



GHN Perspectives: Rob Torres, Google, Inc.



*Rob Torres
Managing Director, Travel
Google, Inc.*

Technology as a Means to an End: Make Your Guests Happy and Make Them Marvel

Technology is the double-edged sword in the travel industry. Mention the word technology at any conference or panel, and it might get both a wink and eye roll. It's empowering, yet alienating. With one swipe, technology puts us closer to what we're seeking, but it too often takes us away from the very things that are most important—nature, people and face-to-face conversation. I have an optimistic view of technology and its role for the hotel business and guest happiness. When I think about the future of travel, starting with my own family vacations, I desire three things: I want us to live more in the moment when we're there, to experience novelty and to feel more “connected” to our destination starting from the initial planning and research. It's technology that will solve for all three and ultimately ensure the success of your business.

A digital concierge for living in the Now

Technology should help us live in the moment. The best concierges anticipate needs and make thoughtful suggestions to explore places and activities you wouldn't have tried before. This is the premise behind Google Now. A friend recently went to Mexico for a wedding and upon his return told me how helpful the Google Now cards were during his trip. It reminded him to check in for his flight and advised him that there was traffic on the way to the airport. Upon arriving, it summoned up the local weather, currency exchange rate and details of local restaurants and attractions. Being an avid photographer, he loved the suggestions of photo spots nearby his location, laid out in a beautiful mosaic format with helpful information including how long it would take to get there from the hotel. His favorite feature was the language cards that told him how to say common phrases like good morning and thank you. He could even type a complex



sentence right into the card and Google Translate would convert it into Spanish. Google Now is about delighting the consumer with the right information delivered at just the right time. My friend was able to worry less, plan out fewer details and truly enjoy each moment of his trip.

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

Marcel Proust famously said these words, and this idea has been quoted many times in reference to travel's effect on the soul. His perspective takes on a new meaning in this age of technology. Wearable technologies like Google Glass give you a literal pair of "new eyes," and allow you to discover your surroundings like never before. Suddenly the process of snapping a photo, sharing it on your preferred social network and learning more about the object you're looking at (even if it's in a foreign language), becomes instantaneous and nearly seamless. Google Glass heightens my sense of novelty while traveling, even with something as mundane as checking into the hotel. The hospitality tech company Itesso is developing a Glass assisted check-in solution where the hotel check-in staff will be able to identify who the guest is before he/she even says a single word. Although Itesso could run into privacy regulations, it's a sure sign that technology will dramatically change every aspect of the hotel guest experience. In fact, TripIt already has a Glass app that allows users to review their travel reservations. Earlier this year, Starwood caught up with the trend as well and started enabling guests to search hotels via Glass.

Connecting the physical and the digital

The biggest sense of innovation in the next five years will come from the developing relationship between our physical and digital world. I wholeheartedly agree with Sree Sreenivasan, the Chief Digital Officer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who said, "The future of travel is all about connecting the physical and the digital." One of the best examples is what Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority (LVCVA) did this summer to attract visitors. LVCVA partnered with Google Maps to create a native web experience that allows users to step through Las Vegas and "feel" their vacation pre-travel, exploring different room types, clubs, shopping and the culinary delights Vegas has to offer. Upon loading, the fully mobile-compatible site LasVegas.com/GeoVegas presents pre-packaged experiences like "Vegas on the Edge" and "Gastropolis," catering to different interests. The advertising campaign was particularly innovative. LVCVA took over the YouTube homepage in the US, UK and Canada and launched a rich media unit with interactive indoor Maps Street View right in the masthead. This is truly a fantastic example of using digital to augment our experience of the physical and heighten anticipation for the final destination. The results were equally impressive: 784 days of brand interaction time with the



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masthead and 583% lift in site visits within 2 days of the homepage takeover in the US (*source: Millward Brown Ad Impact Study*).

Caring about technology is caring about the bottom line

At the end of the day, any conversation about technology should circle back to improving the business. It's not about developing a cool app—no one comes back to a hotel just for an app. We need to honestly assess how technology is helping enhance and transform the guest experience. LVCVA brought a whole city to life and created unparalleled engagement. Any hotel with a sound strategy around technology, whether it is wearable tech or a more innovative advertising campaign, is investing in its brand and ultimately improving market share. A hotel brand that makes the consumer happy commands greater influence, pricing power and is more resilient during recessions. If more hotels started thinking about themselves as though they are in the business of making people happy, we'd have significantly more loyal customers who come back not just for a clean and comfortable room, but also for a greater sense of novelty about life and travel. That kind of market and mindshare is worth investing in.

Google is a member of GlobalHotelNetwork.com and Mr. Torres is a member of [GHN's Thought Leaders Committee](#).