

Topaz Hotel Services

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Integrating the Reservations Process Into Websites Using AJAX

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Introduction

It is now possible to fully integrate the reservations process into a hotel's website. This will help provide the guest a smooth, seamless shopping experience. The property can be presented to the guest in a way that properly represents it from the first page they see until confirmation. This eliminates going back and forth between availability lookups and property description pages.

Integrating the reservation process allows a hotelier to maximize the return on the investment made designing their website. The design will now include the reservations generating portions of the site. Gone are the days of wrapping a generic booking engine with elements designed to portray the feel of the property. Now the relationship between the guest and the property begins when they first visit the website and is not interrupted by a booking engine that forces them to return to the mundane generic world leisure travelers are trying to escape. This also gives hoteliers the option to design the simple, streamline

reservation process that the business traveler desires.

Problem Statement

Although it is common to refer to a hotel's website, the majority of hotels maintain two websites concurrently. The first is a marketing site, presenting the property to potential guests. The second is a sales site, commonly referred to as a Web Booking Engine. Attempts have been made to make the two sites look alike, but until now they are hooked together by a link that says 'reservations'. When the guest clicks that reservations button, their experience changes to the generic process of: Select Date, Select Number of Guests, Select Room Type, Select Package, etc. It looks and feels like every other hotel room they have reserved online. The investment made in creating a website that is inviting in its design and content comes up short with a standard booking engine. A common problem with the two-website model occurs because the guest cannot determine availability until after deciding on the property and room type. Since the sites are distinct, with no interoperability, the guest does not have the option to view the availability while exploring the marketing site. It is not until the guest selects the dates of stay and chooses a specific room or package that guest may find out the choice is not available. Now the guest must go back to the marketing site to find another option. At this point, your potential guest may well end up leaving your website in frustration and ultimately make a reservation with a competitor.

Previous Options

There have been attempts to address these issues before. In most cases the remedy consists of moving more information into the generic booking engine. For example, some major chains have created websites that are all booking engine. These sites put up generic information for all properties in a similar format, creating a consistent user experience. This is done, however, at the sacrifice of being able to depict the uniqueness of the individual properties.

Some booking engine providers have chosen technologies such as Flash to provide an integrated user experience. The use of Flash gives the impression that the booking engine is more fully integrated; however the reservation process is very much the same. A Flash booking engine also requires a back-up HTML engine in the event the user does not have the required plug-in, or is using a low-speed Internet connection..

THS Solution

Topaz has come at the problem from a new direction. Instead of moving the property information to the sales site, Topaz is moving the reservation functionality to the marketing site and eliminating the booking engine altogether.

Availability is presented, not requested

Both inventory and rate data can be displayed wherever necessary throughout the website. Since the display is dynamic, the guest need only suggest what they are interested in and the availability will be updated. As the mouse passes over the picture for a

room, the availability for that room type can be shown on the calendar in real time. Availability can be displayed on a single or multi month calendar. The display may be displaying availability for a property, a room, a package or a combination

Integrated reservations, not an add-on

The BookAbility 3™ reservations system is comprised of a set of components that are integrated where desired, during the creation of the website itself. The web designer determines the placement of the booking system components, incorporating functionality into design. With no rigid format to follow, the designer is free to use creativity with both the form and the function of the website/reservation system.

Effortless reservations

The reservation happens as the guest explores the property. Dates can be selected from any page, at any point in the process. The guest has the freedom to register when ready and the guest's information will be available when the decision is made to finalize the reservation. The system allows for multiple reservations to be made during the same session, reusing appropriate information.

Implementation

With existing technology, websites must reload the page every time a user wants to see something new. This is like turning pages in a book. The new state of web technology now allows only the portions of the page that need to be

updated to change. This permits the web page to act more like a traditional computer application.

AJAX is a web development technique that is popular in internal corporate applications and now is becoming accepted in public Internet websites as well. Google and Yahoo make use of AJAX in some of their most popular web applications that include mail and mapping. For a good overview of AJAX technology refer to

<http://adaptivepath.com/publications/essays/archives/000385.php> .

Topaz has developed a set of AJAX components with specific application to the hotel reservation process. Using these components, website designers at Topaz or at companies using Topaz Web Tools, can add BookAbility elements throughout a site instead of linking to a booking engine as a separate site. These components include a Datepicker, availability calendar, photo and description panels, e-marketing opt-in selector, reservation form, itinerary and confirmation.

These components are customizable by the web designer, using cascading style sheets (CSS). The individual components can be made to control other elements in a web page. They can also react to events from other web page elements.

Datepicker

At first glance the BookAbility 3™ AJAX Datepicker looks like many others currently in use. But it works very differently. In a common Datepicker the user selects the travel dates and the web browser loads a new page, usually on the

site running the booking engine. With the Bookability 3™ Datepicker the action is determined by the web designer. The designer may choose to have a new page load, or to only change some content

Arrival Date:

Departure Date:

SELECT ARRIVAL

July 2006

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

[close](#)

on the page currently displaying. For example, if the current page is displaying room types, then clicking a “check availability” button could display the available rates for each room type for the dates selected. If the current page is listing multiple properties, the functionality can update the page to show which of the listed properties are available.

The BookAbility 3™ Datepicker is configurable for arrival / departure date, or arrival date / number of nights. It is also able to pop in a calendar from which the guest can select arrival and departure dates. It can accept text entry fields or use drop down lists. The date format is configurable as well. It, like all Bookability 3™ components, is designed to use CSS. Web designers benefit from easy access to fonts, colors, positioning and sizing.

Availability Calendar

With the flexibility of AJAX, the availability calendar can be used to give a live availability snapshot to any page in the website. Since it is context sensitive; the calendar can show the availability of hotels, rooms or packages depending on where it is used. The

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calendar accepts and reacts to events from any element on the web page. The guest can click on a room type or float



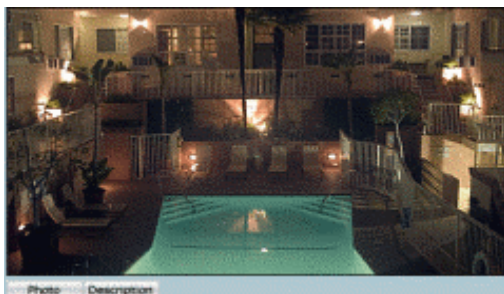
their mouse over a package and the calendar will update with the information for the item of interest.

The calendar is sufficiently flexible so that it can be configured to display one or more months at a time. It can also be set to display rates and restrictions. The calendar can be configured to update

the Datepicker so the guest can select their dates of interest there.

Photo / Description Panels

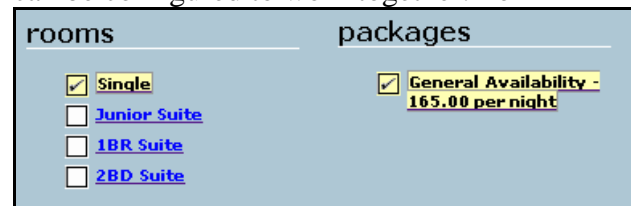
Many sites are designed with pages filled with lists of descriptions and images. These cumbersome pages may describe and display room types, promotional packages or other items. By using integrated photo and description panels, the guests may select between information and full graphic content as they are looking at each selected item, thus eliminating the need to scroll through columns of photos and text. This application allows the



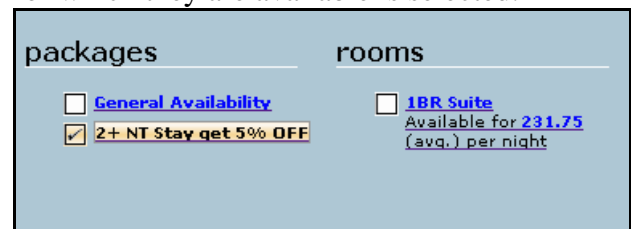
selection of an item to control the graphic content and information displayed by an adjacent panel, providing a compact, information-rich display.

List Panels

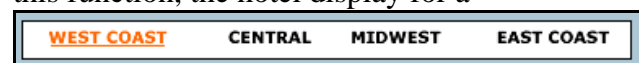
List panels can be used to dynamically display room types or available packages and allow the selection of various combinations. Additionally, list panels can be configured to work together. For



example, a list of packages or discounts can be set to display when the room type for which they are available is selected.



Conversely, a predetermined list of rooms can be set to display only when the applicable package is chosen. Another useful application of list panels provides hotel selection by region. In this function, the hotel display for a



multi-property group may be filtered by the geographical area of interest. List Panels are configurable to list items vertically or horizontally.

Reservation Form

The reservation form is fully customizable, allowing it to blend easily

with the rest of site. It can also accept input from other components.

If a guest changes his arrival and/or departure dates, the form interactively change the room, package and add-on offerings. Dynamic packaging can be created easily, with package elements and cost changing as the package is being created. The guest see any changes there immediately, no need to request a new page for a package summary. The reservation forms can auto-fill if the guest is on file or a member of a frequent stay program. The guest ID can be saved on the guest's computer. With automatic guest recognition, return guests would have no need to fill in their information during the booking process.

With the benefit of integrated information display website page view and user choice tracking, a user profile can be dynamically determined. This information, including the type of guest and the guest's preferences can control the presentation of information and smooth the reservation process.

Throughout the information look-up and booking process, all communications with the server are securely sent over SSL.

Itinerary

A preliminary itinerary may be displayed allowing the guest to confirm and or revise choices. This also allows the guest to reserve several rooms at once, adding additional choices to the itinerary. When the guest has completed the transaction, all reservations are delivered together. With this feature, small groups can create a linked itinerary. The property can easily see

that they are traveling all together and to welcome them as a group.

Confirmations

Confirmations can be created in any format. This will allow the property to incorporate their unique branding on the confirmation page that the guest may print and retain until check-in. Maps and/or directions may be added at the hotel's or guest's discretion. When combined with the Topaz pre-stay welcome e-mailer, the guest will feel warmly received when arriving at the property.

Summary

It is time to rethink the web reservation process. Hotel sites can now reach out to potential guests, allowing any page to display information relevant to the user and gather user information and preferences along the way to dynamically streamline the reservation process.

BookAbility 3™ from Topaz Hotel Services offers a new level of control and customizability to hotel websites. Through the componentization of the booking system elements, the reservation system can now be as unique as the property it represents. Websites can now be tailored to a property's specific markets, gather guests' preferences through the process of browsing the site and offer relevant information based on this intelligence. A new level of hotel website-guest interactivity is available to deploy today. The use of AJAX technology creates an informative, guest-specific experience, drawing the guest more effortlessly to making the hotel reservation.