The Iterable User Engagement Report: Top Travel Companies

iterable

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Where to Next?

Traveling is a staple of the modern consumer. Be it for business or for pleasure, we're traveling more than ever—last year, studies report Americans alone accounted for 2.3 billion different trips! From cross-country business trips to relaxing round-trip getaways, consumers are empowered to easily look and then book.

This is primarily because travel itself is more accessible to consumers than it's ever been before. Hassle-free booking is a baseline standard for any brand wishing to compete for consumer reservations.

As a result, consumers now enjoy immense choice and control over their itineraries. The market has collectively recognized the importance of frictionless booking experiences, and results show this was the right move.

Web-Driven Wanderlust

There's good reason why 86% of travelers hit the web when the travel bug bites: destination discovery is a hobby, research is plentiful, booking is instantaneous, and prices are transparent. Now it's up to brands to earn their keep through first-class engagement and retention.

Getting it right pays off, too. The stakes are incredibly high when it comes to winning travelers' trust:

- Travel represents an annual market of $480 billion in the U.S. alone
- The global market is expected to garner nearly $1.1 trillion by 2022
- Global mobile travel sales are expected to comprise 25% of total online bookings, eclipsing $260 billion in 2019

How do businesses in the travel industry keep travelers coming back for more after every trip? In this report, we analyzed the email and mobile messaging strategies adopted by 30 top online travel companies in the United States to study how they communicate with their customers.

Our report notes how these companies regularly interact with their customers and details what they can do to better stand out from the crowd. We explore their messages and make recommendations about how all brands can optimize their own cross-channel marketing.

Report Overview

Over the course of our three-week study, we examined the email and mobile messages sent by 30 different online travel-related companies.

These companies were comprised of nationally recognized brands from the following industries: airlines, online travel agents (OTAs), car rental companies, and hotels.

We carefully evaluated the timing, content, and calls to action of each message as part of these brands' broader campaign strategy.

Here are our key takeaways from analyzing the travel industry's aggregate trends of how user activity affected message content and timing.

Travelers Welcome

97% of brands kicked off the relationship through the use of welcome campaigns. These series were typically comprised of two emails educating users about account benefits. Campaigns were email-centric as none of these companies extended their campaign across other channels.

Movin' on App

Travel companies aren't maximizing their mobile potential. Each company offered an app, but only 23% sent mobile messaging to new users. The mobile messages received aligned with promotional use and were not reflective of app-specific behaviors. Overall, in-app, push, and text messages were few and far between.

OTAs Lead the Way

Emails from OTAs dominated our inbox. Messages from the ten OTAs accounted nearly 60% of our total message volume! While heavy on inbox presence and promotional awareness, OTAs generally personalize their messages using previously browsed destinations as part of their email content.

This report is for marketers and go-to-market leaders interested in implementing high-performing, cross-channel marketing campaigns that can achieve these objectives.

Activating consumer attention and interest

Driving engagement that grows LTV

Developing a loyal, captivated audience

Inside, we present valuable insights about the travel industry and include real-world messaging examples from the country's most popular airlines, OTAs, car rental companies, and hotel groups.

If this report piques your interest and you'd like to learn how to advance your own campaigns, please reach out to us for some one-to-one advice and best practices.

About Iterable

Iterable is the growth marketing platform that enables brands to create, execute and optimize campaigns to power world-class customer engagement across email, push, SMS, in-app and more with unparalleled data flexibility. An integrated, cross-channel solution—built for marketers, trusted by engineers, designed with intelligence.

REQUEST DEMO

Report Methodology

We carefully selected 30 top U.S. travel companies for observation. Companies were determined by respective market share, website traffic, reported revenues, among other brand characteristics. Selected companies are representative of their respective industries for the purposes of our study.

Companies were chosen from each of the following four categories.

Airlines

Online Travel Agents (OTAs)

Car Rental Companies

Hotels

After creating an account for each of these companies, we tracked email and mobile messaging content over the course of three weeks during July and August 2018:

Activity Summary

1. Week 1
   Signed up for email communication with the companies.
2. Week 2
   Downloaded mobile apps, increased levels of cross-channel engagement, and abandoned carts with all 30 companies.
3. Week 3
   Abandoned new cart sessions and weaned engagement.

This research report was designed to analyze select messaging tactics in a brief timespan for the purpose of evaluating user engagement from the leaders of the travel industry.

Readers should note that Iterable's recommendations for cross-channel engagement are based on the limited experience of this study, which is not meant to be scientific in its analysis and does not reflect the official position of any company listed.

During our analysis, we studied how each company utilized cross-channel communication to engage users at two critical stages of the customer lifecycle—activation and nurture.

Welcome Campaigns

Welcome emails are often designated by their targeted purpose of introducing a user to a brand's website, mobile app, social media platform or other business property.

Did the company send out a welcome email after a new user created an account, signed up to receive communications or downloaded an app? If so, how many welcome emails did each company send? Was this series extended across channels?

Promotional Campaigns

Most promotional marketing campaigns are typically high-volume, general-purpose communications that brands use to inform customers of sales, membership rewards, and other promotional events.

Did the company promote their business with promotional messaging? How many promotional emails were sent in total by each company? Which categories tended to send more? What types of content were being promoted to customers?

Cart Abandonment Campaigns

Cart abandonment messages are reminders which encourage customers to finish completing their recent near-purchases.

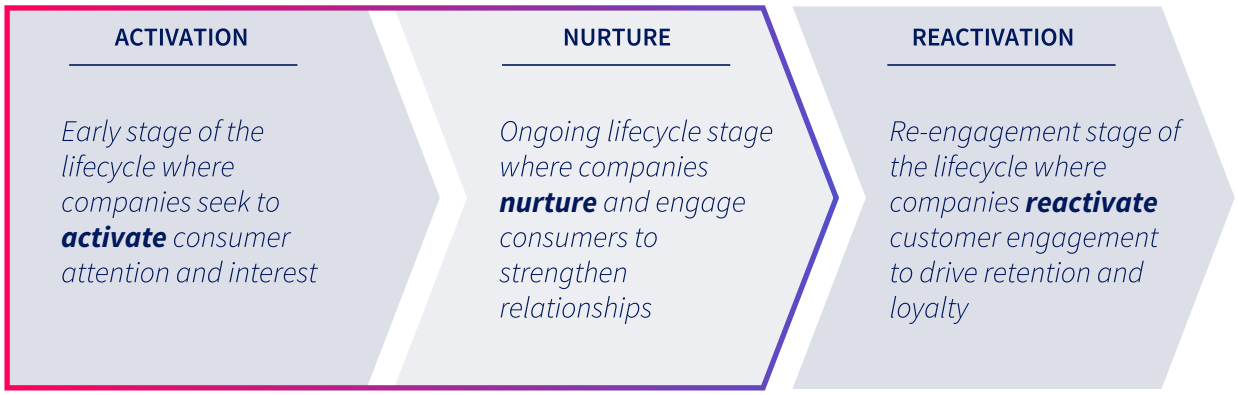
Did the company send out any messaging after a reservation was selected and then abandoned? Was this messaging sent out in a relevant time window? How many reminders were sent?

Mobile Messaging

Mobile text, push, and in-app messaging can include marketing promotions, account notifications, as well as transactional confirmations.

Of the companies with mobile applications, which incorporated mobile messaging strategies? Which categories tended to message more on mobile? Which channels were used most frequently?

The Customer Lifecycle



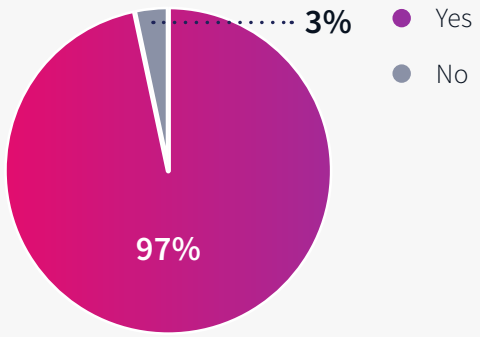
The brief nature of our study focused on the early activation and nurture stages the full customer lifecycle.

Welcome Campaigns

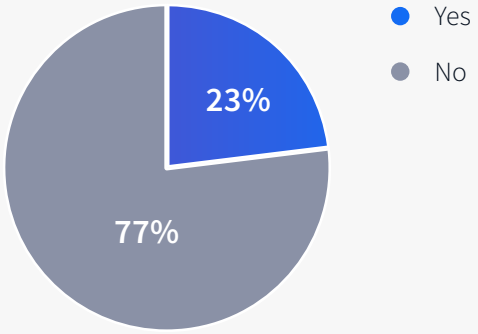
Data Analysis

Welcome emails were almost unanimously used by travel companies across the board. 97% of companies studied sent at least one welcome message upon account creation. Roughly one quarter of these companies extended their welcomes as part of a longer series and sent anywhere from two to five messages.

