Optimizing Your Hotel’s Online Distribution Strategy
Index

Introduction 3
What Is Online Distribution Strategy? 5
OTAs vs. Direct Bookings 10
Pricing Strategy 17
Managing Reviews on Distribution Channels 23
Case Study: Pure Salt Luxury Hotels 28
Introduction
Introduction

Hotels have virtually unlimited options when it comes to distribution channels, but with a finite number of rooms to sell and limited resources available, you must be careful about choosing channels that will deliver the highest profits for your property.

While costs can vary by channel, overall distribution costs—the fees hotels pay to market and sell rooms—have climbed significantly in recent years, often at a faster pace than rooms revenue. This has resulted in lower profits for hotels.

Until recently, the impact of this trend has been partly obscured by relatively strong demand for hotel rooms. But in many regions of the world the hotel industry is experiencing or forecasting a downturn in demand driven by economic uncertainty, reduced travel, increases in supply, and new competitors like Airbnb.

To maintain or increase profitability, hotels will need to find ways to reduce costs, increase market share, and implement a smart distribution strategy that reflects today’s market conditions.

In this guide we discuss how to take a focused, strategic approach to online distribution. We’ll show you how to develop a distribution strategy, choose channels, manage OTA business, increase direct bookings, manage reviews and measure results. And we’ll look at how one hotel company is reaping the benefits of a smart distribution strategy.
What Is Online Distribution Strategy?
Online distribution strategy is a hotel’s plan of action for selling rooms on digital channels to maximize profits and advance financial objectives.

A hotel’s financial objectives are laid out in the annual budget and typically include yearly and monthly targets for total revenue, rooms revenue, average rate, occupancy and RevPAR. The budget also specifies the amount of money allocated for achieving these objectives through marketing, revenue management and distribution activities.

Strategy is defined as the actions the hotel takes to achieve its objectives, whereas distribution is the channels on which a hotel chooses to list room inventory for sale. To optimize is to make distribution as efficient and profitable as possible.
Distribution Channels

Distribution channels can be online or offline. Offline channels include voice reservations, walk-ins, groups, wholesale/tour business, and the GDS (travel agent and managed corporate business).

In this guide we focus on online or web-based distribution channels, which can be divided into two main types: direct and indirect. A direct online booking is a reservation that is made by a traveler directly with a hotel without using an intermediary. Direct online channels include the hotel’s website, mobile app and, if applicable, affiliated brand or group website or app. For direct bookings, no commissions are paid by the hotel to an intermediary. However, the hotel may pay a booking engine fee, brand fee, pay-per-click fees or other related fees.

An indirect booking is a reservation made by a traveler through an intermediary website. The hotel pays the intermediary a fee for completing the transaction, typically in the form of a commission or percentage of the room rate. Indirect channels include OTAs like Expedia, Booking and their affiliates and assisted booking channels like TripAdvisor’s Instant Booking and Book on Google.

Metasearch channels like Kayak, Trivago, Google Hotel Ads, TripConnect and Skyscanner act as an intermediary but refer bookings to hotels and OTAs for completion, charging a pay-per-click fee for doing so. However, some metasearch channels also process bookings and charge a commission for doing so, which makes them a source of both direct and indirect bookings.
A hotel’s distribution mix refers to the breakdown of bookings or revenue among its booking channels or market segments. Typically, a hotel establishes targets for each segment and tracks weekly, monthly and annual performance. While the optimal distribution mix can vary by hotel, most hotels strive for a diverse mix to avoid becoming overly dependent on any given segment or channel.

Every year Phocuswright surveys U.S. travelers on hotel room purchase behavior, and the results have been fairly consistent over the past five years. (See graph.) In 2015, 34 percent of respondents said they typically booked through an online travel agency, up four points from the previous year, and 23 percent said they purchased through the hotel website, down 4 points from the previous year. Metasearch remained flat, at 10 percent, and calling the supplier climbed slightly, to 18 percent. Note that this data applies to American travelers only; OTAs are generally more popular in Europe and other regions of the world.
Satisfied with Your Distribution Mix?

During the ReviewPro webinar, Optimizing Your Hotel’s Online Distribution Strategy, we polled attendees on their distribution challenges. To our surprise, only 7 percent of respondents said they were satisfied with their current distribution strategy. See the results below. How does your hotel measure up?

