

Another fine monopoly rules sites on the Internet

August 4 2009, By Ellen Creager

A traveler booking a night at the Ft. Wayne Marriott hotel on Aug. 19-20 may get a surprise when checking prices online.

There are only two possible prices.

[Expedia](#), Orbitz, Priceline, Travelocity and Cheaptickets.com uniformly quote \$149 before taxes.

Hotels.com, Lastminute.com and Marriott.com uniformly quote \$119 before taxes.

Eight sites and just two prices?

Either this is the biggest coincidence since Laurel met Hardy -- or something else is going on here.

Who owns whom?

That something else has nothing to do with the Ft. Wayne Marriott or any specific hotel.

It is a system of sophisticated algorithms that control hotel prices, even on the secondary market of travel Web sites -- the high-low, the profit margin, the supply.

In addition, sites have recently slashed booking fees, cancellation fees

and change fees, narrowing differences in price among rivals and hotels' own Web sites.

But the biggest development is that travel sites keep swallowing one another with the avarice of the Donner party at lunch.

Just four corporations now own most of the major online booking sites.

We're talking major inbreeding, folks.

This is not a complete list of what they own in the world (it would take pages), but here are some highlights:

Expedia Inc.: Owns Expedia.com, Hotels.com, Hotwire.com, Venere.com, TripAdvisor.com _ plus TripAdvisor subsidiaries CruiseCritic.com, BookingBuddy.com, SmarterTravel.com, SeatGuru.com, AirfareWatchdog.com and IndependentTraveler.com.

Orbitz Worldwide: Owns Orbitz.com, CheapTickets.com and RatestoGo.com.

Sabre Holdings Inc.: Owns Travelocity.com, IgoUgo.com, LastMinute.com and the gigantic Sabre reservations system used by the travel industry. Travelocity also powers the search on Yahoo! Travel.

Priceline.com Inc.: Owns Priceline.com, Travelweb.com and Lowestfare.com.

According to June figures from Hitwise, which tracks popularity of travel Web sites, only MapQuest and [Google Maps](#) outrank Expedia, with Travelocity, Priceline, Yahoo! Travel, TripAdvisor, Orbitz, Hotwire and Hotels.com close behind.

But does it really matter which site you use? In my experience, hotel prices vary more with the day, date or occupancy rate of a property rather than which booking site you use.

Sometimes, a site may work a deal with a hotel chain, and you'll see a huge discount. If you are flexible about where to stay, you might tumble into a great deal. Eureka!

But more often, your choice will run the gamut from A to B. Not worth an all-day search to find the best hotel deal in all of Ft. Wayne.

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