



## Rich Media And The Future Of Travel Distribution

The rich media revolution is about to begin: Are you in?

It's taken years for travel suppliers to understand the customer. Remember the first generation of airline and hotel Websites? Online booking interfaces were designed from the "inside out": designed as if an airline employee or travel agent would be using them, with airport codes and expressions like "rack rates" all part of the standard customer interface. But suppliers quickly learned the value of user centered design, usability testing, and designing intuitive and simple interfaces. The second and current generation of travel tools and Websites are straightforward and clear, and as a result, they have been enormously successful.

As the tools became easier to use –and as millions of customers began using the Web—the travel industry experienced a huge evolution. Online travel booking was no longer just for the early adopter, but for any consumer who was comfortable purchasing products over the Web. For those customers (and the new users to the

***Online travel tools are beginning their next major evolution. The winners in this battle will deploy rich media online experiences –interfaces that seamlessly integrate images, video, audio, virtual tours—to create an immersive online customer experience.***

Internet who are following right behind them) the industry has forever changed distribution through *changing customer behavior*. This change in customer behavior is a huge achievement for the travel industry. Today, the reliance on travel agents for booking simple products and itineraries has evaporated, and the use of travel agents is generally reserved for complicated itineraries, destination consulting, and corporate travel (where online tools have not yet been deployed). Future changes in online distribution can now occur at a more rapid pace, given that customers are already comfortable using, comparing, and experimenting with online travel services. And for those users who are still behind the curve and have not yet purchased travel online, it is just a matter of time.

In addition to this fundamental change in customer behavior, another change in the industry has helped prime us for the next revolution: the rapid adoption of high speed internet connections. Within the last few years, more than 22 million American homes have now connected to the Internet via high-speed connections (DSL or cable modems), and more will follow. Whether at home or at the office, using the Web is now largely an instantaneous, high-speed experience.

Travel planning is inherently 'experiential'. As part of their planning process, customers continually search for as much detail on what type of experience they will be having on their trip before and after they make their booking. Using rich

This fundamental change in customer behavior –coupled with the rapid adoption of high speed Internet connections– has set the stage for the next revolution in online travel: the rich media online experience.

media/rich content is a very effective way of conveying very detailed travel information. (For an explanation of what is rich media, see the sidebar at right). If a picture is worth a thousand words, then rich media –in selling travel solutions– speaks volumes.

Whether a customer is booking a holiday and wants detailed views of the resort's pool, or she is traveling for business and wants to see the details of the fitness center that she will be using for the next two weeks, rich media will help answer those questions, allay fears, and close the sale.

### Rich Media Today

Similar to CRM, most of the early experiments into rich media online focused too much on the technology itself, and not on how the technology will add real value to the business. In the case of rich media, suppliers need to consider how rich media will enhance the customer experience, while considering the cost of creating and updating the content. Spinning logos might be fun for a developer to create, but they don't add real value to a customer experience.

*In a recent study, when asked which features of high speed internet access were most important to them, 50% replied 'high bandwidth tools'.*

*Forrester 2003*

To date, the travel industry has been slow to incorporate rich media into their online services. Other industries, like the automotive industry, have been much more forward-thinking. As automotive manufacturers have realized the importance their Web sites have in consumer's pre-purchase research process, they have been the first major industry to exploit the power of rich media. Cars are similar to travel products in the sense that both are "complex" products, where customer research and comparison can occur over a longer pre-purchase research period. And like travel, cars have complex sets of features that typically need to be explained or illustrated to customers.

Nissan, has one of the best Web sites out of all of the automotive manufacturers, and makes some of the best uses of rich media. Their recent interactive tour of their new pickup, Titan, is an excellent illustration of how virtual tours over high-bandwidth connections can help create an online experience that is truly like being inside the pickup's cabin.

### The revolution is about to begin

Rich media is about to change the online travel marketplace. The first and second generation travel tools have focused on making online services **usable**. With the new possibilities of rich media over high speed connections, a new chapter will be written on how rich media helped online travel solutions enter a new era of **usefulness**, conveying a whole new dimension of information.

### Rich Media is defined as:

- Images
  - Streaming video (without the use of a standalone player)
  - Voice Audio, Music, etc.
  - Virtual and 360 Tours
  - Animation, Flash
- that are integrated into the overall customer experience.

### The Interactive Tour of the new Titan



Titan's interactive tour includes:

- Virtual tour of the exterior and interior of the truck
- Interactive control: user's mouse can control the tour and vehicle perspective
- Custom configurators: users can select and configure different color and optional components.

### Rich Media's other benefits:

In addition to the added value rich media brings to the customer, it is also helping to change the vehicle production process. Feedback and data from the Web site's vehicle configurator on which features are most frequently selected by customers on the Web site is now fed back into the production process to help support anticipated customer demand.