Which of the following applies to your hotel/hotel group?

(Check all that apply.)

- We’re happy with our current distribution strategy: 7%
- Marketing/acquisition costs too high: 22%
- Need a more focused distribution strategy: 36%
- Too dependent on OTAs: 47%
- Not enough direct bookings: 64%
OTAs vs. Direct Bookings
OTAs vs. Direct Bookings

Are OTAs a friend or enemy of hotels? You’ll find a diverse range of opinions among hotel experts on this topic. The general consensus, however, is that OTAs should be regarded as important distribution partners but must also be managed carefully.

An over-dependence on OTA business can impede your hotel’s ability to maximize profits, can lead to a price-driven revenue strategy, and can make you vulnerable to changes in market conditions.

During Duetto’s Revenue Strategy Forum in late 2016, Peter O’Connor, Dean of Academic Programs at ESSEC Business School, argued that the perception that online travel agents are ‘horrendously expensive’ is false and that OTAs should be embraced by hoteliers (The Caterer, 2016.). O’Connor conducted research which found that OTA commissions are often cheaper than direct-booking costs when all marketing and distribution expenditures are taken into account.

In a follow-up article on Tnooz, O’Connor went as far as to describe OTAs as a “steal of a deal” for hotels. His viewpoint is hotly contested by many people in the industry. (See the Comments section of the article). At the very least, it highlights the importance of monitoring, comparing and controlling costs among distribution channels.
Another controversial topic in the hotel industry is the so-called billboard effect. A 2009 Cornell University study found that a significant number of travelers discovered a hotel on an OTA and then booked directly with the hotel. The study found that the incremental reservations generated from listing on Expedia (without including the reservations made via Expedia) were as high as 26 percent. (Cornell School of Hotel Administration, 2009.)

More recent research has called the theory into question, however. “We have declared the billboard effect to be dead,” said Cindy Estis Green, CEO and co-founder of Kalibri Labs, during a 2016 ReviewPro webinar. She cited a study from her company that found that only 7 percent of consumers visited an OTA and then booked the hotel directly. (ReviewPro, 2016.)

And yet the debate continues, with a new study published by Cornell this year declaring that the billboard effect is “alive and well.” (Cornell, 2017.)
OTAs vs. Direct Bookings

Disagreements aside, it’s a known fact that OTAs are a key part of trip planning for travelers. In a ReviewPro webinar late last year, Simone Puorto of WIHP pointed out that “OTAs are often the first contact the guest will have with your hotel. Even if they do not convert, they play a role in the booking journey.” (ReviewPro, 2017.)

In other words, although it may sound counterintuitive, OTAs can actually drive direct bookings by reaching travelers who might otherwise never know about the hotel. But exactly how much direct business remains in question.

One thing is certain: OTAs are an important source of indirect bookings, and few hotels can afford to work without them. However, not all OTA relationships are equal in value. Hotels must carefully manage inventory, positioning, rates and commission on each OTA channel to ensure that the relationship is serving their needs.
Direct Bookings: a Top Priority

If costs are managed effectively, direct bookings should be a hotel’s most profitable channel. Consider the following strategies for increasing direct bookings for your hotel.

• **Set direct-booking objectives.** How much revenue do you want from direct bookings, and how much through OTAs? Set attainable goals, and measure progress over time.

• **Educate and recognize staff.** Ensure that front desk and reservations staff are informed of your objectives and understand the value of direct bookings. Offer incentives to staff for achieving direct-booking objectives.

• **Search engine marketing (SEM).** Experiment with paid options like cost-per-click and display advertising on search engines to drive qualified traffic to your website.

• **Optimize your website.** Ensure that your website and booking engine are user friendly, mobile friendly and search engine friendly to ensure that you never lose an opportunity to attract, engage and convert travelers.

• **SEO and content marketing.** Drive traffic to your website by optimizing content for search and maintaining quality imagery and descriptions. Post information about local activities, attractions and upcoming events to help travelers plan their trip.

• **Book-direct campaigns.** You can work around OTA rate parity agreements by offering lower rates and incentives for direct bookings through private channels such as your CRM database, email subscribers and social media followers.
Direct Bookings: a Top Priority

• **Offer a best-rate guarantee.** Advertise a best-rate guarantee and direct-booking incentives prominently on your website. “Providing a lower rate that is not found on the hotel website and not promoted by the hotel is counterproductive because it trains the traveling public that they can always find a lower rate on OTAs,” says Max Starkov, CEO of HeBS Digital. “Teach travelers that they will receive comparable rates and perks if they book direct.” (ReviewPro, 2016.)

