

Technological evolution is changing the way travel and hospitality players identify and acquire new customers. New-age technologies such as internet of things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud are being adopted to deliver a personalised experience to customers. The majority of these players are using analytics to create a strong and loyal customer base for their brands.

Manoj Sharma, Chief Technology Officer, Cleartrip

shares his views on the evolving ICT needs of the sector and future technology trends...

What are the key ICT trends shaping the travel and hospitality industry?

ICT is helping us reach out to our customers and provide them the desired services or information. We reach out to them on the channel and location of their choice. When travelling, customers seek information regarding their flight status and the activities to be explored in the city they touched down at to plan their trip accordingly. Customers want to be notified about new services on their desired channel or application, namely, SMS, e-mail, and WhatsApp, rather than checking for service details themselves. There are consumers who are interested in receiving notifications over voice communication.

What are the technology solutions that your company is deploying?

Currently, we are using SMS, email, WhatsApp and voice services. SMS and e-mail are the traditional methods to reach customers. We are also catering to an audience that prefers WhatsApp (this is a new growth area for us) over traditional services. By using these communication channels to reach customers, we are able to reduce the support required. We are able to engage better with our customers through WhatsApp, which enables us to provide a lot of other related services.

How are technologies such as AI, IoT, cloud and blockchain transforming the travel and hospitality industry? What is your future roadmap for their deployment?

This is by far an interesting area for our industry. We are already witnessing a proliferation of cutting-edge technologies such as machine learning, AI, cloud, IoT and big data in the industry. These help us in understanding our customers better and crafting hyper-personalised services. When people travel, they have specific preferences or priorities, and Cleartrip caters to such travel preferences in a meaningful way. With machine learning and AI, we are able to better

understand customer behaviour over a period of time, and create unique content and solutions. Technology innovations should help in reducing the time taken for meeting various business requirements. The better we understand the consumers, the better we will be able to offer unique services and content. This will be a win-win situation as customers are happy and it gives us a chance to engage with them more deeply. It increases the chances of customers choosing our platform for future bookings.

IoT and voice are also interesting components. In addition, we are experimenting with machine learning solutions. We are finding ways to assess travellers' profiles. Simply put, how committed they are while booking, and if we can offer them a discount or incentive to convert their intent into a transaction with us. As of now, this experiment has increased our conversion rate.

IoT helps us in communicating with our customers like informing them when their luggage is available on the conveyor belt. Voice is the leading technology and Cleartrip is in the early phase of its deployment, and is leveraging various voice platforms currently. Voice technology will bring in a new set of customers to our platform who otherwise are not very tech savvy and find it challenging to navigate desktops and mobile platforms. We need to assess the service first in English and eventually in other vernacular languages. There are other solutions in the pipeline. We are striving to remain relevant with our customers because they are central to our business.

What are the key challenges faced in deploying these technologies?

There is no major challenge as such. It is the usual support needed to back the existing technologies such as maintenance and upgrade. We have a strong and experienced team to support and maintain these technologies. Most of the solutions, whether in-house or outsourced, are deployed on the cloud. This means that the upgrade and maintenance are done automatically without much interference from a specific person. Cloud comes with an inbuilt ability to scale quickly.

What are the key technology trends that are expected to shape the future of the travel and hospitality industry?

AI-driven solutions, including machine learning, are the key technology trends driving maximum

investment. Another trend would be voice services, and I feel they will be the most promising solutions. Payment solutions will also be an exciting trend that will shape the future of the travel and hospitality industry.

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