Digital Travel
INSIGHTS

Unlocking Traveler Intelligence

An Analysis of Customer Data Strategies, Challenges, and Innovations in the Travel Industry

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Executive Summary

Customer data has become critical to the travel and hospitality industries, as it is a requirement for supporting personalized experiences. Travelers now expect tailored services and seamless interactions across multiple touchpoints, at every stage of their journeys.

Results from the survey indicate that travel organizations are collecting diverse data types and leveraging mobile platforms. However, most rate their data unification efforts as only somewhat effective.

This report examines how travel companies are leveraging customer data to gain deeper insights into traveler behavior. It also reveals organizations' plans for launching highly contextualized marketing strategies and delivering enhanced customer experiences using customer data.

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About the Respondents

The respondents are senior leaders in sales, marketing, customer support, product, and data & analytics roles. They are from many different types of travel companies, including tour operators, airlines, car rental services, cruise lines, and entertainment venues, among others.

58% of the companies represented in the survey **operate globally**
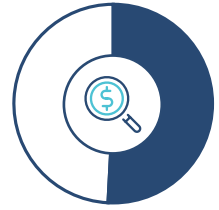
51% make **$1 billion or more** in annual revenue.

Key Insights

65% use customer preference and booking history data.

69% track repeat purchases or loyalty as a key KPI.

72% say mobile data is very valuable.

60% are prioritizing data quality, governance, compliance, and integration.

78% rate their data unification as only somewhat effective.

57% are "very effective" at centralizing and enriching customer insights.

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Travel Organizations Utilize Many Different Types and Sources of Customer Data

Travel companies today have access to an unprecedented variety of customer data sources, each offering unique insights into traveler behavior and preferences. This reflects the multi-touchpoint nature of the modern travel experience, where customers interact with brands across numerous channels throughout their journey.

Organizations are leveraging this data ecosystem to build comprehensive customer profiles that inform everything from marketing campaigns to product development.

Customer preference data and booking history emerge as the most widely utilized data types, with 65% of organizations actively collecting and analyzing this information, in each case. This reflects the fundamental importance of understanding what customers want and how they behave during the booking process.

Customer service interaction data follows closely, with 62% of organizations recognizing its value in understanding pain points and satisfaction drivers. In each case, 54% of travel organizations collect both customer feedback and survey responses, as well as mobile app usage data.

These data sources provide complementary perspectives on the customer experience, with feedback offering direct insights into satisfaction and mobile usage revealing behavioral patterns. The relatively high adoption of mobile app data collection underscores the growing importance of mobile platforms in travel planning and booking.

Which of the following types of customer data does your organization currently use?

Customer preferences
65%

Booking history
65%

Customer service interactions
62%

Mobile app usage
54%

Customer feedback/survey responses
54%

Browsing behavior
50%

Social media activity
45%

Loyalty program activity
43%

Demographic information
38%

Geo-location
38%

Engagement (e.g., clicks, email opens, SMS)
34%

Upsells (e.g., add-ons, on-site services)
16%

In their assessments of data sources, the respondents believe mobile applications deliver the most value. Specifically, 72% of respondents rate them as "very valuable" for generating actionable customer insights. This finding aligns with broader industry trends showing mobile's dominance in travel research and booking behaviors.

Direct bookings follow at 70%, highlighting the importance of proprietary customer interactions over third-party channels.

Marketing channels including direct emails, owned media, and SMS campaigns are "very valuable" data sources according to 66% of the respondents. Website interactions and advertising platforms round out the top sources, rated as very valuable by 53% and 52% respectively.

Currently, organizations place the highest value on data sources that provide direct customer relationships and behavioral insights rather than broader demographic information. Organizations are therefore prioritizing investments in technologies that enhance direct engagement and yield richer behavioral data, such as advanced analytics, mobile app development, and integrated marketing platforms.

Despite these advancements, many travel companies still struggle with fragmented data systems, manual campaign performance comparisons, and the rapid pace of technological change.

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES

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"We have complete visibility into every guest who visits our booking engine—their searches, bookings, and the revenue they generate. Most importantly, we can show our hotel clients exactly where their money is coming from."

For each data source listed below, please rate its value in generating actionable customer insights for your organization.