How many companies sent a welcome message?

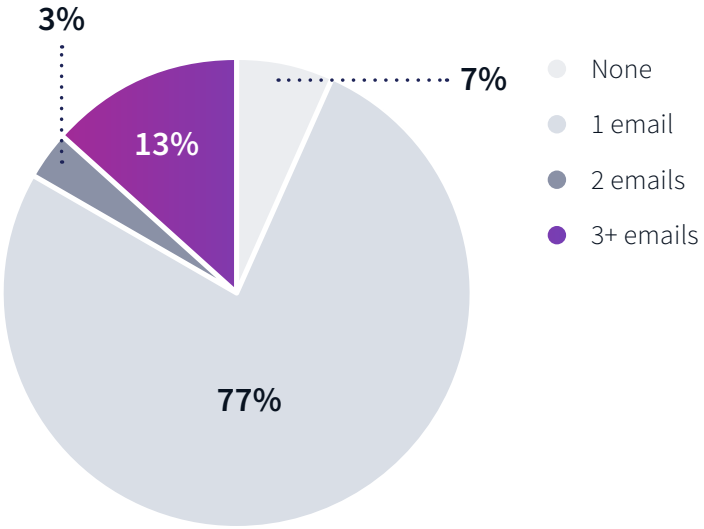


How many companies sent multi-message campaigns?



While a single welcome message was the most common approach, 3% sent two emails and 13% used three or more emails in their welcome series.

How many messages are in a company's welcome campaign?



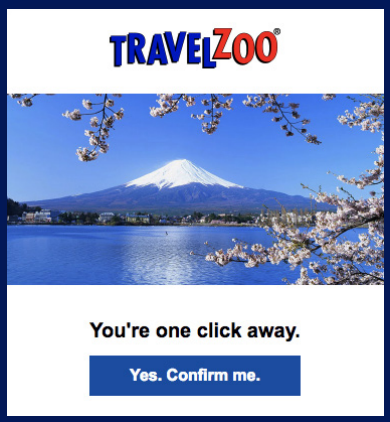
Nearly all companies included in our research employ some welcome outreach to new account holders: airlines, car rental companies, and hotels led the way at 100%, followed closely by OTAs (90%).

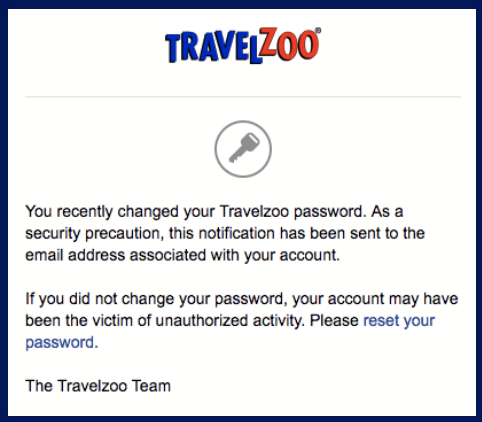
Which industries use welcome campaigns?

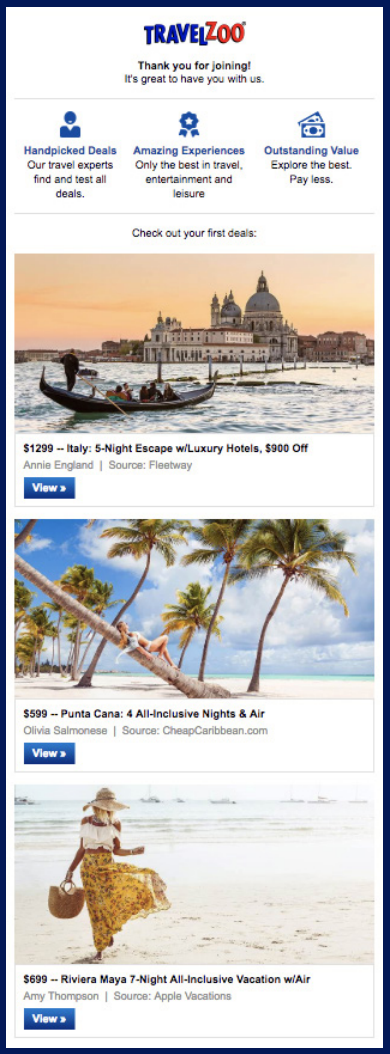
Transaction Interaction

Just because transactional messages are used like receipts doesn't mean they have to look like it! 40% of the companies we studied used transactional messaging to communicate with new account holders. We frequently received these messages during our onboarding—usually after updating account information, email addresses, or phone numbers.

Acknowledging changes to personal data is an appreciated gesture in a world where security breaches are far too common. But remember, this is another touchpoint in your growing relationship with your newest member! Modern growth marketing platforms can recognize account updates and trigger responsive content that supports a more cohesive welcome experience.





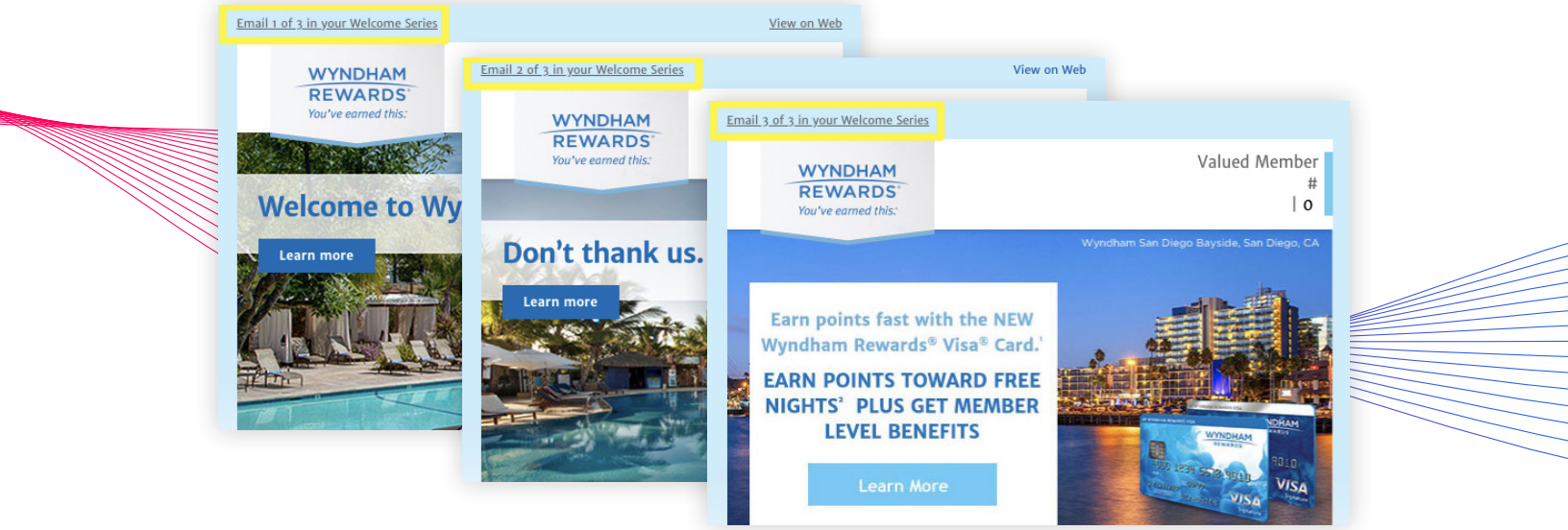


Travelzoo sends two transactional messages before customers enter the welcome stream.

Interesting Findings

There's no shortage of creative ways to welcome consumers to your brand. What works best varies drastically when it comes to achieving five-star engagement, but one of the trends we appreciated during our study was brands proactively setting expectations about pending onboarding experiences.

We observed a handful of different companies who've taken steps to make their expectations clear from their initial email. Wyndham Hotels subtly notified us that we were receiving our introductory emails from their welcome series by actually spelling it out as part of their email header text.



A careful eye detects Wyndham's 3-part welcome campaign.

In this messaging stream, Wyndham sets three distinct engagement goals for their newest members while they onboard: earn points by booking a room, convey the benefits of your current membership status, and sign up for an exclusive credit card offer.

