

Marketing Via The Internet

A guide for UK accommodation businesses



Author: Nick Hill, Managing Director, www.myuk.travel
Nick has over 7 years experience in the UK and in New Zealand with accommodation booking websites and systems and is particularly passionate about zero commission online booking.

Abstract: This guide covers everything that a UK accommodation business needs to know about using the internet to market their business, including the importance of using the internet, setting up and optimising a website for your business, the advantages (and pitfalls) of using online booking and advanced techniques such as yield and channel management.

Contents

Marketing Via The Internet	1
Contents.....	1
1. Why Use The Internet?	1
2. Setting Up Your Own Website	2
3. Website Design	3
4. Search Engine Optimisation	4
5. Marketing Your Website	6
6. Why Use Online Booking?	8
7. Which Online Booking Websites To Use	9
8. Integrating With Your Property Management System	10
9. Conclusions	10
10. Questions / Comments	10

1. Why Use The Internet?

Understanding Your Customers' Needs

The internet is used by approximately 2/3 of customers seeking accommodation in the UK¹. It is therefore pretty clear that marketing via the internet is just as important to your business as offering clean rooms to your guests.

It is important to understand that people use the internet differently. Whilst some people are very internet savvy and will happily book online, a significant proportion of customers will use the internet to find out about you and will prefer to email or telephone you. This is very much an age related thing with a few exceptions. Our research shows that the majority of customers under 35 **expect** to be able to book online with you and many will simply book elsewhere if you don't offer this facility.

¹ Source: <http://www.tourismtrade.org.uk/MarketIntelligenceResearch/default.asp>

2. Setting Up Your Own Website

Using Your Own Domain Name

In order to maintain a professional image for your business we recommend that you setup your own website using your own domain name (or web address) and that you have full control of what goes onto your website. UK domain names can cost as little as £2.95 per year so will not break the bank.

We do not recommend using directory websites (eg www.yell.com) as your primary website as in many cases you won't have full control over everything that goes on it and especially who else is linked to from your website (which is critical when it comes to search engine optimisation). If you must use a directory website then at the very least use your own domain name.

Choosing A Domain Name / URL

Wherever possible use the most simple domain name that is available. Long domain names can be difficult to type and may result in emails not reaching you.

Always use a domain name ending with **.co.uk**

Whilst **.net.uk** or **.com** versions of your domain name may be available you really don't need to waste your money on buying them. If you do have more than one domain name then choose the best amongst them (ie the simplest **.co.uk** domain name) and only use that domain name in your marketing and simply get your web developer to get any web traffic to your other domain names to be redirected to your best domain name.

For example - out of the options below the best domain name is the top option:

www.watersidehotel.co.uk
www.westonsupermarewatersidehotel.co.uk
www.westonsupermarewatersidehotel.net.uk

You can use one of the websites listed below to check to see which domain names are available:

www.123domainnames.co.uk
www.ukreg.com
www.123-reg.co.uk

Once you have your own domain name then it is really important to use that domain name for your emails. We recommend using an email address that starts with **info@** rather than **reservations@**, any personal names or anything else. This maintains a professional image but will also give you more enquiries as a worryingly high proportion of customers misspell **reservations**

For example - out of the options below the best choice of email address is the top option:

info@watersidehotel.co.uk
reservations@watersidehotel.co.uk :Too long - may be misspelt.
nick@watersidehotel.co.uk :Personal - looks unprofessional.
nick@hotmail.com :Personal - looks unprofessional.

Finding A Good Web Developer

If you only take one thing from this guide it should be this: don't try and design your own website or get your friends or family to do it for you; use an experienced professional. There is a lot more to web design than pretty pictures and DIY websites will almost certainly underperform.

The most important factor concerning your website is where it is ranked in search engines; if it can't easily be found then your website is not going to generate much business for you. Therefore to find a good web developer who knows what they are doing just goto www.google.co.uk and type in the name of your nearest town and the word 'accommodation' and click on search (eg 'Bristol Accommodation'). In the search results find the top ranking property websites, ignoring all of the large directory and online

booking websites. Click onto these top ranking websites and have a look at who designed them (this is often noted at the bottom of the home page).

When considering employing a web developer/designer ask to look at their portfolio (ie which other websites they have done). If they have not done accommodation websites before or if they are not well ranked in search engines then we recommend looking elsewhere.

Website Hosting

Your web developer/designer can assist in helping you with this (or maybe even host your website for them). Website hosting is relatively cheap - the key things to look at if sorting this out yourself are the reliability of the service, any restrictions that the hosting service may impose on you (eg some hosting companies do not allow you to send marketing emails out to your customers from your own website).