• **Offer a better deal for direct bookings.** Consider going beyond rate matching to offering a lower rate for direct bookings. “Travelers should know that no matter the season or day, if they book direct they will receive a lower price, value-added offer or enhanced service,” says Patrick Bosworth, CEO of Duetto. “As long as the customer is recognized, this does not break parity agreements.” (HotelNewsNow, 2014.)

• **Take control of inventory.** According to Pablo Delgado, CEO of Mirai, it’s virtually impossible for hotels to compete against OTAs in terms of investment, technology, visibility and brand awareness, so the best strategy is to manage inventory appropriately. “Hotels must understand that there is only one thing they have that distributors don’t: the rooms,” he writes. “They must decide where and at what price they are going to sell rooms on each of the channels, burying the mantra of ‘inventory and rate parity’ once and for all.” (Mirai, 2017.)

• **Recognize repeat guests.** Hoteliers tend to obsess over chasing new guests, often to the neglect of return guests, even though return guests are more profitable. Give your guests good reasons to come back and book direct. You don’t need a loyalty program to recognize repeat business and milestone stays with discounts, upgrades, personalized notes, welcome amenities, late checkouts and other perks.

• **Monitor direct distribution costs.** Again, be sure to calculate and compare the costs of acquisition on each channel, as well as the value of the guests generated in terms of rate, length of stay, total spend and profitability. When you determine where your greatest profits are, allocate more resources to that channel.
Distribution Tools

There are many tools available to help hoteliers understand market conditions and competitor activity, manage rates and inventory, collect and analyze data, and increase efficiency. These include:

• **Basic tools:** PMS, Excel and Google Analytics.

• **Revenue management tools:** to manage rates and inventory, analyze performance, and set flexible pricing strategies for multiple segments. (E.g., Duetto.)

• **Channel management tools:** to manage inventory, availability and rates on multiple channels. (E.g., SiteMinder, GuestCentric.)

• **Reputation management tools:** to collect, score and analyze guest reviews and ratings across distribution channels. (E.g., ReviewPro.)

• **Market intelligence reports:** to compare performance against competitors and the local market. (E.g., STR, TravelClick, OTA Insights.)
Pricing Strategy

A critical part of distribution strategy is pricing. Is your hotel listing the right rates at the right time on the right distribution channels? If your rates do not vary according to market segment, channel and demand, you are missing opportunities. To attract and convert hotel room shoppers, you must optimize rates on each distribution channel.

“Not only has distribution changed, but the technology hoteliers use to manage distribution has changed too,” said Dan Yacker, vice president of global strategic alliances at Duetto, during the ReviewPro webinar. “By using proper segmentation, connecting to OTAs, and having a keen eye on each channel, you will bring more profits to your hotel and manage distribution effectively.”
7 Common Pricing Mistakes

During the webinar, Yacker identified seven common mistakes in hotel pricing and explained why they should be avoided.

1. **Selling out too soon.** You may think your job is done as soon as your hotel is sold out, but if you sell out before the day of arrival you have left money on the table, said Yacker. “Sound revenue strategy means being able to sell at least one room at the last minute to travelers who are willing to pay a high rate.”

2. **Not changing rates.** If your room rates are always the same, no matter the day, time of year or amount of business on the books, you’re missing revenue opportunities. To maximize RevPAR and NetRevPAR, Yacker said, hotels should pay close attention to demand for rooms in each segment and change pricing according to demand. Rates should change to reflect supply and demand, ideally maintaining a steady pace of bookings leading up to the day of arrival.

3. **Pricing by “gut feel”**. If you rely solely on intuition, you’re bound to make mistakes and miss revenue opportunities. Hunches must be supported (or disproved) by actual data and analysis. Take into account historical data, pace of bookings and competitive information. When your gut is telling you something, take a deep breath and pause, look at the data, and then adjust your pricing accordingly.