Wyndham's welcome continuity is woven through each message of the series. The first and second emails layer on the importance of "why" members should be maximizing their account value. The third email of the series then offers up the "best" way to attain this value: by opening a new credit card. It's a large ask to make, but thorough, upfront demonstration of real benefits helps justify the call to action.

Starwood Hotels takes this concept even further using a robust 5-step welcome campaign spanning ten days. They are overt in their new member education and onboarding efforts, and clearly communicate the series value inside each message.

Upon signup, new members receive their first welcome email with a broad overview about their rewards program and a variety of calls to action—book a stay, customize account preferences, link existing accounts, and more.

Starwood Preferred .	Hotels	SPG Welcome Email #5 of 5: How to Achieve Elite Status - here. Starwood Preferred Guest" style="displa...	Jul 27
Starwood Preferred .	Hotels	SPG Welcome Email #4 of 5: How to Redeem - SPG | Starwood Preferred Guest" style="display:block;" cl...	Jul 24
Starwood Preferred .	Hotels	SPG Welcome Email #3 of 5: How to Earn Rewards - here. Starwood Preferred Guest" style="display:bloc...	Jul 21
Starwood Preferred .	Hotels	SPG Welcome Email #2 of 5: How to Book - ? Click here. Starwood Preferred Guest" style="display:block;...	Jul 18
Starwood Preferred .	Hotels	Welcome to Starwood Preferred Guest - SPG | Starwood Preferred Guest" border="0" src="http://www.st...	Jul 17

Starwood's welcome series' subject lines address likely FAQs about their rewards program.

Over the following nine days, Starwood dedicates their emails' primary content blocks for showing off their exclusive account holder perks. Every two days a new email is sent that explores a specific component of membership: booking, earning rewards, redeeming rewards, and achieving higher membership status.

We especially liked Starwood's visual series progress bar at the top of their emails.

Companies profit from engaged customer bases and welcome messages drive significantly higher engagement rates than other marketing messages. Building these messages into a longer series is a strategic way to grow trust and solidify long-term engagement. The majority of travel brands we studied could likely benefit from extending their initial emails into informative series. Clearly explaining their "what's in it for me" value upfront is a great way to encourage ongoing interaction.

Destination: Early Engagement

1

First Impressions That Last

Welcome campaigns shape the initial impressions you make with your customers. Strategize content that builds familiarity with your brand and leaves new customers feeling empowered to maximize their membership value.

2

Cross-Channel Continuity

Consumers move fluidly across channels and so should your campaigns. After members download your app, keep the conversation rolling using in-app or push notifications to help them onboard and optimize their app experience.

3

Purpose-Driven Objectives

Use objective-driven CTAs that help customers steer their own experiences in a dynamic message stream. Responsive messaging streams will encourage users to complete outstanding welcome objectives before engagement wanes (e.g. profile completion, app download, preferences, and so on).

4

Embrace Crystal Clarity

Don't confuse people with too much or too little information in a welcome email. Spell out what they've signed up for, what they need to do, and the value they'll receive in-turn.

5

Real-Time Experiences

Customers move at their own speeds so personalize welcome messaging with content that resonates with their current experiences. Avoid static content that urges completion of actions they've already taken or gives reason to ignore future messages.

Promotional Campaigns

Data Analysis

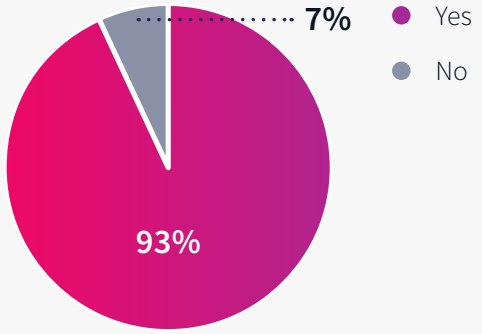
Using promotional messaging campaigns is a prominent tactic of companies everywhere. And not surprisingly, 93% of the travel companies we observed sent us some sort of promotional messaging during our study.

The frequencies of these email occurrences were incredibly variable—we received anywhere from a single message to over twenty from each of these different companies.

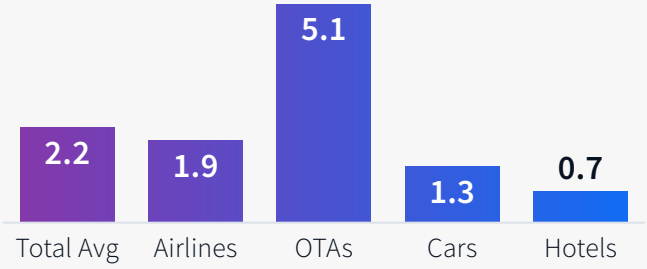
The average number of weekly promotions sent by a typical travel company was 2.2. The average OTA sent 5.1 messages per week, followed by airlines at 1.9, and car rentals (1.3) and hotels (0.7).

We also noted that weekly send volumes grew quickly over time. New message volume from all companies grew from a total of 42 received in the first week, to 77 (week 2), and 118 (week 3).

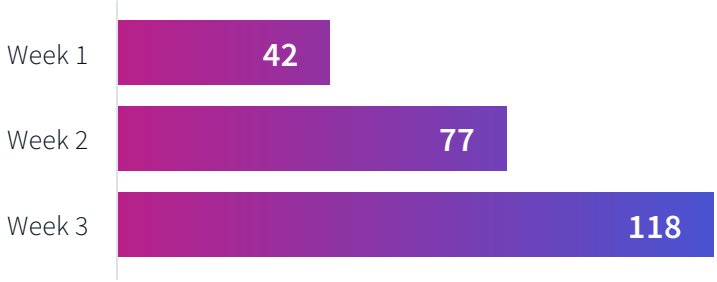
How many companies sent promotional messaging?



What was the average weekly number of promotional messages sent by industry?



How many promotional messages were sent by week?



Timing Is Everything: Triggered vs. Scheduled Promotions

Well-timed messages capitalize on consumers' current interests and maximize conversion rates. In fact, over 75% of email revenue is generated via triggered campaigns versus scheduled campaigns.

But to see these returns, responding to real-time behavior is a must. Unfortunately, the majority of messages we received barely reflected our recent engagement.

The travel companies we observed could up their promotional antes by incorporating behavioral triggers as campaign drivers. Triggered messages get almost twice the amount of opens and hone in on a customer's most recent activity; if it's highly personalized content that's being triggered, conversion odds increase even further!

OTAs are taking advantage of the value that personalization brings. OTAs dedicate dynamic email content to location-specific deals in the areas we recently browsed. Their front-and-center hero content was linked directly to our previous searches. This tactic was effective at encouraging us to consume familiar and additional promotional content on a regular basis. They can further boost bookings by triggering these same messages after certain activity thresholds—repeat visits, shares, favoriting, and more—are met.