3. Website Design

Determine Your Goals

The whole point of your website is to get you bookings. A common mistake is to concentrate on the graphical design of your website whilst spending little time and attention on the more important things like how your website is ranked in search engines, how else your website will be promoted and how you will measure the success (or otherwise) of it.

Developing Your Brief

To help your web developer/designer build your website we recommend that you give them (in writing) a bullet point list of your requirements (this is termed the 'brief').

This should include:

1. Who your target markets are
2. Any example websites with design features that could be used on your own website
3. Examples of all of your current marketing
4. How frequently you want reports about your website

Photos

Good quality photos of your property can make a huge difference to the success of your website. We recommend using a professional photographer; although this may cost you a couple of hundred pounds it will have a very short payback period for your business.

Do not be tempted to take photos yourself or get friends or family to take them for you. In most cases it is very easy to tell when a professional photographer has been used (especially when you see some photos with the date/time imprint on them!). Make sure that photos used are of a decent size and include photos of both the inside and outside of your property. If customers can't see what your rooms look like they will be reluctant to book with you.

Integrating Online Booking

There are a number of online booking companies which provide online booking services designed to integrate with your own website. For instance www.myuk.travel supplies a number of different design booking "widgets" that your web developer can literally cut and paste onto your website. Customers visiting your website simply select the date and the number of guests and click on search. The customer is then directed to a page that allows them to complete the online booking. This approach means that all the complexity is kept off your website.

Check Availability & Book Online

Date: 23-Sep-2009

Guests: 2 [Adults & Children] Search >

Powered By MyUK.Travel

Measuring The Success Of Your Website

It is really important to measure the success of your website; the old business adage applies: if you don't measure you can't manage.

The three most important figures which you need to measure and review on a monthly (if not weekly) basis are:

1. Where your website is ranked in search engines
2. How many customers visit your website
3. How many bookings you get from your website

If you don't understand the reports that your web developer/designer gives you then it is really important that you take the time and effort to learn what all of the terminology means and what you should be looking out for.

A common mistake for businesses to make is to look at the number of hits that a website gets. You should be looking at the numbers of sessions or site visits instead. A 'hit' is just a counter that just measures the number of pages and images viewed on your website. If a customer visits your homepage which has 7 images on it then this is recorded as 8 hits (ie the page itself plus the 7 images). If the same customer refreshes the page in their web browser then that is another 8 hits, if they visit other pages on your website then that increases the number of hits similarly. If you are looking at sessions or visits then this customer's activity is simply recorded as a single session/visit, which is much more meaningful.

Website Design Tips

1. Search engine optimisation is the most critical design factor.
2. Offer your customers online booking (or failing that the ability for them to see your room availability).
3. Keep your website simple. Complicated designs with lots of pages can distract the customer from booking (which is the whole point of your website!). Less is more.
4. Ensure that your website design is consistent with the rest of your marketing. You risk confusing customers if you use different designs.
5. Include your email address and telephone number on all pages on your website to make it really easy for customers to contact you.
6. Include customer testimonials.
7. Include a map with travelling instructions - especially important if your property is difficult to find.
8. Make your booking terms and conditions (and especially your change/cancellation policies) clear and simple to understand.

4. Search Engine Optimisation

Why It's Important

If your website cannot be found in search engines then you will get very little web traffic and a correspondingly low number of bookings. You should aim to be in the top 3 pages of search results when a customer types in your keywords as the top 30 results get 90% of web traffic (more on helping you work out which ones are the best for you later on).

It's really very simple: the higher up the rankings you get the more bookings you will get.

Which Search Engines To Target

A dominant 77% of customers use www.google.com (or the UK specific www.google.co.uk) when searching on the internet in the UK. Out of the other search engines www.msn.com, www.yahoo.com and www.ask.com are the most popular (in that order).

In practice many businesses only optimise their websites for Google and don't worry so much about the other search engines. Most search engines will automatically find and rank your website; you do not need to manually submit your website for inclusion. However if your website is brand new then it may

be worthwhile to manually submit it (for Google see: www.google.com/submityourcontent/index.html). Note that it may take 3-6 months for your website to appear in search results so do this sooner rather than later.

Choosing Your Keywords

Your keywords are the search terms that customers type into a search engine in order to find your property. It is important to choose your keywords carefully in order to maximise the number of times you appear in search engines; obviously keywords such as 'Bristol Hotel' will result in more searches than more obscure phrases such as 'Bristol luxurious appointed city hotel'.