4. **Reacting to sudden price changes from the competition.** Shopping competitor rates and activity is important, but competitor behavior shouldn’t dictate everything, said Yacker. If a competitor increases or drops rates without an obvious reason, they may have internal reasons for doing so. Blindly following competitors can get you into revenue trouble. Pay attention to the competition, but don’t follow their every move.
5. **Selling rooms on a first-come, first-serve basis.** If you take reservations as they come, you’re probably leaving a traveler who books one night on Expedia isn’t as profitable as a traveler who calls your hotel directly and stays for three nights. “If you close certain lower-cost channels like online travel agencies during higher demand periods, you may miss out on travelers who are shopping only on that channel and don’t see availability at your hotel,” said Yacker. Rather than take rooms on a first-come, first-serve basis, put restrictions in place.

6. **Linking different price points together.** The more frequently you change your rates based on supply and demand, the more revenue you can capture. It’s important to offer a variety of rates and price points and to have your hotel available for booking on any and all channels where consumers may be shopping, he said.

7. **Shutting down price points at the end of the day.** If at 6:00 p.m. you call it a day and hand over any pricing decisions to front desk staff, or worse yet, to no one at all, you’re missing out on revenue opportunities. Revenue management is a 24-hour job, and that’s especially true of pricing. “At Duetto we think it’s better to have your hotel out there so that travel shoppers see it and can book it at a much higher rate rather than closing out your hotel completely,” said Yacker.
Flexible Pricing

Yacker also emphasized the importance of flexible pricing, also referred to as dynamic pricing. Traditionally, hotels use BAR or Best Available Rate pricing strategy. If the BAR rises, all other rates rise in unison: standard rooms, deluxe rooms, suites, etc.

A better alternative is dynamic pricing, which allows each segment to be priced independently without a predetermined and fixed connection to the BAR. “Rather than pin all pricing to the BAR rate, all rates can be independent of one another. They don’t have to go up and down together,” Yacker explained.

“If you close off a channel or date, the person sees that your hotel is sold out. Why not leave it open? Shrink the discount—or offer no discount,” he said. “This puts the decision power in the guest’s hands rather than shutting off bookings completely.”

As an example, Yacker cited a hotel that closes a conference rate because occupancy is high, thereby closing out delegates who are willing to pay a much higher rate for the convenience of staying at the conference hotel.
Deeper Segmentation, Better Pricing

Yacker also recommended that hotels finetune revenue strategy to take advantage of different, finer segments rather than the usual broad segments. “What if you could price every channel, segment and room type independently?” he said. For example, hotels can divide the retail segment into subcategories, each of which may have varying levels of demand, and set prices for each subcategory that are not tied to each other.

A simple example is a hotel that charges a $25 premium for rooms with king beds throughout the week even though demand for this type of room is softer on weekends, when more families are in house. To maximize revenue, the hotel should charge a premium for king-bedded rooms on weekdays and a premium for double-bedded rooms on weekends.

Dynamic pricing and deeper segmentation requires more work from revenue managers, but the incremental revenues should justify the effort. Advances in revenue management technology facilitate these processes and help hotels drive high returns on investment.

For more information about pricing strategy and revenue management technology, check out Duetto’s whitepaper, Pricing Mistakes You Can’t Afford to Make.
Managing Reviews on Distribution Channels
Managing Reviews on Channels

Given that so many travelers discover hotels on OTAs, metasearch channels and review sites, it’s not enough to manage pricing and positioning on these channels. You need to manage guest reviews of your hotel too.

Creating Demand Through Reputation

During the webinar, Josiah Mackenzie, vice president of business development at ReviewPro, cited research that demonstrates the relationship between reputation and revenue. “Reputation allows you to differentiate your hotel in the eyes of consumers and to benefit from that differentiation,” he said. “Focusing on reputation as a differentiating factor will boost pricing power and demand and will protect rates in event of a downturn in the economy.”

For example, if two hotels in a market offer comparable value propositions, including similar amenities, services and price offerings, the hotel that has stronger guest reviews will naturally experience higher demand.

Evaluation Reputation Across the Web

Mackenzie emphasized the importance of understanding your hotel’s ratings across review sources and monitoring how they change over time. “Channel by channel, it’s important to keep an eye on how you rank against competitors,” he said. “Potential guests compare reviews and ratings as they shop around for hotels. It also helps you identify where you need to improve.”