“A whole new chapter in the history of online travel distribution is about to be written: how rich media helped make online travel tools **useful.**”

Unlike the flat Websites of today, rich media will have the ability to:

**Inspire** : As rich media is deployed and online sites become more immersive, online travel tools will have the power to inspire users, something that has been very difficult with even the best of today’s flat Web sites. Some examples of how rich media can inspire customers: a well designed inspirational online experience might just help the customer choose one holiday resort over another. In addition, an engaging online feature that brings to life the excitement of South Beach can encourage some customers to plan a trip for an upcoming weekend for which they have no plans and weren’t considering traveling.

**Illustrate** : Rich media can convey information that is sometimes very hard to articulate or describe, Images, Video, Virtual Tours, and Audio all have the power to help convey far more accurate, detailed, and emotional travel information. Consider the following opportunities:

- » **Airlines** – For the valued long-haul business class passenger, a virtual tour of the airport lounge and the flatbed business cabin could help translate the elegance of the real-world experience into the online experience.
- » **Hotels** – Holiday planners can better help evaluate –at a detailed level– the different amenities of resorts
- » **Cruises** – A successful cruise hinges on enjoying the on-board experience. What better way that a virtual tour is there to help bring the onboard experience closer to a customer?

**Simplify** : When properly designed, rich media interfaces can help simplify the interaction with applications that are typically difficult to use. Free from some of the limits of HTML, rich media can bridge the connections to multiple back-end systems to allow side-by-side comparisons or show real-time availability of inventory.

#### **A Continued Emphasis on Good Design**

To date, the travel industry has been slow to deploy rich media, and for some great reasons. Early attempts at using rich media were largely gratuitous, ineffective, and costly. Things are starting to change. The Broadmoor Hotel is one of the first suppliers to use a Flash based interface to their reservation engine. Although the redesign successfully shortened the number of screens typically needed to complete a hotel booking, the interface is very complicated.

And while Broadmoor’s interface is a interesting experiment, sadly it highlights some of the pitfalls in designing for rich media. Broadmoor has deployed a rich media interface that seems aimed at designers and Internet professionals. Any user with only moderate skills or confidence levels in Internet booking would surely be overwhelmed by the complexities of this interface (not to mention the legibility of the type, icons, and interaction design cues). So what benefit has this new interface added to the business? Furthermore, given the critical nature of the booking process,



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The above graphic represents Sapient’s research into customers travel planning and purchasing process.

The initial stages of any travel planning process involves “Inspiration”: meaning, a traveler may know that he or she will be taking a trip (such as an annual summer vacation), but he or she not know where they will be going.

To date, it has been very difficult for Websites to inspire customers, given the medium. With rich media, the limitations of a flat, electronic medium are surpassed by engaging video, audio, product tours, etc.



The Broadmoor Hotel is one of the first travel suppliers to try to reap the benefits of a Flash®-based booking system. While interesting from an experimental point of view, the interface is visually complicated.



A recent study conducted by Carlson showed that Radisson hotels that feature videos and virtual tours on Radisson.com are averaging 52% more online revenues than those that do not

a separate HTML-based booking interface must be maintained. (And at what cost of maintenance to Broadmoor?) The Broadmoor interface example raises a number of issues to consider when designing for rich media. First, and foremost, there must be a continued emphasis on good design and usability. Just like the arrival of the laser printer gave everyone the potential to become a desktop publisher, doesn't mean that everyone had skills in page layout. The problems with the next wave of rich media tools will be exponentially more dangerous, since we are dealing with complex interactions. In short, think of the Broadmoor Hotel example and don't create a flight simulator when all you need is a simple interface. The appropriateness of rich media must always be considered.

*"In 2003, Most Web interfaces feel insufficient. Now is a good time for companies to update their Web-based offerings by developing rich Internet applications"*

*The New Rowley Group 2003*

#### **The revolution is about to begin. Are you prepared?**

It's time to think about how rich media will change distribution for your business. Just like how the first and second generation travel Web sites separated the leaders from the laggards in distribution strategies, rich media will begin to identify the next generation of winners in creating a step change in the **usefulness** and engagement level of online customer experiences. Consider how rich media can change your current online customer experiences and overall distribution strategies.

#### **About Sapient**

Sapient, a leading business and technology consultancy, helps Global 2000 clients achieve measurable business results through the rapid application and support of advanced technology on a fixed-price basis. Founded in 1991, Sapient has offices throughout North America, Europe and Asia.

For over 10 years, our global team of user researchers and designers have been creating some of the most successful online experiences, using the latest generation technologies. Chances are you have used—or are even regularly using—a Website that Sapient designed.

**To find out how Sapient can help, please contact:**

**Donald Chesnut, Vice President**

**dchesnut@sapient.com**

Sapient's recent travel clients:

