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OPINION

“Share Is Holding” Is the Wrong Comfort

The Zero-Click Guest, from HEDNA Lisbon

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Views are the author’s own and do not represent HEDNA or its members.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Six things to take from the session

01 AI now matches online communities and sits close to social media as a place travelers find trip ideas. And it is changing decisions, not just inspiring them.

02 A major OTA told investors that LLM referrals are below 1% of its room nights. In an April 2026 survey, 29% of US leisure travelers said an AI recommendation changed their travel plans. Both are true, and **the gap is the story.**

03 “Share is holding” only describes the share you can track. **Zero-click journeys don’t break demand; they break attribution.**

04 Hotels are repeating the OTA-versus-direct mistake one layer earlier. What matters isn’t fighting the model but whether you’re in the consideration set it builds.

05 Nobody has won this yet. Flights built the pipes for AI agents, while hotels are being scraped off the open web. That gap is an opening for hotels that plug in.

06 Three moves: audit your AI representation, define your cost of sale, and treat reputation as infrastructure.

HEDNA LISBON · SEPTEMBER 16, 2026

On September 16, Miki Gulati (Corporate Director, Distribution Partnerships at Omni Hotels & Resorts) and I had twenty minutes on the main stage at HEDNA Lisbon and one question: who owns the traveler when the clicks disappear?

Our answer: not whoever looks best in the attribution report. **The traveler belongs to whoever makes the shortlist an AI builds,** and to whoever keeps the context after the stay.

The traveler describes a trip. The booking engine asks for dates.

Travelers increasingly start with a purpose, not a place: a quiet weekend by the water, somewhere the kids won't get bored, a base near a 9:30 meeting. They describe it in their own words, with screenshots, videos and vibes. IHG built its July launch of conversational search around this, letting guests type their destination, trip purpose and preferences in everyday language.

Then most travelers land on a rate grid and a set of filters that know none of it. That gap was the premise of the session. Better search won't close it. **What closes it is continuity of intent:** carrying what the traveler said all the way through to the room they book.

Chat alone won't close it either. Pure chat is too text-heavy for a visual product like a hotel stay, it's bad at comparing many listings side by side, and trips are usually planned with other people, not in a one-person conversation. Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky put the direction plainly this year:

> *"The future is not apps. The future is agents."*
>
> BRIAN CHESKY, CEO, AIRBNB

HERE WE GO AGAIN

Hotels versus LLMs is the OTA mistake, one layer earlier

About fifteen years ago the industry treated OTAs as the enemy. Direct versus OTA became an adversary to resist rather than distribution to manage, and hotels paid for that decade in commission and in lost access to their own guests.

The same reflex is forming one layer earlier, with hotels versus LLMs, and that reflex is the mistake. The model decides which three hotels a traveler hears about out of two hundred. The question isn't how to fight it. **It's whether you're in the consideration set it builds.**

THE CONSIDERATION SET IS ALREADY MOVING

In an April 2026 survey of 1,006 US leisure travelers, AI (30%) sat level with online communities (30%) and just behind social media (32%) as a source of trip ideas, ahead of travel blogs (27%).

Where US leisure travelers find trip ideas



The influence goes past inspiration:

40%

said they had discovered a destination through AI

29%

said they had changed their travel plans based on an AI recommendation

THE COMFORTING NUMBER

“Share is holding.” Is it?

Now the number the industry finds comforting. On its Q2 2026 earnings call in August, a major OTA told the market that traffic from large language models, paid and unpaid, is still below 1% of its room nights, with no material change over recent quarters. On its own, that reads as AI not moving demand yet.

<1%

of a major OTA’s room nights come from LLM traffic, paid and unpaid

Counts visits that arrived carrying an AI referrer

29%

of US leisure travelers changed plans on an AI recommendation

Counts decisions travelers say AI changed

Different denominators

Put it next to the 29% and the picture changes. The two numbers use different denominators, and that’s the point. One counts visits that arrived carrying an AI referrer. The other counts decisions travelers say AI changed. When the recommendation happens in a conversation and the traveler turns up a week later by typing the hotel’s name, the influence is real and the referral never appears.

That’s the question we put to the room: if zero-click journeys break attribution, how can anyone say with confidence that share is holding? What you can say is that **trackable** share is holding.

That describes your measurement stack, not your guests.

THE JOURNEY

What the zero-click guest should meet

Today's journey is search-led: search, compare, book, across 200 hotels and generic bundles, ending in a checkout to grind through. The zero-click journey starts with intent and runs recommendation, transaction, service, narrowing 200 hotels to the right three.