Interesting Findings

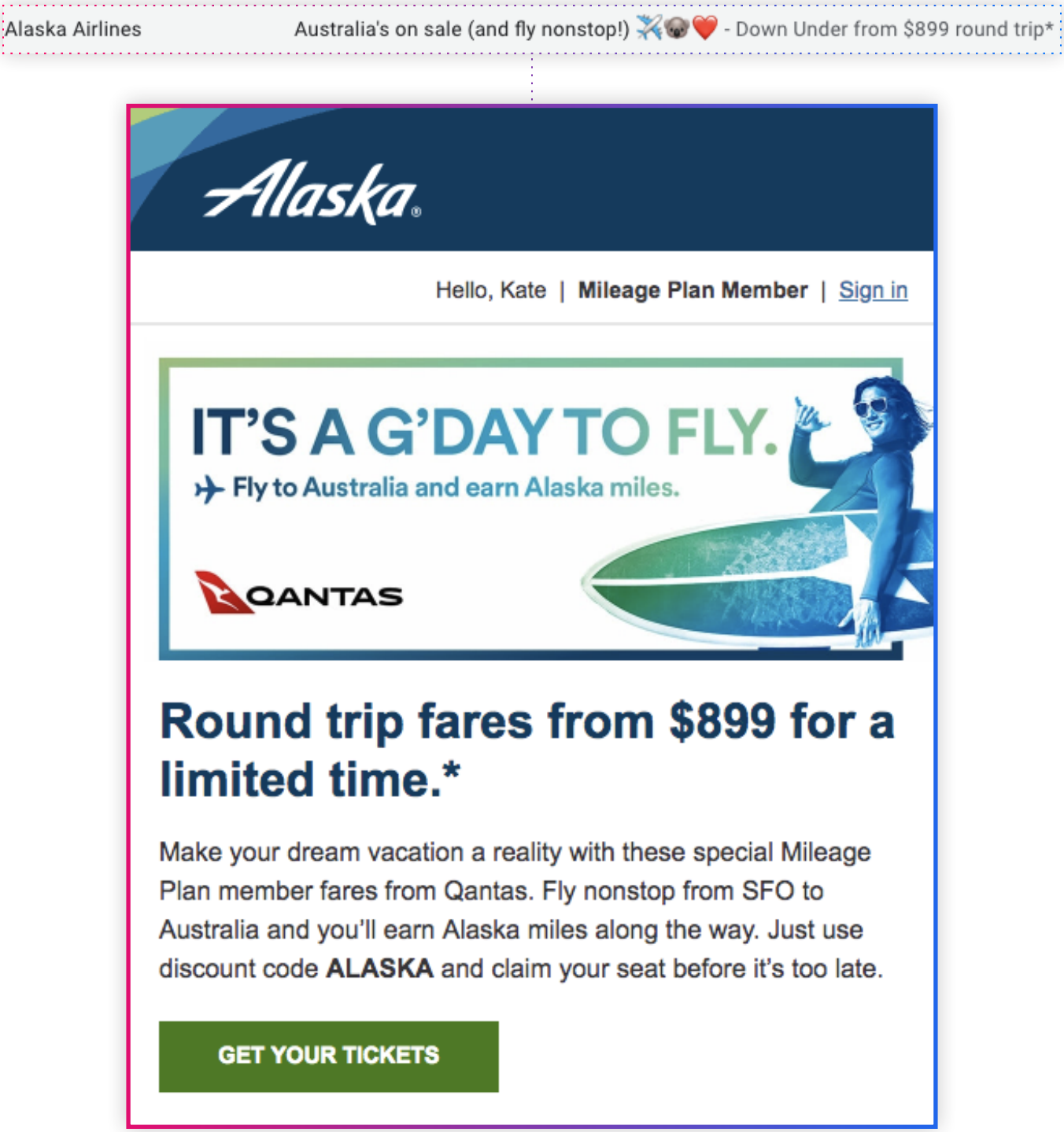
Promotions come in all shapes and sizes, and nowhere was this more apparent than inside our inbox. Such a wide variety of message layouts made it difficult to discern any industry-wide trends—every company had their own sense of style: templates, content blocks, imagery, color palettes, text density, animations...you name it.

We also encountered numerous approaches for tackling promotional strategy ranging from a picture with a caption to sponsored partner content. Interestingly, partner content was plentiful throughout the hundreds of emails we analyzed, and for good reason.

Promoting partner content inside an ongoing message stream is a strategic approach for mixing up messaging while tapping into partner revenue streams. Companies from each of the industries observed had their unique take on displaying partner content.

Dedicated Emails

Companies like Alaska Airlines dedicated an entire email toward promotional partner content. Alaska Airlines featured round trip fare promotions to Australia with the Australian-based airline, Qantas. Their email weaves in elements synonymous with Australia from subject line to body content: koalas, slang, and imagery.

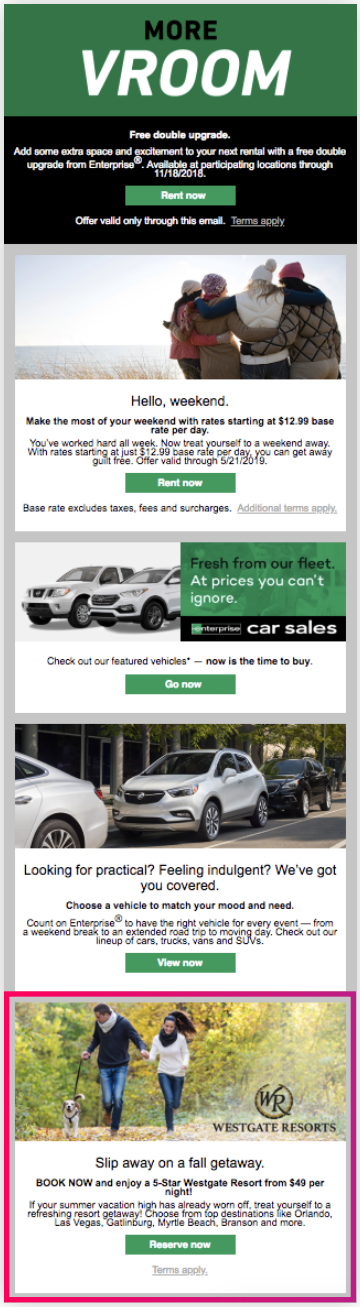


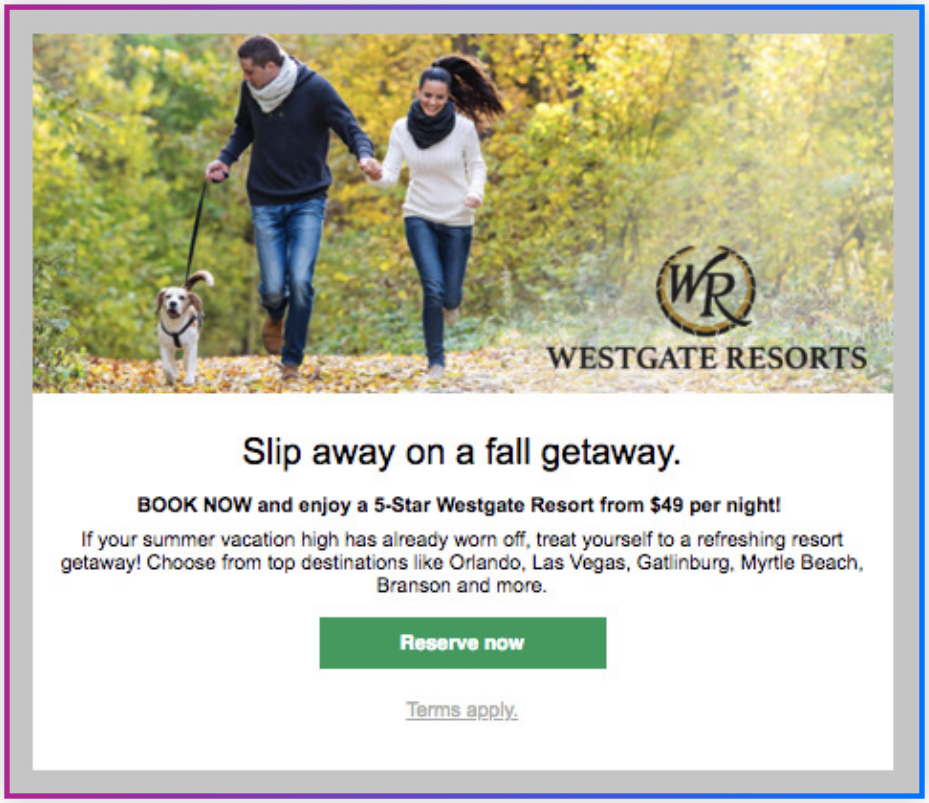
Alaska Airlines helps their customers find a great fare down under via Qantas promotion.

Content Blocks

Other companies like Enterprise Rent-A-Car highlight partnered promotions more subtly. Inside one of their promotional emails, we see a block of content dedicated to Westgate Resorts offering great rates to top destinations across the country.

Whereas Alaska Airlines' Qantas promotion "stands out," Enterprise's Westgate Resort promotion is aimed at "fitting in" with the rest of their car rental content. Placement is toward the end, and there's little overt delineation between this and the rest of Enterprise's body content.