The first keyword should always be your location. If your location is a small and not very well known then you may wish to use a larger nearby town or city location name instead as that will result in more search engine 'hits'.

Your second keyword in most cases should be either "accommodation". Only use specific terms such as "hotel" or "holiday park" if the competition is too fierce for the more popular "accommodation" keyword.

Your choice of keywords may also be impacted by your target market. For instance if you specifically target people who use your local mountain biking track, then you may want to consider using keywords such as "Bristol Mountain Biking". This approach may be especially worthwhile if you are in a larger town or city and face stiff competition.

We recommend getting your web developer/designer to help you determine your keywords as part of the design process.

Once you have chosen your keywords eg "Bristol Accommodation" then your web developer will include them throughout your website, as page titles, in the text on your website itself and other places to ensure that your website has a good "keyword density". Your keywords will also be used by other websites to link with you. For instance if other websites include links to your website with your keywords in them eg [Bristol Accommodation](#) then search engines will rank your website better for those keywords.

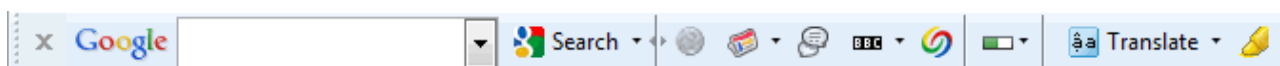
You may get your website optimised for more than one set of keywords eg "Bristol Accommodation" and "Bristol Mountain Biking", however this may compromise your overall rankings - eg a website that is optimised for "Bristol Accommodation" will generally be ranked above a website that is optimised for other keywords.

Factors Affecting Your Ranking In Google

Google uses a very complicated technique for ranking websites which is not published. This means that it can be difficult for mere mortals like us to get well ranked, especially as any changes you make to your website may take several weeks (if not months) for the changes to be reflected in your search engine ranking. It is often a matter of trial and error trying different search engine optimisation techniques until you get the ranking that you want.

At the heart of Google's ranking technique is the concept of Page Rank. This is the level of importance that Google attaches to your website and is marked on a scale of 0 to 10 (with 0 being an unranked website and 10 being the most popular website in the world). Page Rank is calculated by Google based upon the structure of your website and how many websites link to yours (and conversely how many websites you link to). In general the more website links to yours the better. The higher your page rank then the higher you will be in Google's search results (although factors such as your keywords are obviously very important here too).

To measure your page rank: just download the Google toolbar for your browser. See the example below: page rank is the red and white bar icon (to the left of the translate option). In this example the website has a page rank of 5/10.



You should aim for a page rank of between 3 and 5 - if you get 6 or above then you are doing really well.

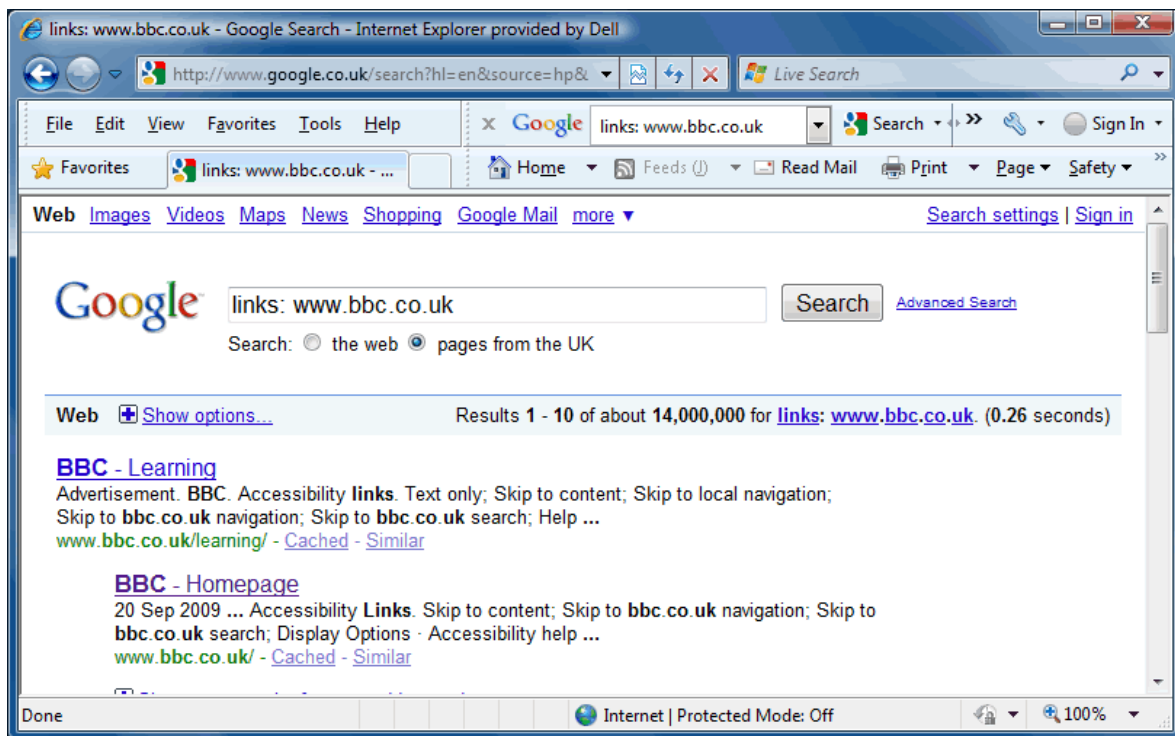
Finally a word of warning here: Google will penalise you if you over optimise your website or worse ban your website entirely (which believe me is not a good situation to be in). This is why you should be using a professional web designer.