📍 Very valuable   📍 Somewhat valuable   📍 Not very valuable

Mobile applications
| 72% |
| 28% |
| 0% |

Direct bookings
| 70% |
| 29% |
| 1% |

Marketing (e.g., direct emails, owned media, SMS)
| 66% |
| 25% |
| 9% |

Website interactions
| 53% |
| 47% |
| 0% |

Advertising platforms
| 52% |
| 46% |
| 2% |

Social media
| 50% |
| 47% |
| 3% |

Loyalty programs
| 50% |
| 45% |
| 5% |

Customer service interactions
| 49% |
| 49% |
| 2% |

Third-party booking platforms
| 39% |
| 61% |
| 0% |

Post-stay/travel surveys
| 38% |
| 54% |
| 8% |

Partners
| 35% |
| 64% |
| 1% |

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# Challenges Limit the Effectiveness of Travel Leaders' Data Strategies

Despite widespread recognition of customer data's importance, travel organizations face significant obstacles in maximizing their data investments. The majority of respondents acknowledge that their current capabilities fall short of their aspirations, with systemic challenges preventing optimal data utilization.

These limitations directly impact marketing effectiveness and the ability to deliver personalized customer experiences at scale.

A striking 78% of travel organizations rate their data unification efforts as only "somewhat effective," while an additional 3% consider their efforts "not very effective."

This level of data fragmentation prevents organizations from achieving the unified customer view necessary for sophisticated personalization. Addressing this issue itself is a challenge, as traveler data tends to span multiple systems and touchpoints, all of which must be synchronized.

How effective is your organization at unifying disconnected data sources and processes to drive its marketing efforts?
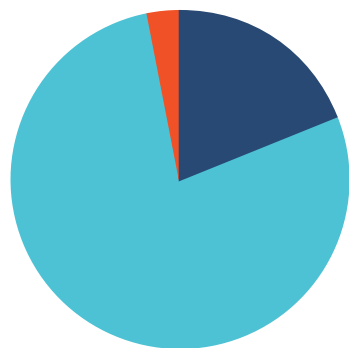
- **19%** Very effective
- **78%** Somewhat effective
- **3%** Not very effective
- **0%** Not effective at all

Since you said your organization is not as effective as it could be at unifying disconnected data sources and processes to drive its marketing efforts, which of the following are challenges that you face in doing so?

Data quality inconsistencies
64%

Inadequate software and/or technology infrastructure
51%

Technical integration issues
46%

Inadequate data governance
44%

Lack of cross-departmental collaboration
42%

Lack of unified customer IDs
40%

Lack of standardized data definitions/taxonomy
38%

Budget, talent, or resource limitations
38%

Data privacy issues
32%

Ineffective change management processes
27%

Difficulty demonstrating ROI or business value of data unification efforts
6%

Among organizations struggling with data unification, 64% identify data quality inconsistencies as their primary challenge. Poor data quality creates a cascading effect across the organization's workflows, tainting analytical results or preventing practitioners from generating insights in the first place.

Additionally, 51% say inadequate software and technology infrastructure are significant barriers to effective data unification. Fixing this issue should be an important part of digital transformation efforts. New software and technologies need to be funded, so achieving buy-in from leadership is critical.

The survey reveals a more positive perspective when examining unified customer views across touchpoints and channels.

Most respondents (78%) rate their organizations as "good" at maintaining unified customer perspectives. They effectively integrate most data to provide adequate customer visibility.

An encouraging 12% rate their capabilities as "excellent," achieving consistent integration across all data sources for seamless customer views. These findings suggest that while technical unification remains challenging, many organizations have developed workarounds to maintain reasonable customer visibility, or they have other sources that deliver insights into traveler needs and behaviors.

Creative solutions and manual workarounds can support efforts like targeting and personalization for a time, but they are not sustainable. Integrating data from every touchpoint through a unified system is the best way to scale operations and prepare the organization for more advanced solutions, such as artificial intelligence.

How would you rate your organization's ability to maintain a unified view of customers across different touchpoints and channels?
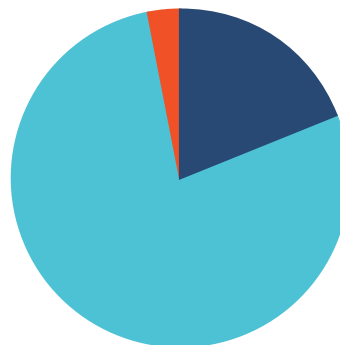
12% Excellent – We consistently integrate all data, providing a seamless view of the customer.

78% Good – We effectively integrate most data, providing an adequate view of the customer.

10% Fair – We effectively integrate only some of our data, providing an unreliable view of the customer.

0% Poor – We integrate little or no data and have difficulty understanding our customers.

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES

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The more you experiment, the more you discover what's possible. For example, start with something simple and low-risk, like optimizing email subject lines. Since this doesn't require sensitive customer data, it avoids legal hurdles and is an easy way to achieve a quick win—demonstrating real impact for your organization."