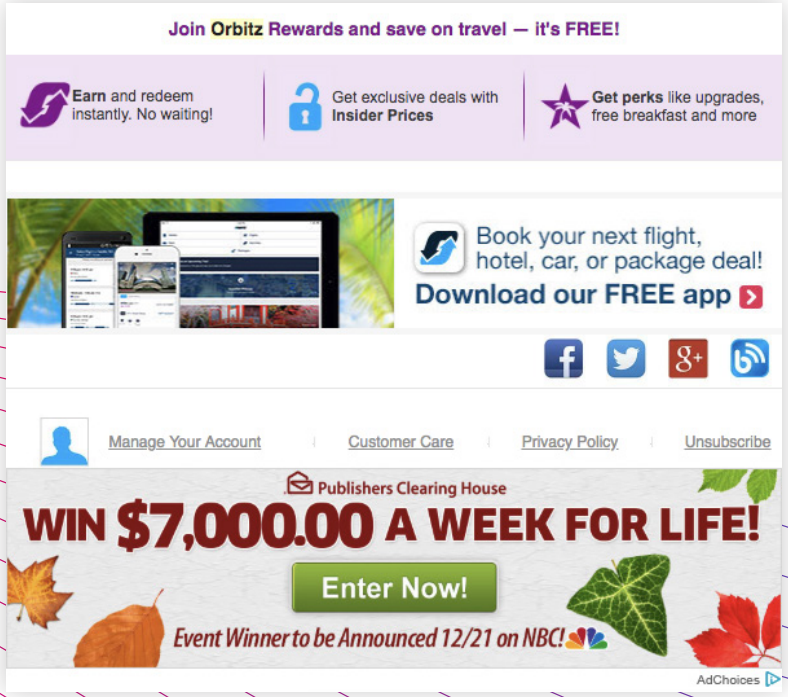




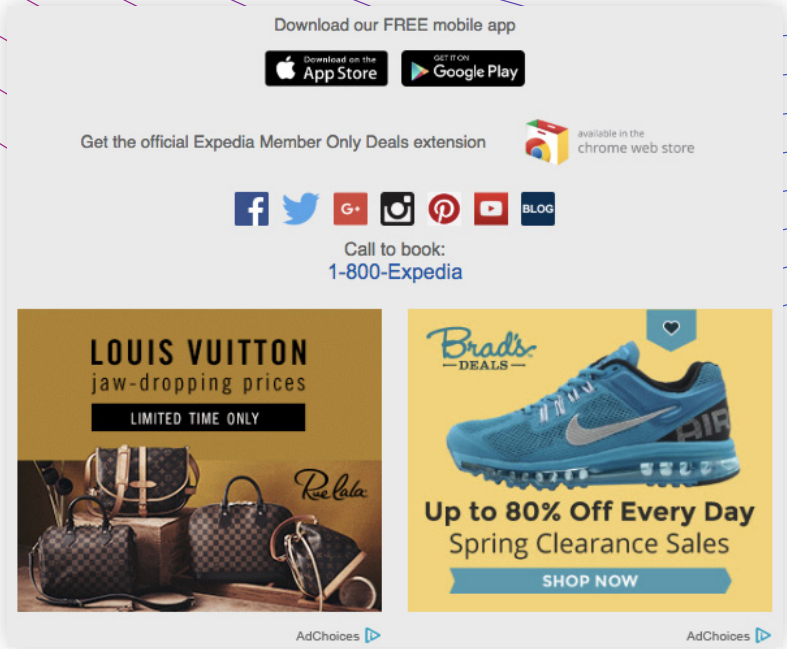
Need to book a car and a hotel?
You can do both from Enterprise's email.

Interest-Based Advertising

OTAs like Expedia and Orbitz take a different approach and feature interest-based ads at the base of select emails. As part of the promotional strategy behind this integration, these OTAs incorporate browsing-based history which identifies and serves ads likely to resonate with an individual's tastes.



ORBITZ



Expedia

Expedia and Orbitz integrate internet-based advertising inside their email content.

Destination: Driving Conversions

1. **Strategize Success**
   Stand out inside the inbox by spot-checking your pre-delivery checklist. Optimize subject lines, preheader text, and delivery times to set yourself up for maximum clicks.

2. **Customer-Centric Content**
   Lean on your customer data to guide your promotional content. Customers interact with messages tuned to their individual interests. One-size-fits-all campaigns actually fit very few.

3. **Tell Your Story**
   Stay true to your brand's authentic "self." Customers likely came to you because of a certain product or service flair—weave that unique charisma into your campaigns for better engagement.

4. **Surprise & Delight**
   Find new ways to impress your customers inside every promotion you send. Explore RFM (recency, frequency, monetary) and engagement data to customize highly nuanced campaigns to key customer segments.

5. **Data In, Value Out**
   If you're struggling to pinpoint the deals that resonate with your customers, don't be afraid to ask. Interactive content, surveys, and other feedback requests help you learn your customers' tastes.

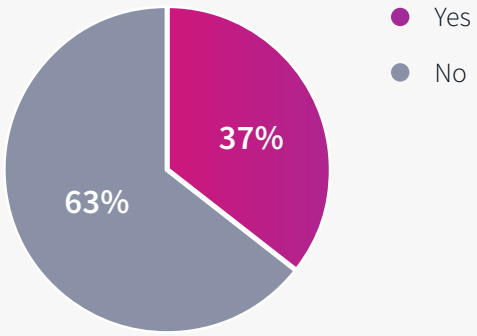
Cart Abandonment Campaigns

Data Analysis

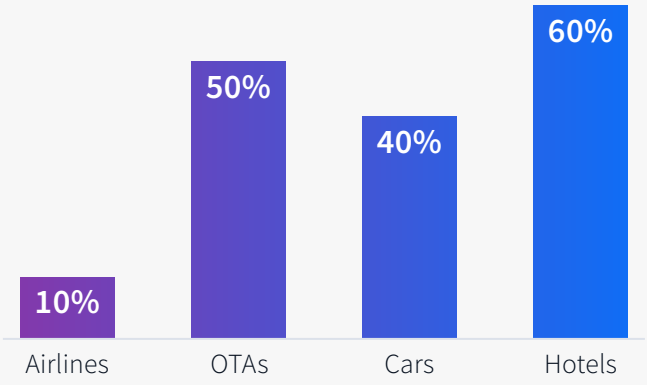
Cart abandonment is a scourge of any online business—and the travel industry is no exception. They're hit especially hard and reports indicate that 81% of companies suffer from incomplete transactions, likely because of the comparison-heavy nature of travel planning. The companies we studied demonstrated a wide variance of cart abandonment approaches—from ignoring the occurences to deploying multi-message series.

We performed our analysis with each company by selecting a set reservation, submitting our required details before stopping activity a step shy of completing the transaction. We observed the abandoned cart follow up and and found that 37% of these companies use these campaigns. When looking at usage by industry, hotels led the way at 60% usage rate, followed closely by OTAs (50%) and car rental companies (40%); airlines were the least frequent adopers at 10%.

How many companies sent cart abandonment messages?



How did cart abandonment usage vary across industries?



Make It Snappy

Cart abandonment happens for a variety of reasons, but that doesn't mean the conversion opportunity is lost! There is, however, a finite window of time in which customers need to complete any remaining actions in order to convert. With each passing minute, hour, and day, the likelihood of conversion dwindles.

The companies studied that use cart abandonment campaigns waited, on average, 3.7 days before sending their first abandonment message. By comparison, Iterable's customer benchmark data indicates 51% of companies use cart abandonment campaigns of which 87% are triggered within three days!

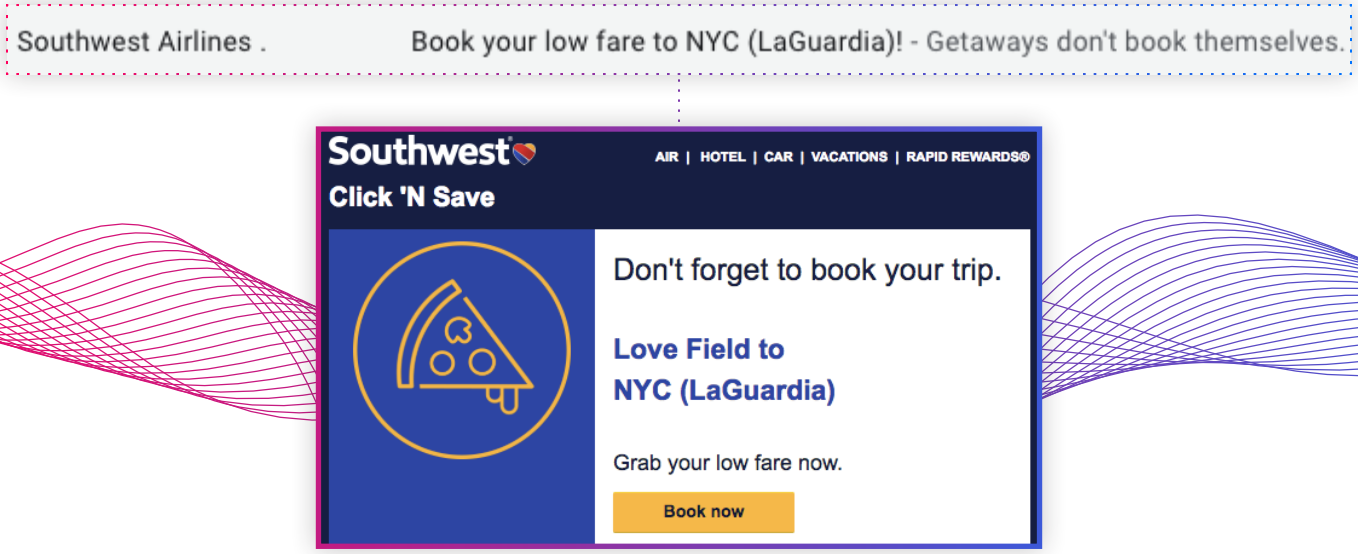
These campaigns provide an excellent way to recover lost revenue from incomplete reservations—Iterable benchmark data found 81% of marketers achieve a conversion rate of up to 40%!