By tracking reviews on all channels, you can gain a better understanding of the unique needs and expectations of different cultures, he explained. For example, Ctrip reviews will help you understand the needs of Chinese travelers and adapt your offers and services to appeal to this market segment.
"ReviewPro provides hotels with detailed reputation performance data and trends across all major OTAs and review sites in key areas such as Average Rating, Ranking, % Recommended, Review Volume and Management Responses," said Mackenzie. "Our department indexes provide guidance on how you should present your hotel and marketing messages to individual segments."

**Better Understand Key Segments**

"Savvy revenue managers focus on better understanding their customer segments to optimize revenue strategies," said Mackenzie. Review analysis can help you understand guest satisfaction and trends by segment—for your hotel and for your competitors."
Managing Reviews on Channels

ReviewPro breaks data into segments like trip types and country of origin to help hotels understand who are their happiest guests and which travel shoppers are most likely to convert into bookings. Mackenzie recommended using the information to understand guest sentiment in each segment and to benchmark against competitors to understand where improvements are needed.

Analyze and Improve Responses
By responding to reviews on OTAs, you can positively influence the behavior and impressions of both previous and potential guests. In a TripAdvisor survey, 65% of respondents agreed that they are more likely to book a hotel that responds to traveler reviews versus one that does not respond. (TripAdvisor, 2015.)

In addition to forming a critical part of guest service, responding also impacts revenue performance because negative reviews can scare away potential guests,” Mackenzie said. “If you receive a bad review, you need to be notified of it right away so you can respond promptly, address the issues raised, and assure other travelers that the same thing won’t happen to them.”

To stay focused, Mackenzie recommended setting objectives for response times and the ratio of reviews to responses. “Most travelers don’t look beyond the ten most recent reviews,” he said. “The faster you respond, the better your chances of converting them. Focus on responding as quickly as possible to the most relevant reviews. And track response ratio and time-to-response across the different sites for your hotel and competitors.”
Managing Reviews on Channels

Focus on Review Collection
Once you have put into place systems and procedures for listening and responding, the next step is to accelerate the volume of reviews. One effective way to do so is to invite guests who complete post-stay surveys to share their comments on a review site. “ReviewPro is an official review collection partner of TripAdvisor, Google and HolidayCheck,” Mackenzie said. “Our clients who add this option to post-stay surveys are seeing great results.”

Use Reviews to Boost Conversion Rates
Another way to increase review volume—and to increase conversions of direct bookings at the same time—is to feature guest reviews on your website. “Consumers trust other consumers more than any other info source,” Mackenzie said. “Putting reviews directly on your website can be a great way to boost bookings and conversions.”

He pointed out that OTAs do this successfully, so why not do it on your own site? “The idea is to give guests all the info they need to make the booking on your site so they don’t have to leave to check consumer reviews elsewhere.”

Mackenzie concluded the webinar by reminding listeners about the most important element to an effective online distribution strategy. “Positive guest experiences and rave reviews drive success on all types of distribution channels, online and offline,” he said.
Case Study: Pure Salt Luxury Hotels
Case Study: Pure Salt Luxury Hotels

Now let’s look at a small hotel group that has applied the principles and practices outlined in this guide and is enjoying phenomenal results. Pure Salt Luxury Hotels is a new luxury brand from family-operated Mac Hotels, with two stylish and contemporary five-star hotels in Mallorca, Spain: Pure Salt Garonda and Pure Salt Port Adriano.

Setting Distribution Objectives

During the webinar, Ricardo Samaan, revenue manager, explained why his company set out to change its distribution mix two years ago. “Here in Mallorca there is still a lot of dependence on tour operators, with fixed rates for the season and high allotments contracted,” he said. Because this business is generally less profitable, “Our main objectives were to reduce dependence on tour operators and to move this business into OTAs and direct bookings.”
Case Study: Pure Salt Luxury Hotels

Distribution Strategies

To achieve these objectives, Samaan and his team undertook the following strategies:

• **Refurbishment and rebranding of properties.** The new design is stylish and luxurious, and the properties were rebranded to Pure Salt Luxury Hotels. “This helped us break away from tour operators, reduce contracts and move business to OTAs and direct bookings,” Samaan said.

• **Updated inventory and rates.** “We needed a system that allows us to constantly update inventory and move rates up and down according to demand,” he explained.

