking and travel dates)
- At point of initial booking the final price of the product may not be known (unlike conventional ecommerce where people are buying a known product at a known price)
- Many travel bookings are two step payments – deposit then balance – and you want to make this simple for the customer to make the balance payment without you having to chase them for their payment (i.e. to keep the balance payment under your control)
- You must comply with the PCI credit card standards (see next tip)

To take credit card payments you need:

- Merchant account (you agree this with your bank)
- Payment gateway (a software service that connects your merchant account with your website).

PayPal acts as both layers at the same time and can be good system to start with.

The following alternative approaches should be considered:

- Take deposit or 100% payment within online booking engine
- Ask for and save credit card details within online booking engine but don't charge the card. Only charge the card when you know the booking is likely to progress and the sale value is known
- Don't take any payment within the online booking engine. Instead, later, use an email system to send a link to a payment page – where the customer can make a payment

For tailor made tours we suggest that you don't take a payment (or even mention credit cards) during the online booking phase. Instead, subsequently, send an email to the customer with a payment link. At that point you will know what product you are selling and therefore have a final deposit and sale amount.

Customers then click on the link, go to a payment page, make a payment and the sales ledger in your reservation system should be updated to reflect the new payment status.

For activities you may decide to make the payment 100% and mandatory in order to complete the initial booking.

Some payment gateways are permitted to store your customers' credit cards on your behalf (and still maintain PCI compliance). This means that after the deposit payment you can then request funds from that saved card. i.e. the onus is on you to collect the balance payment. This can be easier than having to contact the customer a 2nd time to take the balance payment. Bear in mind that if you are using this approach even the payment gateway is not storing the CCV number (from the back of a card) hence you may be surcharged by your bank for what they may refer to as an unsecured transaction. The question is whether the benefit of being able to charge a customer's card when you want to is more useful than having to contact the customer for a balance payment and then perhaps have 1 or 2 weeks delay while they get back to you.

Some companies working with suppliers choose to make the deposit payment go to the agent and the balance is payable to the supplier. In effect then the deposit becomes the commission payment and no money needs to flow between agent and supplier.



TourCMS works with booking engine payments, email payment requests and saved credit cards (using billing reference numbers). It can also be linked up to virtual terminals for phone payments (in some situations)

#54 Know about the PCI credit card standards

These are complex technology standards that you will need to be aware of if you are dealing with payments by credit card (or even just collecting them for reuse)

The summary is if you are collecting, storing or handling credit card information on a computer you need to comply with a lot of complex security requirements. These are global standards and there is no getting out of them.

Mainly small tour operators are not able to comply (due to budget reasons) so in that situation you should work with a payment gateway who will deal with all the issues on your behalf. This would mean your customers enter their credit card details on a page managed and maintained by the payment gateway. You never learn what those credit card details are but you still receive the money instantly.

For additional clarification the following are NOT permitted:

- Sending credit card details via email / fax
- Collecting credit card details in a form on your website and then subsequently using those card details on a credit card terminal in your own office
- Collecting credit card details via your website / email and then using those card details on a suppliers website (or passing them to your supplier).

You do not need to be PCI audited if you use a hosted payment gateway. e.g. your customers only enter credit card details on a 3rd party banking website (and you therefore never get to know them).

Additional consideration needs to take place if you have home workers who are taking credit card payments.

Further information from <http://www.pcisecuritystandards.org>

#55 Learn a few technical skills

Example skills that could come in handy:

- HTML and basic web page design
- How to edit digital images
- How to upload a file to your web server using FTP

Even if you don't build your own site – or you use a CMS to hide the complexity from you - the time you have spent playing around will give you greater knowledge and confidence when directing your own web designers.

To be a great house architect you don't need to have been a skilled plumber or plasterer - but it helps if you know the difference between different kinds of wood and steel.

Like it or not, knowing about the web is now a core skill for a director of a small tour operator.

Making learning new things part of your office routine

If you have staff - organise a weekly "sandwich meeting" where one person demonstrates something new they have found and describes it to your team. Bring your sandwiches and do it over lunch!

As everyone uses the web nowadays don't restrict this to your marketing or web design people. Get everyone involved!

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Alex has led travel ecommerce, social media and reservation system projects for airlines, leading tour operators and hotel distribution companies in both leisure and business travel sectors.

He is the Managing Director of Travel UCD, the company behind TourCMS, a web based reservation system and distribution platform used by many small tour operators worldwide to take online bookings and manage their operations.

Travel UCD also runs the Small Fish Big Ocean forums & community which Alex co-moderates.

Previous publications include 300 blog posts on travel ecommerce and online travel issues and 3 research reports on the usability of OTA hotel booking websites. He is also a regular speaker at travel industry conferences.

Alex has a computing degree, is passionate about usability and still writes and reviews code.

Alex writes about online travel for Tnooz, a provider of news, analysis, commentary, data and business services to the travel, tourism and hospitality industry.



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*Want even more advice?
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