But as the saying goes, "Time kills all deals." Cart abandonment campaigns are effective at recapturing the initial consumer interest—don't let the opportunity window close because it took too long to deploy a campaign.

Interesting Findings

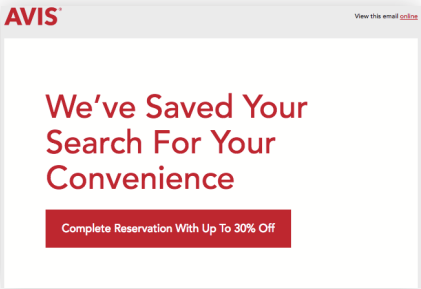
Of the lifecycle campaigns assessed, cart abandonment was the least utilized. It seemed that once reservations were deemed incomplete, most businesses were comfortable letting that near conversion pass.

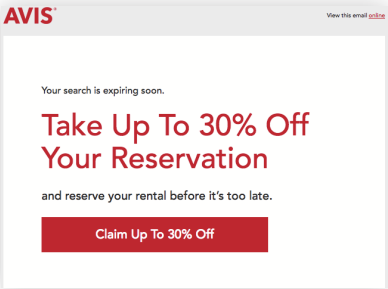
Southwest Airlines gets right to the point when trying to woo back potential passengers. They sent a single cart abandonment reminder: it featured a memory-jogging subject line and witty preheader text about an unbooked trip to New York. The email copy itself is minimal, yet clear. And who doesn't love a great slice of NY pizza?

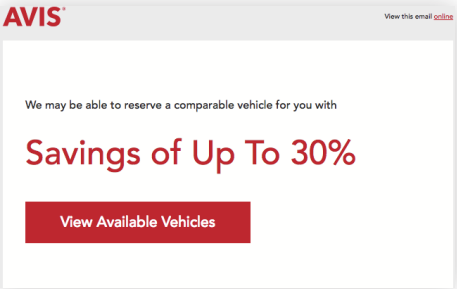


Southwest demonstrates why "less is more" still rings true.

Avis sent a simple, yet straightforward abandonment series that incentivizes customers to complete their booking with savings of up to 30%. We overlooked the series' limited personalization since the message content and calls to action were direct.

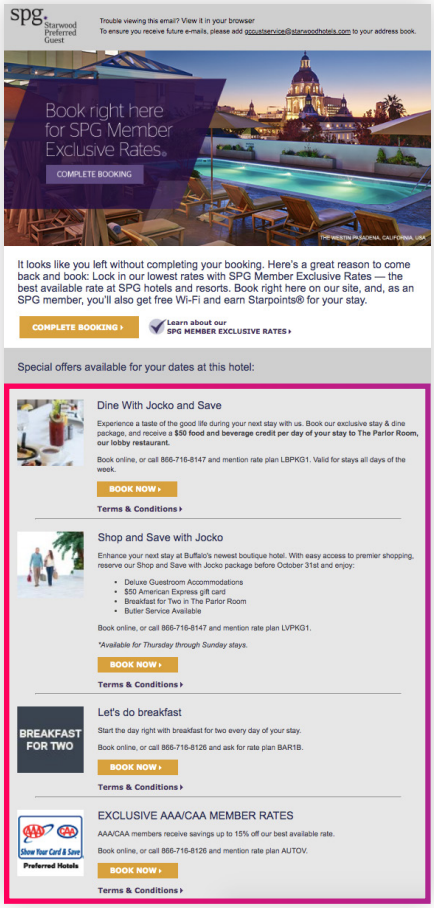


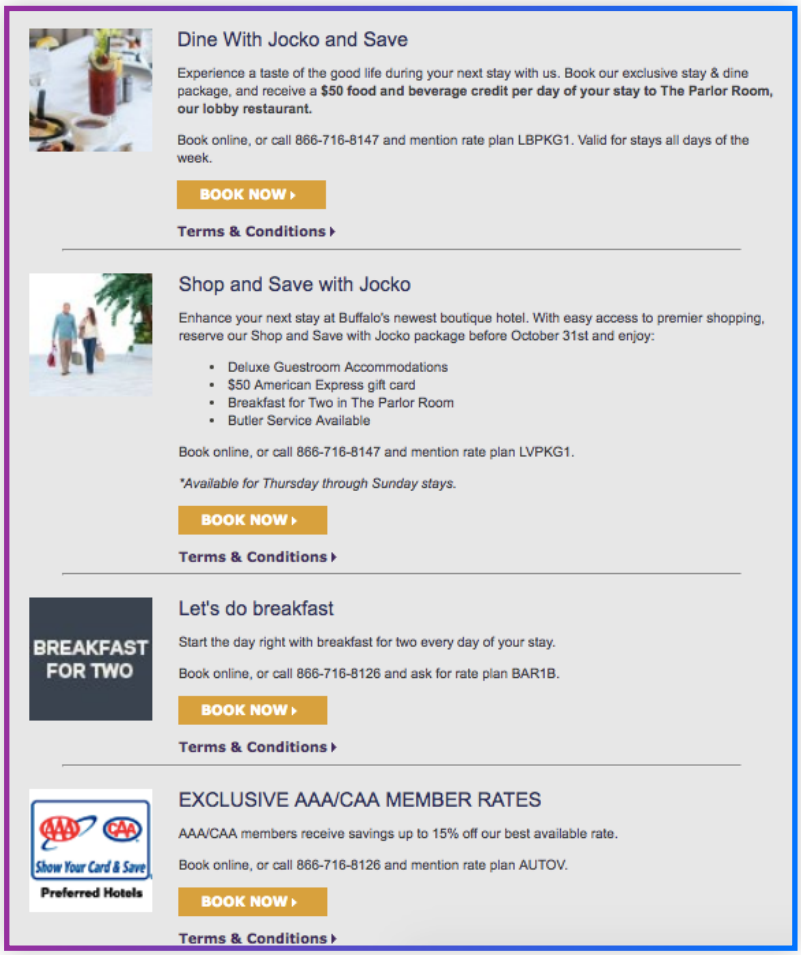




Avis' series notifies, incentivizes, and substitutes incomplete bookings in a timely manner.

SPG packed a punch into their abandonment email. They reminded us of our near-booking and promoted a variety of special offers to further entice guests. SPG highlights key saving opportunities on meals, shopping specials, and discounted rate promotions to justify booking that much-needed getaway.





Starwood calls out four specific reasons for customers to finish their checkout.

Destination: Checkout

1. **Speedy Delivery**
   Don't let near-purchases pass you by! Use behavior-specific triggers and automated delays to send your abandonment campaigns as soon as customers click away from their carts.

2. **Start Small and Grow**
   Launching a very simple "You forgot something" triggered message is better than having no campaign at all. Scale complexity with supporting imagery and details as you hone your strategy.

3. **Contextual Support**
   Help convert your carts by adding context to your abandonment emails. Call out things like cart contents, where they left off and what they need to do to complete the transaction.

4. **Test It Out**
   Experiment with the cadence that works best for your business. Explore how timing, days elapsed, number of emails, and campaign lengths affect conversion rates.

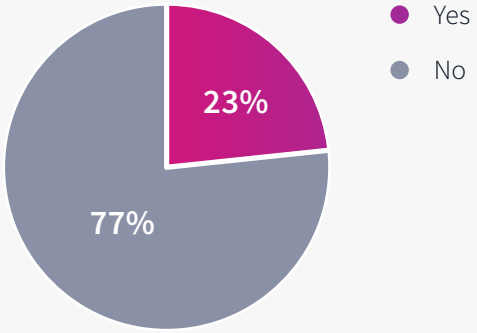
5. **Simplify Conversion**
   Link your CTAs back to the full cart, the checkout screen, or even offer the option to complete transactions inside your emails. Streamlined conversion paths turn carts into cash.

