

What's the best way to create a road map? Start with a road trip

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A road warrior without a final destination is simply lost, no matter how fast or far he or she travels. But what if that final destination were to find, rather ironically, a road map?

When I started in this role around one year ago, I set myself the objective of getting round all our major offices and meeting all our major clients. No small feat given our epic scale and geographic diversity.

Since then I have made almost 20 international long haul journeys, including crossing the Atlantic three times, two visits each to Australia, Dubai, Singapore, China and Japan, plus a host of other countries within both Europe and Asia Pacific.

Along the way I've been listening to our customers – who are made up solely of travel agents (contrary to the belief of some, we do not work with consumers in the direct channel and nor do we plan to!) – to find out more about their needs in this rapidly evolving market.

In response to this I have been reflecting – in my role as the Director of all the retail brands that Hotelbeds Group has: Bedsonline, GTA, TravelBound and TravelCube – on what kind of road map can best serve all of our travel agent customers globally.

The first decision related to our technology platform. It made sense for us to operate one technology platform only, not least as customers would benefit most. Due to the fact that Bedsonline had such a strong platform and that the feedback from travel agents was overwhelmingly positive, it seemed the obvious choice. Already we are gradually moving all our travel agent customers onto the platform, region by region.

The second decision stemmed directly from the first and seemed an obvious choice. As a result of gradually shifting everyone onto the Bedsonline platform, region by region we are also moving to one brand identity only, that of Bedsonline.

The third decision also led from the first two and in many cases has already been implemented. As some of you may have recently noticed in the news, we have recently refreshed the Bedsonline brand. This includes an updated website and new imagery. We are currently hosting a series of events globally to update our travel agent customers on our new enhanced offering.

All three of these decisions are about enhancing the offering for our travel agency customers by taking it to the next level. In fact the word 'road' doesn't sufficiently describe the path needed, perhaps better to call it an 'information superhighway' map.

For example, for customers of TravelBound or TravelCube, this means that the number of hotels available to them has now increased from 55,000 up to 170,000. A significant increase, I'm sure you'd agree? Meanwhile we've cherry-picked the best technology functions from across the brands to create one super-charged platform. For example we've improved search parameters such as districts, hotel standards, 'distance from', points of interest, and so on; this allows for filtering functionality, integrating ancillaries and much, much more.

We've also put together a great leadership team for Bedsonline, combining the best talent from across Hotelbeds Group, following Tourico Holidays and GTA joining the Group last year. These

positions have now all been closed and you'll be seeing more news soon in the media confirming more about who is covering each region.

For the coming months we'll be busy supporting customers as they migrate onto the new Bedsonline platform; but after that we'll be busier still helping them to sell more hotels, at higher margins, as well as cross-sell products such as tours and transfers.

And where does the road map lead after that? Look out for more exclusively negotiated prices and content not available elsewhere, more local hotels through partners, greater rewards to thank you for your loyalty, and a continually enhanced service.

Perhaps one of the best things about the travel industry is that the journey never ends – but for sure our journey will involve only and solely travel agents, who for us are the only destination worth visiting.

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