In summary we recommend:

1. Ensure that the layout of your website is optimised for Google.
2. Ensure that you have a good keyword density.
3. Get as many other websites to link with you as possible using your keywords.
4. Avoid linking to other websites wherever possible (as this reduces your page rank).
5. Don't try and cheat Google or use paid linking services.

Measuring The Success Of Your Website

We recommend that you track your search engine ranking on a monthly basis - simply type in your important keywords and see where you are in the rankings. If you are not well ranked then get your web developer to make some changes. You also need to check your Google Page Rank on a monthly basis and the number of inward links coming to your website (just do a search in Google for "links www.yourwebsite.co.uk").



In the example above the BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk) has 14 million inwards links; unsurprisingly it has a page rank of 9.

5. Marketing Your Website

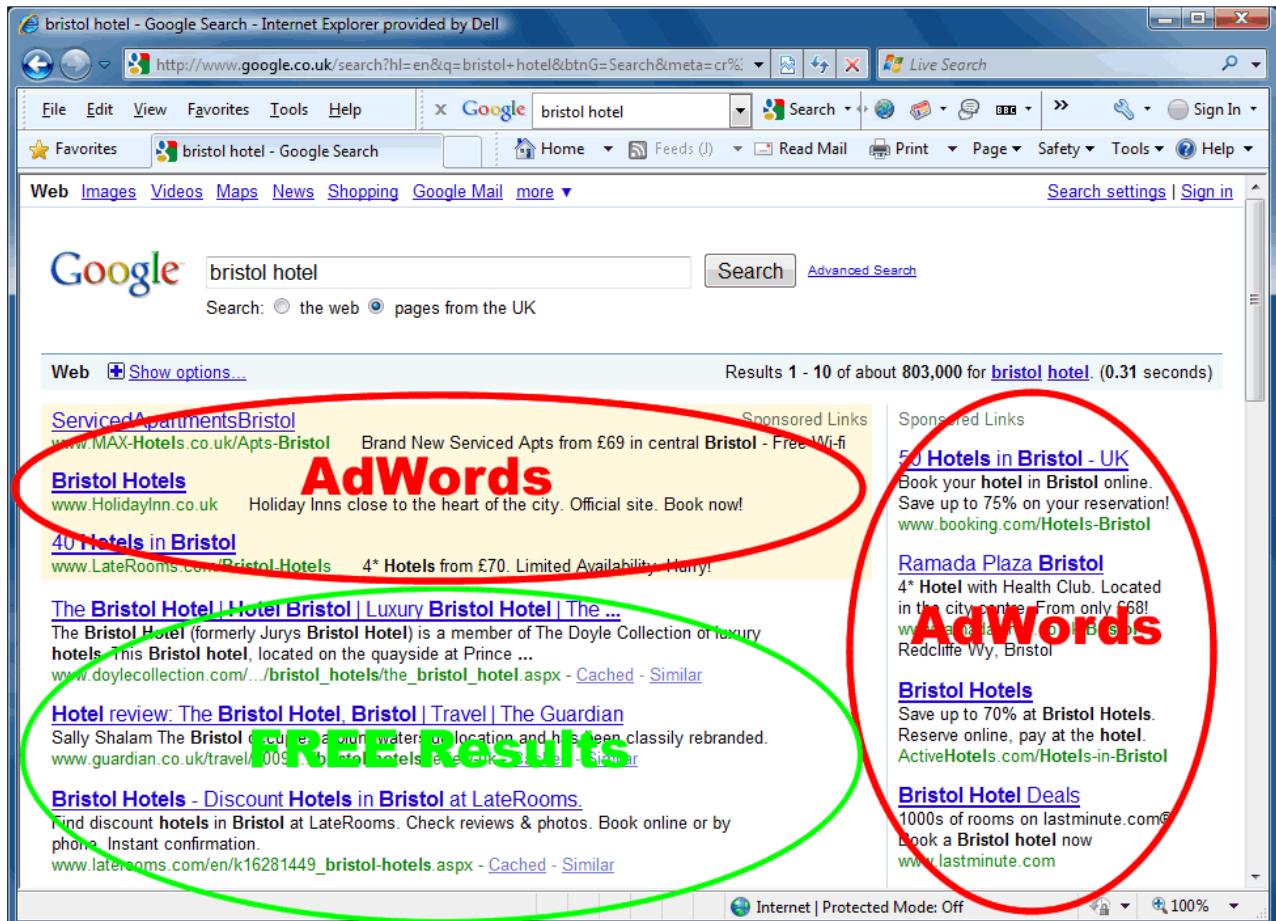
Integrating With The Rest Of Your Marketing