Mobile Messaging

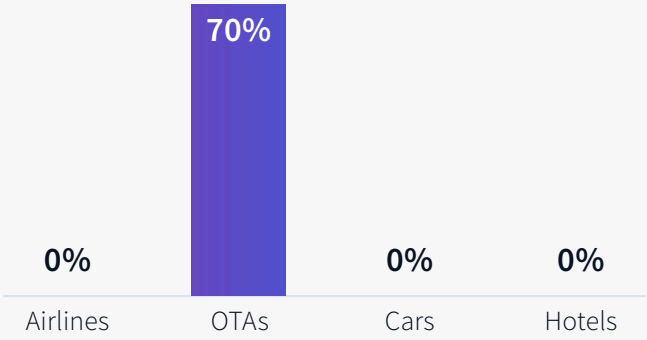
Data Analysis

Mobile makes up for more than half of all online traffic and continues rising as the preferred channel of choice among consumers, but travel companies aren't keeping pace with this trend. Only 23% of companies observed use mobile messaging as part of their ongoing outreach strategy to new users.

What percentage of companies used mobile messaging?



How did mobile messaging usage vary by industry?



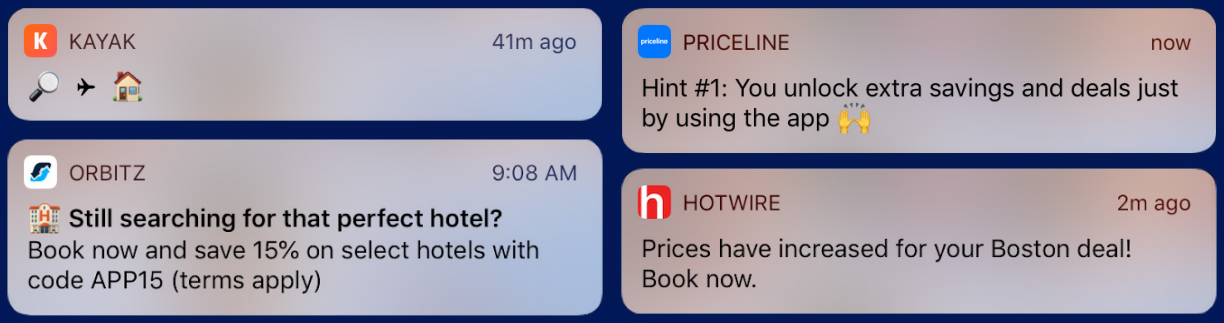
Interestingly enough, OTAs were the only travel category we studied which made use of mobile messaging. We noted that mobile messaging was only conducted through push notifications—no SMS or in-app notifications.

How many mobile messages did OTAs send?

Priceline	3	Hotwire	1
TripAdvisor	1	Travelzoo	1
Hotels.com	1	Booking.com	0
Kayak	1	Expedia	0
Orbitz Worldwide	1	Travelocity	0

A Push in the Wrong Direction

The instantaneous nature of push messaging is great for driving brand awareness and app engagement. Push messages command attention the very moment they flash across the mobile screen—if brands want to benefit from push engagement, it's critical they build a bulletproof strategy for sending them effectively.



Push messages from OTAs added additional depth to their promotional outreach strategy.

When we looked at the timing of when we received push messaging, we weren't immediately able to recognize any patterns nor tie many of these messages to activity-based triggers. Most occurred during the work week from morning to mid-afternoon. However…

We did receive a single push on a Monday at 2:39 am, a far-from-ideal time for a marketing message. Avoid these types of situations altogether by using behavior-based triggering—that way your customers are always receiving the right messages at the right times for them!

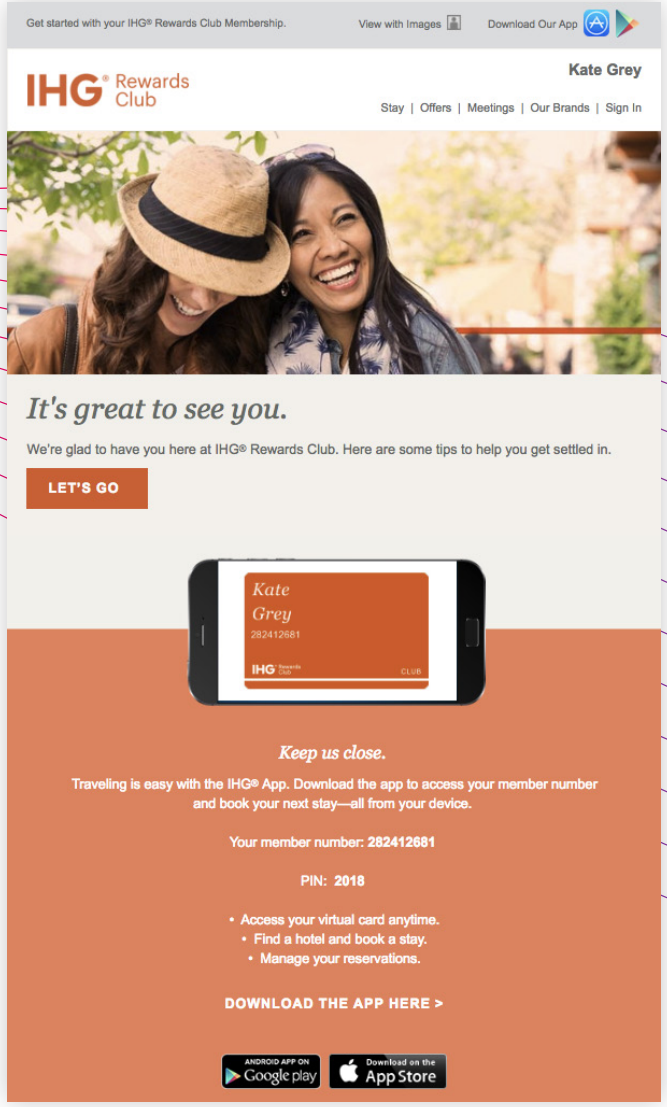
Interesting Findings

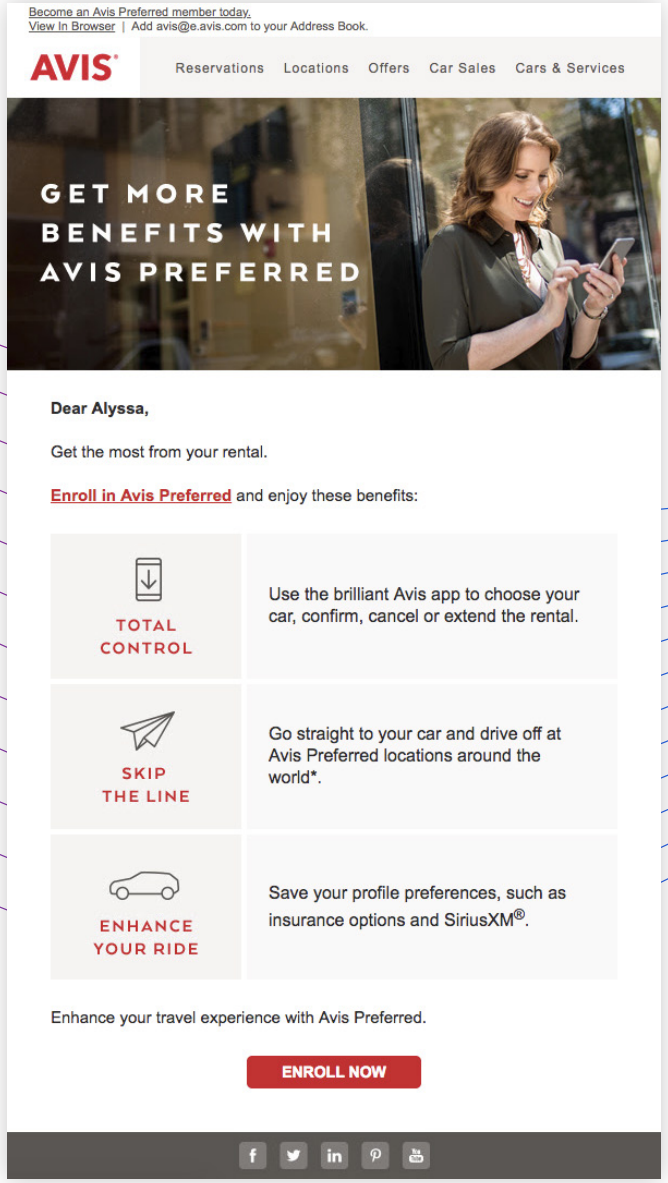
We aimed to study the cross-channel engagement of these 30 companies, so one thing we kept a close watch on was how these brands drive customers toward mobile engagement. The majority of consumers embrace mobile experiences, and brands can profit by appealing to these tastes. Consider the following:

- Consumers open a majority of their email (55%) on mobile
- 40% of online transactions are made on mobile devices
- Visiting a company's website or app precedes a purchase 24% of the time

Brands increase their conversion odds by making the most of their mobile offering—the more situations (desktop, mobile, offline) where consumers can "buy," the better. So once we learned that each of our travel companies offered an app, and we wanted to see their different tactics for driving customers into their brands' mobile environment.

