

The battle between travel bots and TMCs - who will win?

AI assistants and travel bots may be gaining ground, but a sound digital solution that incorporates these tools should be complemented by a knowledgeable travel management company (TMC) and consultant.



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With smartphone adoption nearing 100% and considering that an average business traveller checks their smartphone 34 times a day, it's not difficult to understand the popularity and attraction a mobile or virtual assistant holds. The nearly ubiquitous adoption of smartphones by the modern business traveller, says Ben Lamm, CEO Conversable, means that a digital solution to travel needs is now a business imperative for the corporate travel industry.

Building freedom and preference into the travel framework

The travel bot is the perfect technological answer to address the business traveller's need and desire to manage their trip on their own, and give them much-needed freedom within the travel framework. TMCs can make use of bots to improve their service to travellers in a format the travellers desire in a cost-effective way. "If corporations are going to succeed in winning over the largest generation in the world today and improve retention rates within a group that is notorious for changing paths quickly, building in freedom within framework will certainly be a company imperative."

Lamm explains that today, bots in the corporate travel industry allow customers to access information as conveniently as possible. He says: "Answering common queries, supporting the booking process, and providing easy access for customers to their travel information make travel bots the go-to solution for friction-free travel support."

According to Norm Rose, president, Travel Tech Consulting, chatbots are however not so much about freedom, but more about preferred interface. "Chatbots that have stored payment information allow the user to simply say 'buy' and a purchase will be completed."

In his opinion, smartphones have been the major catalyst in freeing up the corporate traveller enabling unrestrained search and booking on apps or the mobile web. "Chatbots are an option for those who prefer messaging."

The possibilities for the future are endless, according to Lamm, who explains that as bots become increasingly sophisticated, powered by conversational intelligence, and as technology like NLP progresses, bots will be able to manage the booking process end-to-end, including crisis management, with seamless integration into any company's framework

travel policy.

An itinerary management tool on steroids



Euan McNeil, GM FCM South Africa

FCM has its own travel bot called Sam, an itinerary management tool on steroids, describes Euan McNeil, FCM GM for South Africa. Sam has been released in the USA and is expected to be launched early in 2018 in South Africa. McNeil believes Sam will be how most business travellers interact with their travel programme in the future and explains that corporate travellers can book a car and hotel themselves and complete the booking without having to work with a consultant.

Travel policy will also not be a problem for Sam, says McNeil. “We will have a generic policy based on best practice in the market. Then, if customers want to take their full travel policy and load that into Sam, there will be a level of commercial uplift.”

Lamm agrees that if successfully integrated with a company’s travel policy, bots will be able to match the user’s preferences and information with the businesses’ requirements around travel. He adds: “To keep track of all travel, most policies require that travel is booked through a specific company or channel. Because bots serve as a single access point for multiple sources of information, travellers will be able to access more options from more places,

giving them more flexibility within the framework of the travel policy.”

In the end, who will win the battle between bots and TMCs?

Well, that’s the wrong question to ask. There is a clearly defined role for both the TMC and the travel bot in the current corporate travel landscape.

Travel bots will enable TMCs to combine human service with technology to create a more advanced level of customer service and to cut costs. Says McNeill: “Travel bots, such as Sam, have been developed to provide an additional interface for travellers, which will complement but never replace the skills and insights of the TMC. The travel expert will always have a key role to play when it comes to managing business travel for large corporations as well as SMEs.”

“ In today’s digital world, every company must be a tech company... ”

Lamm explains that bots afford TMCs the opportunity to create a channel strategy to reach their customers where they are. In today’s digital world, every company must be a tech company, even those traditionally reliant on call centers and human interactions. With bots, TMCs are able to scale personalised service in a way never managed before.

Rose adds travel chatbots could also be deployed to handle redundant questions such as policy questions, baggage fees, customer support, and limited booking capabilities. “Progressive TMCs could use chatbots to reduce call volumes answering simple questions about policy or travel options.”

TMCs are uniquely positioned to assist with travel bots because they have intimate knowledge of the business traveller, both in institutional and anecdotal knowledge. Lamm explains that travel bots are incredibly well equipped to work within the framework of established travel policies and routine transactions. However, bots are not equipped to know when to make an exception. That’s a human’s job.

Tasks such as checking flight information, routine booking, changing traveller information and even checking the weather in your target destination are perfect for the chatbot. But, Lamm adds: “The human steps in when you miss a flight to your daughter’s wedding. While the bot may help you rebook, it’s the human-to-human sympathy when you call a representative that will give a brand its customer service cred.”

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