It is important to integrate your website with the rest of your marketing. Include your web address on your printed leaflets, your emails (as an email signature), your signage and everywhere else you can think of. If you offer online room availability or better still online booking then tell them about it - this is a significant benefit to customers that they will want to know about!

Using Google Adwords

An easy way to side-step search engine ranking is to advertise on Google using their AdWords service. This effectively allows you to pay for adverts that display when an appropriate search phrase is entered. The position of your advert is based upon how much you are willing to pay for it. Google earns money each time the advert is clicked (which in turn gives you a good indication of the success or otherwise of your AdWords campaign).

In the example below I've searched in Google for "bristol hotel" and highlighted the paid AdWords listings on Google to distinguish them from the free results listings.



Be warned: AdWords is fairly complex and it is very easy to waste money - so we recommend starting off small and increasing your advertising when you are more comfortable with how everything works. However, it is relatively easy to get good results in a very short period of time and can drive traffic direct to your website.

Using Social Networking Websites

Social networking websites such as www.facebook.com, www.bebo.com and www.twitter.com give you a totally free way to market your business. It really doesn't take long to setup accounts on these services and keep your customers up to date with what is happening with your business. It also can provide your website with additional inward links which is almost a reason in itself to get busy with this.

If you are really keen, why not setup your own blog and get involved with other local tourism industry people. Getting your name out there can certainly help your business.

6. Why Use Online Booking?

Advantages

1. Many customers now expect to book with you online - if you don't offer this service then you will potentially miss out on a lot of business.
2. Customers can book with you 24 hours a day / 7 days a week, your online booking service does not close when your office does.
3. Customers are much more likely to book with you if they know that a) you have a room available when they want to stay with you and b) the cost of it.
4. They do not need to phone or email you.
5. You save a lot of time - instead of dealing with an inbox full of email enquiries you deal only with confirmed bookings.
6. Online booking is especially popular with overseas tourists where time zones and language can act as a barrier. No need for expensive international phone calls!

Pitfalls

1. High commissions can make online booking expensive. This depends which online booking services you use.
2. If you subscribe to multiple online booking services then you increase your risks of overbooking. This can be avoided by regularly updating the websites that you use, holding some rooms back from online booking to give you a bit of breathing space or by using a channel management system (that does the updating for you).
3. You don't get as much control as to who books with you. To get around this you need to ensure that your online booking policies are clearly defined for example "no stag/hen parties".
4. Additional administration work involved with dealing with invoices/payments for commission bookings.

Guaranteeing Online Bookings

Many online websites take payment from the customer at time of booking. However some websites will take the customer's credit/debit card details and pass them onto you to guarantee the booking. It is important to get this guarantee as customers that fail to arrive ("no-show") may leave you out of pocket.

The banks and credit card companies do not like you storing credit card details, especially the 3 or 4 digit security codes printed on most cards. Most UK banks allow accommodation businesses to opt out of requiring security codes - just send them a request in writing. Alternatively, if you still require security codes they can be faxed to you by some online booking services.

www.myuk.travel gives you the choice of accepting payment via stored credit/debit card, bank transfer or via www.paypal.com

Rates and Minimum Stay

Most online booking websites require you to offer them your best available rates and similar minimum stay conditions.