We found that 63% of companies dedicated space inside their email bodies toward app download. The locations of these download CTAs varied greatly in placement and prominence—from hero content to small footer text links.

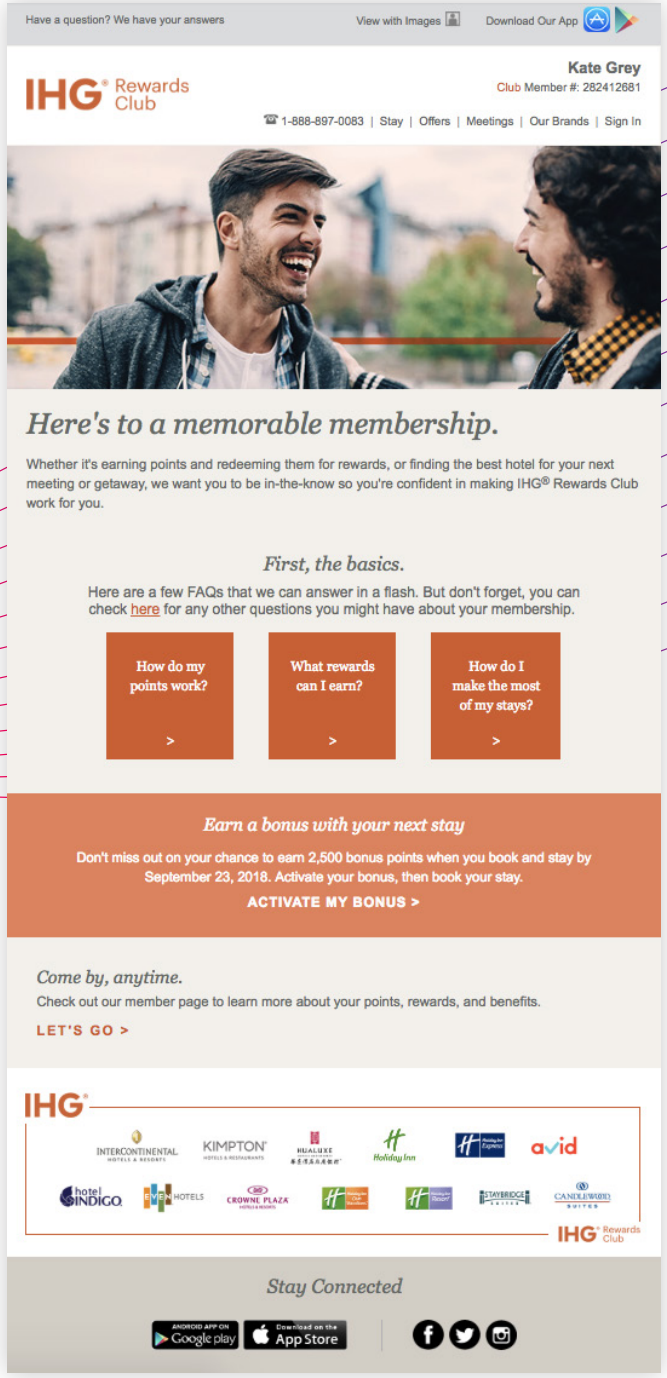


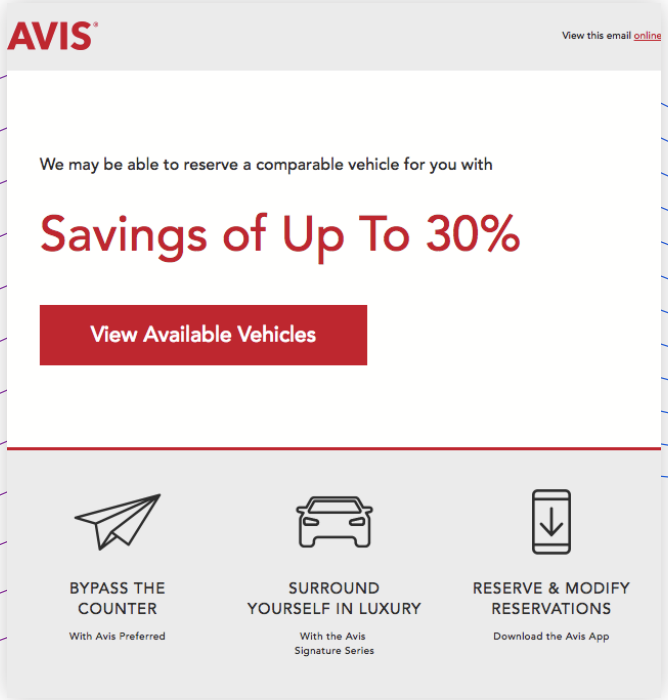


IHG and Avis demonstrate how CTA placement varies greatly during early engagement.

Next, we wanted to see how companies were bridging the customer experience between email and mobile. What changes could we observe after we downloaded each app? Unfortunately, next to nothing changed across the board.

Even after we downloaded and interacted on the apps, we were still seeing email content encouraging us to download. Static content was likely built into their email templates and, as a result, weren't reflective of our actual experience. Leveraging dynamic emails to serve up personalized content to customers is a much better way to stay up to speed.





Static content points toward app downloads even after downloading and interacting regularly.

Destination: Mobile Magic

1. **Keep It Coordinated**
   Whether you're welcoming new customers to your brand or bolstering loyalty efforts, all messaging—email, mobile, direct, social—should be in alignment.

2. **Timing Is Everything**
   A well-timed message is an effective engagement catalyst. Use app activity data to identify the moments of high interaction where a mobile message is likely to prompt desired actions.

3. **Change the Channels**
   Push, in-app, and SMS messages all have unique marketing strengths. Experiment with messaging and CTAs to explore which work best for encouraging specific engagement behaviors.

4. **Light a Fire**
   Mobile messaging is great for evoking quick engagement. Create copy that reflects the urgent nature of your message. Pair action verbs with phrases emoting scarcity or FOMO and pique customer interest.

5. **Mobile Moments**
   Mobile messaging is a great way to keep your conversation moving. If customers actively engage with your app, trigger mobile messages that complement their current experience.

Summary

One might expect a consistent standard regarding the email and mobile marketing of travel companies, but *The Iterable User Engagement Report: Top Travel Companies* demonstrates that quality and extent of strategy is highly variable even among the leaders in the industry.

Some companies are executing sophisticated campaigns, others just cover the basics and the rest range widely in between. As a collective whole, however, there is much room for more effective customer engagement:

- 63% don't welcome new members with more than a single email
- 7% don't actually send promotional emails about their business
- 63% don't make any attempts to convert abandoned carts

An effective cross-channel marketing strategy is 100% customer-driven. Brands that have full access to utilize their customer data freely and creatively aren't just marketing—they're engaging.

Catering your messaging to each customer across every stage of their lifecycle ensures your brand reaches your engagement destination without a hitch.

About Iterable

Iterable is the growth marketing platform that enables brands to create, execute and optimize cross-channel campaigns with unparalleled data flexibility.

Leading brands, like Spotify, Zillow, SeatGeek and Box, choose Iterable to power world-class customer engagement throughout the entire lifecycle.

Data Flexibility at Your Fingertips
Access real-time user, behavioral and event data to trigger personalized messaging at virtually unlimited scale. Support an audience of millions while appealing to each subscriber's unique preferences.

Unified Brand Experience
Orchestrate seamless customer engagement across email, mobile push, SMS, in-app, web push, direct mail and more throughout every lifecycle stage, from activation to re-engagement.

Agile Iteration & Optimization
Launch, measure and fine-tune campaigns with ease to deliver more relevant messaging faster than the competition. Experiment and iterate on-demand to determine the right content, channel and cadence for each user.

Customer Journey Mapping
Visualize the entire customer journey and build sophisticated, cross-channel segments and campaigns with Iterable's intuitive, drag-and-drop Workflow Studio.

If you want to learn more about Iterable, please request a demo:

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Appendix

Full list of the top online travel companies analyzed in this report, in alphabetical order:

Additional Resources

Explore more industry-specific findings inside our User Engagement Teardowns:

- Top Car Rental Companies: Who Drives the Most Engagement?
- Top U.S. Airlines: Whose Marketing Flies First-Class?
- Online Travel Agents: Whose Marketing Wins the Booking Battle?