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AI-Driven Personalization Lags Behind Other Marketing Activities in the Travel Industry

Travel organizations demonstrate varying levels of effectiveness across different marketing activities. While some data management and personalization capabilities are outperforming more advanced AI-driven initiatives, many organizations are already leveraging AI effectively for some uses.

Centralizing and enriching customer knowledge emerges as the only marketing capability where a majority (57%) of organizations consider themselves "very effective." This type of foundational customer data management provides the underlying infrastructure for more advanced marketing activities.

However, even with a strong foundation, it can be challenging to leverage advanced technologies like AI.

The survey reveals AI-driven personalization as the weakest area of marketing effectiveness, with only 24% of the respondents rating their organizations as "very effective." Notably, almost one-fifth of the respondents (19%) rate their organizations as "not very effective" in this area.

The struggle with AI personalization reflects broader industry challenges with implementing advanced analytics and machine learning capabilities effectively.

Although most of the respondents rate their organizations as either "very effective" (44%) or somewhat effective (43%) at using AI-driven tools to improve marketing process efficiency, this merely suggests that they are using AI to streamline some of their internal marketing processes. For example, this could apply to marketers using ChatGPT to help them write marketing emails.

How effective is your organization at engaging in the following marketing activities given its current tools and solutions?

📍 Very effective   📍 Somewhat effective   📍 Not very effective

Centralizing and enriching our knowledge of our customers
| 57% |
| 35% |
| 8% |

Orchestrating contextually relevant experiences for clients and customers
| 45% |
| 50% |
| 5% |

Using AI-driven tools to improve marketing process efficiency
| 44% |
| 43% |
| 13% |

Identifying and engaging top customers and prospects
| 42% |
| 58% |
| 0% |

Measuring and attributing marketing ROI across multiple touchpoints
| 41% |
| 48% |
| 11% |

Preventing lapsed customers and churn with targeted retention programs
| 34% |
| 60% |
| 5% |

Using forecasting and analytics to grow the business
| 34% |
| 52% |
| 14% |

Using AI-driven personalization to enhance marketing campaigns
| 24% |
| 57% |
| 19% |

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Organizations must bridge the gap between basic data performance and AI-powered marketing and customer experience excellence. In the coming years, doing so will be critical to every customer touchpoint.

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES

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"If you think about the customer journey today, it's overwhelming just trying to plan a trip. It's challenging to figure out where you want to go, what you're going to do when you get there, and how you're going to handle excursions if, for example, you have small kids. These are the core issues that artificial intelligence can now help us solve."

Travel Leaders Will Pursue Data Quality, Data Integration, and Predictive Modeling Capabilities Next

Travel organizations are charting clear strategic directions for their customer data investments. Their initiatives will focus on addressing current limitations while building capabilities for future competitive advantage.

Data quality, governance, and compliance emerge as the top priority for 60% of organizations planning customer data initiatives over the next 12-24 months. This focus addresses the fundamental data quality issues identified as major barriers to effective data unification.

Expanding data integration and unification across systems is an equally important priority, also selected by 60% of organizations. The alignment between these top priorities and previously identified challenges demonstrates that travel leaders have a clear understanding of their most pressing needs.

Which of the following initiatives are your organization's top priorities for leveraging customer data in the next 12–24 months?

Improving data quality, governance, and compliance
60%

Expanding data integration and unification across systems
60%

Investing in advanced analytics or predictive modeling
48%

Scaling AI/machine learning capabilities
45%

Enhancing personalization and real-time marketing
42%

Implementing or upgrading customer data platforms (CDPs)
39%

Enhancing omnichannel or cross-channel customer engagement
6%

By addressing data quality and integration simultaneously, organizations are positioning themselves to build stronger foundations for advanced analytics capabilities. This strategic approach suggests a mature understanding of the prerequisites for successful data-driven marketing.

Nearly half of respondents (48%) identify investing in advanced analytics or predictive modeling as a key priority. This interest suggests organizations recognize the competitive importance of moving beyond basic data management.

To measure the effectiveness of these efforts, travel organizations will monitor important key performance indicators and compare them to previous results.

Repeat purchases and brand loyalty metrics serve as the primary KPI for 69% of organizations measuring customer data initiative ROI. In travel and hospitality, customer retention drives long-term profitability more effectively than acquisition, and obtaining repeat travelers is decidedly less expensive than converting new ones to go on their very first trip.

Booking conversion rates and lead-to-booking ratios are tracked by 61% of organizations, demonstrating the continued importance of optimizing the booking funnel. As this process has become increasingly digitized, booking is now dependent on digital customer experiences, insights-driven personalization, and AI-powered marketing strategies.

Overall revenue and sales growth round out the top KPIs, monitored by 54% of organizations as a measure of their customer data success. This broad metric indicates that many travel companies are still developing more sophisticated measurement approaches for their data initiatives.

