

SETTING SAIL WITH TRAVELOCITY: CREATING A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC CRUISE EXPERIENCE

A conversation with Joanne Kok

Intro: This past summer, Keynote released its Customer Experience Rankings for the online cruise industry. In this intensely competitive segment of the online travel industry, Travelocity was a top performer in a number of key experience metrics. Benchmark recently caught up with Joanne Kok, Travelocity's principal for customer research, usability and insight, to learn some of the ways Travelocity creates a ship-shape customer experience.

Benchmark: Travelocity was ranked number one in customer support in the most recent Keynote Customer Experience Rankings for the online cruise industry. Can you share some of your secrets for keeping your customers so satisfied?

Joanne Kok: Customer support is one of the areas we've chosen to differentiate ourselves from a lot of the other online travel agencies. We want to champion the customer and their interest and their needs, and providing that outstanding support is a way to do it. We have very big focus on that.

Benchmark: So how do you figure out exactly what it is your customers' need and want?



The interactive destination map allows prospects to simply point and click to get a listing of all cruises in a particular region, complete with area info and travel tips.

Joanne Kok: We look at a combination of consumer research and our call center feedback. Making use of those listening posts is really where we've been able to leverage those insights, those learning's, and try to translate them into what you see on the Web site so that we can, hopefully, answer questions or avert some concerns before they actually occur.

It's really about listening to the customer, taking the information to heart, translating it into our site design and content, and then going back and testing. Then once we launch it, we check to see how it responded — whether it makes a difference.

There's this continuous feedback loop so that we can continuously update the site with the information that customers need at different points in time.

Benchmark: That's a lot of customer input to process. How do you manage and prioritize it all?

Joanne Kok: Given the volume of business and the volume of feedback — sometimes the information can be very overwhelming. We are putting technologies in place so that we're a lot smarter about thinking and channeling all that customer feedback. We have a significant investment in our incident management system so that, whether someone is emailing a request to us or they're calling in, we can see the kind of questions that they have, respond to them, track what's going on, implement a change, and then track the progress.

The other thing that we're investing in is text mining, because there's a lot of open-ended feedback that comes in, and we want to be able to aggregate it in a way that we can action, whether it's in site design or whether it's to do with how we interact with our partners.

Benchmark: One of the big hot buttons in the Keynote Customer Experience Rankings was the task of booking activities. The cruise lines themselves virtually own this ranking, overshadowing Travelocity and the other online travel agencies. What do you think is behind that, and what are you doing to fix it?

Joanne Kok: It's just content that the cruise lines have traditionally been very strong in. Today, they are the ones who either have the direct partnerships, or the activities are happening on their ship. It's their content and it makes it a lot easier for them to be able to

leverage that, and highlight it a lot better than we can.

That said, what tends to happen on Travelocity is you do your research, and after you've booked your cruise, you make a reservation, you get the confirmation, and then the very next thing that happens is that the customer actually gets pointed to the cruise line site. They have to fill out registration forms and all those kinds of things. And so they have the opportunity to book their activities then, regardless of whether they book the cruise itself on us or whether they book on the cruise line site.

It's going to happen naturally in the process — it's a fairly natural flow as it is.

Benchmark: Activity booking aside, it's obviously a very competitive marketplace. What are the biggest challenges to keeping your high standing in the minds of consumers?

Joanne Kok: Keeping up with their expectations! As more and more companies, whether they are online travel agencies like us or cruise lines, are moving online, consumers start to expect more, because they start to see more out there.

And then, you know, we have the cruise lines to work with as well. They also go through different changes. How we work to support their strategy, that's where we're constantly evolving.

These are some of the things that make it a challenge, always. Anything online — the pace is very quick, nothing quite stays the same. So it's just keeping up all the time with where else our consumer's coming from and what the cruise lines are coming up with as well — just keeping up with it all is basically where our challenge lies.

Benchmark: Can you give any examples of how consumer expectations have changed recently and how Travelocity has responded?

Joanne Kok: I think one really good example is multimedia content. It used to be that *people* didn't think too much about it. You have a listing — and this is across the industries — you list the price, you list some descriptions, you know, that was it.

Then people start to think, well, what's the next logical step? Well, I want to see what this place looks like, and what the ship looks like. So then pictures start to make their way online. And as more and more people started having broadband access, we started introducing even more things.

