

**Monthly Myth Buster:**  
**All online booking engines are the same.**

One of the common myths about online booking engines is that they are all the same or that they all convert at the same rate. This assumption is false in a number of ways. With more and more people securing reservations online (as many as 37-38% of all hotel reservations will be made online in 2008), it becomes clear that travel consumers are very comfortable making reservations in this manner. They are also put at ease when they encounter booking engines that are similar to ones they have previously used.

By far, the most common and most utilized type of travel booking engine is the **multi-step model**. Travel websites such as Expedia, Orbitz, and Travelocity all feature some variation of this type of booking engine. Typically, at step one in the reservation process, the consumer inputs the travel dates, the desired location, and most wanted travel components (hotel, car, etc.). At step two, the list of available rooms, etc. is displayed. At step three, packages and other add on items are usually presented. Finally, step four is where the customer enters billing and contact information. **The reason why large travel websites utilize the multi-step reservation booking engine model is to not overwhelm potential buyers with too much information in one location. This standard also creates a similar buying environment to what is typically found on the Internet.** According to Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMAI), *"The multi-step (4 or 5 steps) booking process has become the norm in the industry. For more than 11 years, North Americans have been using this process to book online."*

In recent years a new type of booking engine has emerged. The one-step booking engine has become popular with some hoteliers and boutique properties. Certainly, the one-step booking engines look appealing. However, they often result in lower conversion rates over traditional multi-step booking engines. The problems are numerous:

- Layouts are often confusing. Users often wonder, "Where do I begin? How to I finish?"
- Too much information is clustered in small areas.
- Images are small and users must scroll to see room descriptions.
- Internet browsers, Fortune 500 company firewalls, etc. sometimes block flash booking engines.
- It is difficult to track revenue, or in some cases impossible to track revenue, from flash web pages.
- Single page booking engines do not work well for multiple property businesses.

## Single page booking engine example:

The screenshot displays a single-page booking engine for the Emperor Hotel Buenos Aires. The interface is organized into three main sections: 'Select Check-in and Check-out Dates', 'Select Just a Room', and 'Select a Room Inclusive Package'. The date selector shows a calendar for August and September 2007. The room selector lists options like 'DELUXE KING', 'DELUXE TWIN', 'CORNER SUITE', 'JUNIOR SUITE', and 'SUITE EMPERATRIZ'. The package selector offers 'Buffet Breakfast', 'High Speed Internet-Daily', and '1 Tea Service at Oliver's Bar'. The subtotal is shown as US\$0.00. The footer contains contact information for the hotel.

Another type of booking engine style popular in the bed and breakfast industry is the **availability calendar**. Most availability calendars are a hybrid in that they typically let people select travel dates and then results are shown in a visual calendar format. The advantage of availability calendars is that they show availability across all units at the same time and they “look nice” (at least) to the owners of businesses that utilize them. The other advantage (and one that often has great weight when it shouldn't) is that they are inexpensive. However, the same problems still exist with using availability calendars that exist with the one-step booking engine.

- Availability calendars convert at much lower rates than multi-step booking engines.
- They are often not intuitive to use and follow no industry standards for design. No two availability calendars look alike.
- They can pose a security risk because availability calendars often do not securely transmit sensitive credit card information and they may even pass along banned information (such as CV2 codes or “security codes”), which is in violation of the PCI (Payment Card Information) standards for storing sensitive credit card information.

**Conclusion:** The bottom line when considering an online booking engine is to use one from a trusted company that offers a multi-step booking process. The reason you are in business is to make money, not to wow people with colorful availability calendars and flash-driven booking engines that confuse just as many people as impress them. The Internet may be a fast growing medium, but certain patterns have emerged across the Internet. People trust processes that look familiar and are similar to what the large companies like Expedia and Travelocity offer. People also want to be assured that their sensitive credit card data is safe and protected.

**RezNEWS advice:** Don't be the first in your town to use a cool, new, cutting edge booking engine.

This month's myth, that all online booking engines are the same is...**BUSTED**.

### **About the author**

Bill Mitchell is co-owner and Chief Operating Officer for RezStream. Bill has over 20 years experience in the hospitality industry with extensive knowledge in management and marketing for hotels, resorts, and bed and breakfasts. Bill is recognized nationally as a featured speaker and consultant for the hospitality industry.