TODAY: SEARCH-LED

Search › **Compare** › **Book**

200 hotels · generic bundles · a checkout to grind through

ZERO-CLICK: INTENT-LED

Intent › **Recommend** › **Transact** › **Service**

200 hotels narrowed to the right three

In that journey, **AI works as a value translator, not an upsell engine.** These are the kinds of lines we showed on stage (illustrative, not a live product):

"Skip breakfast. Your meeting's at 9:30, and two cafés are next door."

"Use your free night Saturday. Pay cash Friday. Save about $140."

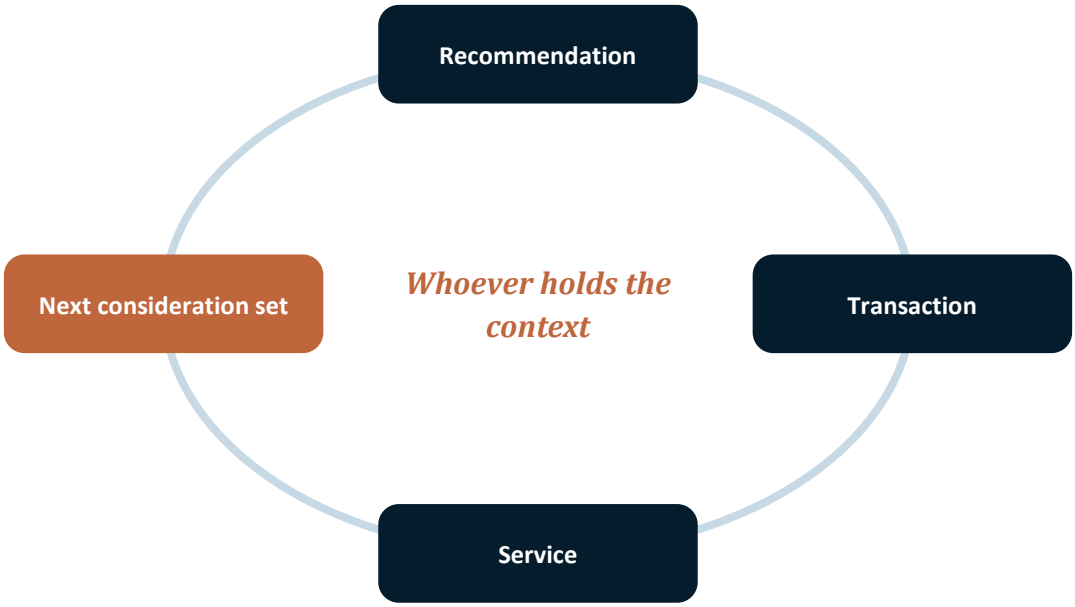
"King room, $647.15 all-in, free cancel to Oct 11. Book?"

Loyalty works without the guest having to ask. The checkout disappears. That's how a good front desk agent talks, and very few booking engines talk that way.

AFTER THE BOOKING

The funnel is a loop

The journey doesn’t end at “book.” Between trips, service moments become commercial moments.



A disruption becomes a proactive rebook that saves the relationship instead of losing it.

A fare drop to a place the guest loved becomes a trip they hadn’t started shopping for.

The weeks after a stay become the next recommendation, arriving before the next search.

Whoever holds the context is in the next consideration set. A hotel that treats checkout as the end of the transaction hands that position to whoever kept the conversation going.

WHERE HOTELS COMPETE

The strategic battleground moves upstream

To be the answer, hotels need to compete on five things:

01

AI-readable content

Structured so an agent can find, trust and quote you.

02

Real-time commercial APIs

Live rates, availability and booking an agent can transact against.

03

AI-native merchandising

Offers that adapt to the guest, not generic bundles.

04

Identity and loyalty

Recognized and applied automatically, mid-conversation.

05

Distribution economics

Know what it costs to be in the answer before you’re in it.

THE NORTH STAR

Four steps and no forms

The north star we showed was a single exchange.

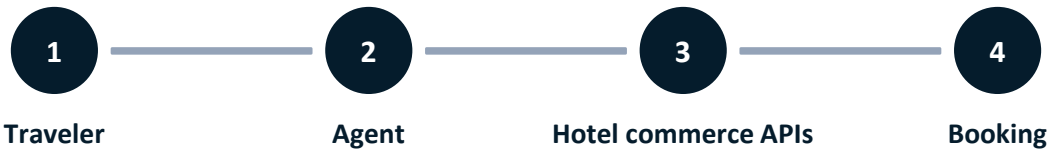
THE TRAVELER

Needs to be in Chicago Tuesday and Wednesday, near the usual office, under $500, with the same preferences as always.

THE AGENT

Comes back with three options, recommends the usual property with breakfast, and books it with the corporate rate and loyalty number applied: high-floor king, away from the elevator, free cancellation.