We were one of the first to introduce what we've trademarked as our Intelli-Deck™ tool, where you can actually look at the ship plan and roll your mouse over each room, and you can see inside the rooms, where they are in the ship, what kind of rooms to expect.

One of the areas that we're also looking at is user-generated

content. More and more people are becoming familiar with the idea of using reviews for hotels, and it's a very similar application for cruise lines.



Travelocity's Intelli-Deck™ feature is a Web 2.0 technology that lets users roll over any room that interests them and see a pop-out photo of the room and location; the feature also shows public areas with photos.

And we monitor things like error rates very closely, and do ongoing

We've also started looking at the more experiential elements of different destinations with our "experience finder" product, to give people a good sense of what to expect when they get there. And I can very easily see, if the opportunity and the resources and the investment is justified, that we can move more and more in the direction where we again bring more and more of that media, of that experiential aspect of cruising to the forefront.

Benchmark: Let's talk a bit more about how you actually accumulate data on your customers and understand the type of experience they are having on your site. What types of research do you do, and how do you structure it?

Joanne Kok: There's definitely a distinction between the creation stage of the process versus when it's actually been launched. We do fairly extensive usability research to make sure that the site addresses the consumer's needs, and that it does what we want it to do as a business. We go through both in-person testing, and we make use of Keynote as well for some of that testing to make sure that we're on the right track and we're getting people through the process the way we

Once we get past that and develop and launch it, then we have different kinds of monitoring that we do — sort of the very basic baseline kind of monitoring, making sure that the system is up, making sure that people are not running into errors, all the kinds of things that any online business has to do.

And we monitor things like error rates very closely, and do ongoing

path analysis to make sure that people are getting through the process — if they're dropping off, where they're dropping off, and monitoring conversion every step of the way.



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“Explore by” is a functionality added by Travelocity in the past year to help cruise prospects narrow their search and get quickly to the cruises that most closely meet their requirements.

Benchmark: Clearly you have the pulse of your customer. But how do you keep on top of industry trends? How do you take the competitive pulse?

Joanne Kok: We tend to focus more on our direct competitors, and sometimes there are lots of other interesting things that are going on. We rely heavily on syndicated research, like Keynote, in order to give us a sense of where trends are, where consumer expectations are, how our competitors are doing, some of the things that they are doing to kind of change the rules of the game.

It's nice to be able to have that benchmark to go back to again and again and see how we've done over time and where the market and consumer expectations are going.

Keynote has a lot of good perspective across different industries. So I push them a lot to say, okay, we're in travel, but what are the really interesting things that some other retailers or other parts of e-commerce are doing that we can learn from and leverage?

Benchmark: So what are some of the trends you're watching?

What new things can we expect to see on Travelocity?

Joanne Kok: Well, there's always a delicate balance between learning about something, keeping an eye on it and making sure whatever we're doing strategically takes everything into account versus dropping everything and pursuing something at once.

We like to make sure we get a complete understanding and have a really good idea of what a particular trend will do for us not only in the next year, but also much further down the road.

Benchmark: So no sweeping changes coming up? Just ongoing incremental improvements?

Joanne Kok: Yes, because the reality of the situation is we have a large and complex site, and when you overhaul or do anything dramatically different, there's a cost associated with it. We want to be smart to make sure that we're investing accordingly.

It seems like a very general statement to say, but I think just about everything we do is in response to the customer either because they have voiced a need that hasn't been fulfilled before, or a process is in place today that isn't working as well as we'd like. And so we're always incorporating that into our design.



Joanne Kok

Joanne Kok has been at Travelocity, an online travel retailer, since 2001. At Travelocity, Joanne began in Enterprise Business Intelligence and then worked towards her current role leading the Consumer Research, Insight and Usability group. Her team is responsible for all secondary and primary research efforts in supporting strategy, brand and new product development; customer satisfaction measurement; communications and user interface design.

Prior to joining Travelocity, Joanne was a Strategic Services analyst at Brann Forbes, a direct marketing agency, where she worked on designing, implementing and evaluating various promotional programs for quick service restaurant accounts such as Pizza Hut, Popeye's and Schlotzsky's Deli.

Joanne received her Bachelor's degree in Operations Management and Marketing at the University of Alberta and her Master's of Science in Marketing Research at the University of Texas at Arlington. She and her husband Jeremy live just outside Dallas, Texas and are avid travelers who are working on visiting every continent, next stop — Chile, South America.