The prevalence of these traditional business metrics suggests that organizations are taking a cautious, results-oriented approach to their data investments.

Which of the following key performance indicators (KPIs) does your organization track to measure the ROI of its customer data initiatives?

Repeat purchases or brand loyalty metrics
69%

Booking conversion rate or lead-to-booking ratio
61%

Overall revenue or sales growth
54%

Customer acquisition cost (CAC)
45%

Retention or churn rate
40%

Customer lifetime value (CLV)
32%

Net Promoter Score (NPS) or customer satisfaction surveys
29%

Marketing campaign performance (e.g., click-through, open rates)
25%

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES

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"For us, the most important parts of the change management process were education and transparency. We had to be sure we were being clear about what we were implementing, what data we were gathering, and how we were going to use it, both internally and with our customers."

Travel Leaders Reveal Their Next Big Initiatives

The respondents revealed what customer data initiatives they are planning to work on over the next several months.

Traveler Control and Transparency

A recurring theme is the drive to empower customers with greater control and transparency.

One respondent highlighted, "We're creating a decentralized customer data vault that allows us to responsibly personalize while giving users complete control over how their data is used."

Personalization and Contextualization

Others are focused on enhancing the utility of customer data through predictive and contextual tools, such as "a personalized travel booking timeline engine that will deliver the best time or period to book travel based on behavioral data and past activity for travel bookings," and "a travel mood predictor, in which the application or tool would use patterns of interaction by the user for more suitable travel destinations."

Real-Time Engagement and Adaptation

Many organizations are also investing in technologies that enable real-time, adaptive experiences. Initiatives include live collaborative planning tools, dynamic content engines, and AI-driven chatbots that "offer more contextually aware and human-like assistance."

The integration of cohort analysis, generative AI for micro-campaigns, and emotion recognition tools further demonstrates the sector's commitment to tailoring marketing and service delivery to individual preferences and behaviors.

Sustainability and Wellness

Finally, sustainability and wellness are emerging as differentiators, with several companies planning to launch initiatives in these areas. Some of the examples include "eco-awareness scoring," "wellness-based recommendations," and "personalized eco-friendly travel options."

Despite these forward-looking plans, the responses reveal an acute awareness of the challenges that remain. As travel companies pursue these innovative initiatives, building cohesive and secure data strategies will be essential to fully realize the benefits of personalization and customer experience enhancement.

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Conclusion: Supporting Data-Driven Innovation in Travel

The travel industry's relationship with customer data reveals both significant progress and substantial opportunities for advancement. Organizations have successfully established diverse data collection capabilities and recognize the particular value of mobile and direct booking channels.

Furthermore, travel leaders possess a clear understanding of their strategic priorities, focusing appropriately on data quality and integration as prerequisites for advanced capabilities. The remarkable diversity of planned initiatives, from AI-driven personas to environmental impact scoring, suggests an industry poised for significant innovation in customer engagement.

However, many still struggle with the fundamental challenge of data unification, which has emerged as a primary obstacle to advancing toward the use of sophisticated, AI-driven personalization. Organizations that successfully address foundational data challenges while pursuing innovative capabilities will be well-suited to compete in the data-driven travel and hospitality marketplace.

Key Suggestions

Develop mobile-first data strategies given mobile's exceptional value rating: Mobile platforms provide the highest-value customer insights for travel organizations.

Prioritize data quality initiatives before pursuing advanced analytics: Poor data quality undermines even sophisticated AI-driven personalization efforts.

Balance innovation with privacy by implementing customer-controlled data sharing: Personal data vaults can enhance personalization while building customer trust.

Invest in unified customer data platforms to break down system silos: Fragmented data prevents organizations from achieving a comprehensive view of the customer.

Measure AI personalization effectiveness separately from traditional marketing metrics: Current measurement approaches may not capture AI-driven personalization value accurately.

About the Author

Digital Travel INSIGHTS

Digital Travel Insights, the industry research and digital publishing arm of Digital Travel, delivers cutting-edge data and analysis on trends, challenges, and opportunities in the digital travel sector. Through comprehensive research reports, webinars, and thought leadership initiatives, we empower senior-level travel leaders to make informed strategic decisions and stay ahead in the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

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Zeta Global (NYSE: ZETA) is the AI Marketing Cloud that leverages advanced artificial intelligence (AI) and trillions of consumer signals to make it easier for marketers to acquire, grow, and retain customers more efficiently. Through the Zeta Marketing Platform (ZMP), our vision is to make sophisticated marketing simple by unifying identity, intelligence, and omnichannel activation into a single platform – powered by one of the industry's largest proprietary databases and AI.

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