• **Customer behavior analysis.** “Rather than hire an outside company, we performed an analysis internally based on historical data,” said Samaan.
Case Study: Pure Salt Luxury Hotels

- **New website and booking engine.** The company commissioned the development of a new website and booking engine that focused on driving direct bookings and highlighted the advantages of booking direct. “The new design features lots of color, bright, big pictures and information relevant to target customers,” Samaan said. “It also allows us to feature specific packages and offers based on visitor behavior, retarget visitors and display messages to create a sense of urgency similar to OTA messaging. Return visitors can pick up their reservation search where they left off.”

- **Inbound marketing and content marketing strategy.** A popular feature of the new website is the blog, which promotes the Mallorca experience and offers recommendations on places to visit, dine and indulge in everything the island has to offer.

- **CRM marketing.** The company regularly mines its database to send customized offers to attract repeat guests.

- **Multi-channel campaigns.** Activities include newsletters, social media and paid search.

- **Increased loyalty.** "All initiatives were focused on engaging our customers and encouraging them to book direct through the website," Samaan said.
Case Study: Pure Salt Luxury Hotels

Distribution Tools
To help advance its distribution objectives, Pure Salt Luxury Hotels employed the following tools:

• **The PMS**: to extract data and make decisions based on pick-up, historical performance, etc.

• **A channel manager (RateGain)**: to manage rates and availability across OTAs, measure the costs of each channel, and closer lower-profit channels when demand is high.

• **A rate shopping tool (OTA Insight)**: to monitor competitor rates in real-time as well as rate parity among OTAs.

• **An online reputation management tool (ReviewPro)**: to monitor online reviews and ratings and improve performance. "Higher scores help increase ADR," Samaan said. The company also uses semantic analysis to find user content in reviews and feature it as part of its marketing messaging.

• **Website and booking engine (HeBS Digital and Avvio)**: to drive direct bookings and lower distribution costs.

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Dynamic Pricing

Samaan said that dynamic pricing practices form a key part of his company’s distribution strategy. “We don’t have a revenue management system, but we do our best,” he said. “We have a classic BAR rates structure, but with the flexibility to raise rates where possible and reach more potential guests.

“Each guest has a price. It’s important to understand traveler behavior so we can offer the right price at the right time through the right channel. We monitor demand closely and adjust rates as appropriate.”

Samaan added that his team keeps a close eye on results, collects as much relevant data as possible, and uses the data to guide future pricing strategies.
Case Study: Pure Salt Luxury Hotels

### Results

In the two-year period following the launch of the new strategy, the company managed to reduce tour operator business from 54 percent to 22 percent and to shift it to OTA business and direct business. OTA business increased from 21 percent to 49 percent and web direct business increased from 10 percent to 17 percent.

“Overall, the most important change was that we were able to increase the average daily rate by 40 percent,” said Samaan. “Going forward, one of our key objectives for this year is to increase direct bookings to 25 percent.”

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**AVERAGE DAILY RATE (ADR) +40%**
Case Study: Pure Salt Luxury Hotels

Samaan’s Top Tips

Here Samaan shares his top tips for optimizing distribution strategy:

1. Know your guests’ behavior, including nationalities and the channels they use.

2. Involve all staff in revenue management and distribution strategies. Let them know what you’re doing, why you’re doing it, and why it’s important for guests to book direct.

3. Control your inventory. Know where your rooms are being sold and at what prices.

4. Be friendly with OTAs – but not too friendly. You need OTAs to drive business, but if your strategy is to increase direct bookings, at some point you’ll be competing with them for the same room. You should have good relationships with OTAs, but never forget that they are competitors too.

5. Maintain a high quality, high performance website. A good website converts shoppers to guests and drives direct bookings.
About Us

ReviewPro is the leading provider of Guest Intelligence solutions to independent hotel brands worldwide.

The company’s suite of cloud-based solutions includes Online Reputation Management (ORM), Guest Satisfaction Surveys (GSS) and Auto Case Management which enable clients to obtain a deeper understanding of reputation performance as well as operational/service strengths and weaknesses. Leveraging Guest Intelligence effectively allows clients to increase guest satisfaction, rankings on review sites/OTAs and revenue.

The company offers the industry-standard Global Review Index™ (GRI), an online reputation score, which is used by thousands of hotels worldwide as a benchmark for reputation management efforts, based on review data collected from more than 175 online travel agencies (OTAs) and review sites in more than 45 languages. +35,000 hotel brands worldwide are currently using ReviewPro’s solutions.

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