



Travel companies caught in a Big Data riptide

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Here's a Big Data quote worth sharing at your next conference, or maybe just your next happy hour with industry peers at a bar:

“Big Data is like teenage sex. Everyone thinks everyone else is doing it. Everyone thinks they know how to do it. Everyone brags they're doing it all the time.

But the reality is that hardly anyone is doing it well or that much.”

That was the kick-off idea at a panel discussion in London last night. [DataArt](#), a 1,000-person firm that develops software for hospitality companies and other verticals, convened a [Question Time event](#) at [The Soho Hotel](#).

The analytics and personalization revolution is a fresh change of topic away from mobile.

Anyone who has attended travel conferences for a while knows that 2008 was the Year of Mobile — and so was 2009, 2010, and 2011, joked panelist Greg Abbott, SVP for travel and hospitality, DataArt.

But now the travel industry has something new to talk about: analytics and personalization.

True, Big Data is sometimes a misleading label that journalists slap into headlines to drive traffic, said Matthew Goulden, CEO and managing director, [Triometric](#). (Tnooz has never heard of journalists doing that, of course.)

But last night, “Big Data” meant taking advantage of information on the behavior of consumers and clients on one's own and via third-parties to predict future behavior — and to use the predictions to guide product delivery or to re-sell to third-parties.

To get the liveliest discussion, Charlotte Davies (DataArt's VP for travel and hospitality in Europe) invited both intermediaries and suppliers to be challenged by questions solely from an audience of industry peers.



The travel industry is generally behind other verticals when it comes harness and integrate the huge amounts of data which are now becoming available, according to the panel. In some companies, existing data isn't being shared well internally.

In other companies, internal data needs to be matched up with external data from other industries, to enhance predictions, said Duncan Freke, development director, TheTrainline.com.

Looking at companies outside of travel may provide the most innovative examples of models to copy, suggested Nathan Clapton, VP of mobile partnerships, TripAdvisor.

For instance, Orange, the European telecom, has found that mobile device users [prefer to receive information in video format](#) and it has been [experimenting with interactive mobile video](#) as a way to communicate with its customers, as noted by audience member Peter Dennis, chairman of [Travel Technology Initiative](#).

Who stands to gain the most?

Metasearch companies may profit from leveraging the data they collect, said Filip Filipov, head of B2B, Skyscanner.

He disagreed with the notion that, because online travel agencies have a transactional relationship with their customers [OTAs also have an edge in Big Data usage](#).

Filipov disagreed, pointing out that Skyscanner knows when transactions are completed and that it has introduced log-ins to help identify its customers.

The metasearch site has also begun analyzing consumer trends in flight and hotel queries to make predictions about future consumer behavior.

It then [sells these predictions](#) based on anonymized data sets of customer behavior to third parties, such as destination marketers eager to know about help them allocate their marketing budgets.

Projects like one that suggest that Big Data is increasingly seen as an asset that can be leveraged to boost revenue.

Third-party companies, such as [Nor1](#) and [Boxever](#) might get an edge in providing analytics to travel companies, noted Abbott.



Panelists and audience members also debated whether big data gives a chance for suppliers, such as individual airlines and hotels, a chance to level the playing field and regain close relationships with their customers that intermediaries have partly taken away.

As look-to-book ratios double, companies may struggle to keep up with all the data their collecting and interpret it using best practices merely with their own IT departments, he added.

There was an inevitable debate about data privacy, and a handicapping of the chances of a possible pushback from consumers.

Audience members and panelists were divided on whether travel companies have to be worried about engaging in analytics and personalization tactics today that might be regulated or legally arbitrated in future years.

Yet while a lot remains uncertain about Big Data and personalization, one thing isn't: It's the new mainstay of travel conferences.