Corporate rate **Loyalty number** **High-floor king** **Away from elevator** **Free cancellation**



Traveler, agent, hotel commerce APIs, booking. Four steps and no forms.

Nobody has won this yet

Even the OTAs aren't frictionless. Walk through a booking on any of the major sites and you'll still hit filters, pop-ups and a multi-step checkout. The zero-click experience doesn't exist anywhere at scale yet.

The path there isn't a straight line. OpenAI pulled ChatGPT's "buy now" button in March 2026: travel was too complex, and trust broke at checkout.

Then look at what launched this month. Meta introduced Muse on September 8, a personal AI agent that books travel and keeps working after you close the app, from a company that reports 3.6 billion daily users. Look at how Muse handles each category.

FLIGHTS

A direct integration

Runs through a direct integration with Duffel, covering 500+ airlines, with booking, cancellation and changes.

HOTELS

No integration

The agent opens a browser and shops consumer booking sites the way a person would. The hotel gets no relationship, no visibility into what happened and no way to opt out.

HOW META'S MUSE AGENT BOOKS EACH CATEGORY

Flights built the pipes. Hotels didn't. For an agent, a hotel is either a connection it can transact with or a page it scrapes.

COMFORT IS RISING, BUT NOT TO ZERO-TOUCH

Zero-click doesn’t mean zero judgment

In the same April 2026 survey, 38% of travelers said they were comfortable booking fully through AI, and 42% expect AI to play a bigger role in booking. Comfort is highest among younger travelers. But it stops short of hands-off: only 9% want AI to book with no human involved, and 54% want a person available if something goes wrong.

38% comfortable booking fully through AI

42% expect AI to play a bigger role in booking

9% want AI to book with no human involved

54% want a person available if something goes wrong

Zero-click doesn’t mean zero judgment. As discovery and booking get automated, **whoever curates the shortlist and earns the trust becomes more important, not less.** Someone has to be trusted to assemble the right three options.

INTEGRATION POSTURE, NOT RESISTANCE POSTURE

Google made this concrete in August. US travelers can now find, compare and book hotels inside AI Mode and pay with Google Pay, while the hotel or OTA stays merchant of record. Launch partners included the major OTAs and the largest hotel brands, connected through Google’s Universal Commerce Protocol for Lodging.

The lesson is to **plug your supply directly into the conversation** instead of hoping to be linked out of it. There’s a counterweight: travel is experiential, not a commodity, so the agentic playbook from retail doesn’t map cleanly. Not yet.

WHAT TO DO NOW

Stop defending. Start positioning.

Earn a place in the consideration set as AI builds, and be ready to transact when the guest arrives.

1

Audit your AI representation.

How is your property described in LLM answers today? Ask ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity and Google AI Mode the questions your guests ask, and check the category they put you in and where the link goes.

2

Define your cost of sale.

Set it internally before someone else defines it for you. Until you know what a direct booking fully costs, you can't judge what a booking through an AI surface is worth.

3

Treat reputation as infrastructure.

Review and rating consistency now shape acquisition. Inconsistent facts across your site, your listings and review platforms read as risk, and risk keeps you off the shortlist.

The OTA era taught us that whoever controls the interface at the moment of decision controls the relationship. That moment has moved into a conversation you can't see.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Five questions, answered

What is a zero-click guest?

A traveler whose discovery, and increasingly whose booking, happens inside an AI conversation. They reach the hotel with no referral trail, or book inside the assistant itself, so the hotel sees the reservation but not what led to it.

If LLM referrals are under 1% of room nights, is AI actually changing hotel demand?

Referral share only counts visits that arrive carrying an AI referrer. Survey data shows AI changing travel plans for 29% of US leisure travelers. Most of that influence never produces a trackable click, so low referral share and real influence can both be true.

Why does it matter that AI agents scrape hotel sites instead of integrating with them?

A scraped hotel has no relationship with the agent, no visibility into how it was presented and no way to opt out. An integrated hotel gets live rates, loyalty recognition and a bookable offer inside the conversation. Flights have largely built those connections. Hotels mostly haven’t.

Should hotels resist AI booking agents or integrate with them?

Integrate. Resisting the models repeats the OTA-versus-direct mistake one layer earlier. The goal is to be on the shortlist the AI builds and to be bookable when the guest decides.

What should hotels do first?

Audit how LLMs describe your property today, set your own cost of sale internally, and make your reviews and property facts consistent everywhere a traveler or an agent might check.

Hotels that fight the model will repeat 2010. Hotels that plug in, and stay worth recommending, get to keep the guest.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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- Skift on how Muse books travel

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