

Booking websites edged out travel agents, and that's a bad thing, tourism study says

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The traditional travel agent is a thing of the past. Nowadays, the burden of planning a vacation falls on the consumer.

"Traveler decision support is one area that has become more and more automated and perhaps less and less helpful to a traveler," said Mark Lehto, an industrial engineering professor at Purdue University.

Travel agents and booking websites, however, are only the starting point in a decentralized network of the tourism and hospitality industry, which also includes transportation services, hotels and restaurants. These businesses are moving toward automation to improve efficiency and cut costs, sometimes to the detriment of the consumer.

Research shows, for example, that humans benefit more from interacting with people than with computers, and that human interaction is extremely important to travel experiences, said Xinran Lehto, a professor in the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Purdue.

"It doesn't matter if it's in a hotel, resort, on the road, in an airport or at an attraction site," she said. "The human interaction is part of the product. It's the experience we provide. I question the wisdom of automating away a lot of that."

Drawing from tourism and industrial design perspectives, the Lehtos have proposed a traveler-[wellness](#) centered model under which this web of products and services would operate like a well-oiled machine. The researchers also suggested developing a wellness index for consumers to quickly and conveniently identify personal health benefits at each point along the way.

The recommendations were published in the *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research* as part of its distinguished scholar series.

"How can we translate what we've learned in other settings?" Mark Lehto said. "Much of the work has been done in manufacturing and traditional factory-type jobs, but also more recently, there's been a lot of work in hospitals to try to improve the delivery of services."

Research shows that consumers feel more isolated by technology than ever before and that they seek the restorative qualities of vacation above other considerations, such as price, Xinran Lehto said. The model suggests that the tourism and hospitality industry focus its energy on activities that maximize wellness value to consumers while automating tasks of lesser importance. This approach is similar to improvements made in industrial and health care processes.

"Look at how to reduce wasted time and enhance experience time. Conventional productivity measures may not work well in this regard," Xinran Lehto said. "That's why we were inspired to use existing concepts and engineering principles to explain why we have to be careful in terms of what we do. Don't just blindly utilize something because it reduces time and cost, because in the process, we can throw the baby out with the bath water."

From the outset, travelers are forced to interact with technology as they plan their vacations, not through traditional travel agents, but through booking websites and other reservation systems. These platforms, however, often are oriented around affordability rather than emphasizing health and wellness aspects, such as walkability, physical activities, social interactions and safety.

Due to inadequate information, it's difficult for consumers to make decisions in their health's best interest. As a result, the researchers

proposed developing a ranking for [consumers](#) to quickly and conveniently know what wellness benefits to expect.

"We propose a wellness quality index or ranking," Xinran Lehto said. "Cost is one consideration, but you travel to a place not to save money, per se, but to enrich yourself, to enhance your well-being, to have fun. But the current system really fails to communicate that."

Xinran Lehto said that the tourism and hospitality industry can better serve its customers by emphasizing the health and wellness aspects of vacation each step of the way, leading to a more sustainable business model in the future.

"Vacation, if it's well done, does wonders in terms of restoring people, restoring their mind and empowering them to be more creative," she said. "Vacation is a wellness product, and the support system is extremely important."

More information: Xinran Y. Lehto et al. Vacation as a Public Health Resource: Toward a Wellness-Centered Tourism Design Approach, *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1096348019849684](#)

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