If you do have different rates on different websites then you run the risk of annoying your customers. No-one likes to make a booking on one website only to find it cheaper on another.

Yield Management

One strategy that you may wish to consider using is yield management. In a nutshell this is simply altering your pricing to make your rooms more expensive during busy periods and cheaper during quieter periods. This needs to be used with caution as you may find yourself encouraging customers to book with you last minute.

7. Which Online Booking Websites To Use?

We make a big distinction between the online booking services based around whether they charge commission or not.

ZERO Commission Websites

Instead of paying a high commission on each booking you pay a low monthly service fee. These types of services are primarily designed to integrate with your own website but can also generate bookings for you direct from the customer.

www.myuk.travel

Commission Websites

Typically charge 15% commission upwards. Expedia charges 25% commission on bookings that are not deemed last minute (ie booked more than 28 days in advance). Commission websites include:

www.laterooms.com

www.booking.com

www.expedia.co.uk

www.lastminute.com

The big problem with commission websites is that they are really only useful during quiet periods. We see many operators that are reluctant to use online booking during busy periods; why sell rooms online and pay commission when you are going to sell them anyway?

We see many UK properties addicted to commission booking websites and it is easy to see why - the websites are effectively doing the marketing for them, albeit at a high cost.

We recommend using commission websites to sell only those rooms that you would not expect to sell via walk-ups and non-commissionable sources.

Online Booking On Your Own Website

Our experience has shown that with a reasonable quality web site that is well ranked in Google and is managed properly can generate between 50% and 75% of bookings.

Given this level of online booking, we highly recommend that you use a ZERO commission online booking service on your own website. Even if you use a booking service that charges a small commission fee it quickly mounts up and turns out to be a very expensive option.

Last Minute Booking Websites

Last minute booking websites not only will charge you a commission but you are strongly urged to discount your rooms. This double whammy makes it a very expensive option. By discounting your rooms on such websites in this manner you run the risk of encouraging your customers to book last minute, which is not a great strategy long term. We have even heard of some operators that used last minute booking and found that their regular customers were now booking via those websites as it was cheaper for them. You only imagine what effect this had on those properties profitability.

Our recommendation is simple: if you do choose to discount your rates last minute then at least make those offers available direct via your own website, otherwise you are training your customer not to book direct with you.

8. Integrating With Your Property Management System

Overview

Managing online booking services is made far easier if you use a Property Management System (PMS) that offers channel management (which is a fancy way of saying that it updates multiple websites/systems).

With a fully integrated system your reservation system will update the online booking websites whenever your room availability changes (eg you get a telephone reservation, a reservation gets cancelled etc). This means that you will not have to manually update your online systems and virtually eliminates overbooking. Note that we do not believe that any system can offer a 100% guarantee against overbooking as it may still occur under certain circumstances (eg one of your staff taking a telephone reservation at the same time as someone is making an online reservation).

A fully integrated system also means that reservations made from any of your online booking services are automatically entered into your PMS.

Whilst channel management may also be done via some websites, this will give you far fewer benefits as you will still have to manually update a website. The best place to do channel management is via your PMS system.

The advantages of using an integrated are thus very clear - not only does it save you considerable time it also will do a more accurate job, virtually eliminating overbooking. If you use multiple websites we strongly recommend using products such as [MyUKTravel.PMS](#).

9. Conclusions

Putting it all together and in summary we make the following recommendations:

1. If you don't already have a good quality website for your business, then get one built by someone who knows what they are doing.
 2. Allow your customers to book online with you via your own website.
 3. Use a ZERO commission online booking service on your own website.
 4. Put your best available rates on your own website - if you do offer last minute discounts then make sure that they are also available from your own website.
 5. Use an integrated property management system that offers channel management.
 6. Put your effort into selling via non-commissionable sales channels; use commissionable sales channels to fill in your gaps rather than as your standard way of getting bookings.
 7. Use Google AdWords to direct web traffic to your website. Whilst there is a per booking cost to this, in most cases it will considerably less than the 15-25% commission that you would have otherwise paid.
 8. Get internet savvy; get training if you need it. Without question, the internet will grow in importance to your business.
-

10. Questions / Comments

We welcome all of your questions and comments. Please contact us at:

Telephone: 0845-1635163 (Local calling rates apply)
Email: nick@myuk.travel
johan@myuk.travel
