Marriott Redesign Project

User Research Interview Findings

Anne Sawyer
29 June 2019

This report outlines the steps taken to produce a set of specific recommendations for the Marriott Redesign Project. User research interviews with 3 potential users revealed several key insights that may be leveraged to help Marriott achieve its business goals. Specifically, we found that:

- In choosing where to stay on vacation, leisure travelers are primarily motivated by cost. This includes hotel rewards members.

- Business and more frequent travelers also prioritize quality, cleanliness, and customer service in their hotel experience.

We recommend additional interviews and usability testing to gain a more clear picture of the scope of user needs, goals, and attitudes, particularly with regard to use of mobile apps for travel planning. In addition, adding a Sort by Price feature to the website, front-loading incentives for leisure travelers to join Marriott Rewards, and developing targeted marketing initiatives for business travelers could all work symbiotically to drive increased user adoption of Marriott.com.

We have prepared a video highlighting some of our key findings from the interviews, which may be found here:
https://video.kent.edu/media/AnneSawyer_Highlights/1_1lcqw5p0

Project Background

To better meet its business objectives, Marriott International initiated a redesign project to increase adoption of its digital properties. As the design consultant hired for this project, SawyerUX implemented several user research activities to align Marriott's business goals with the user experience needs of its customers.
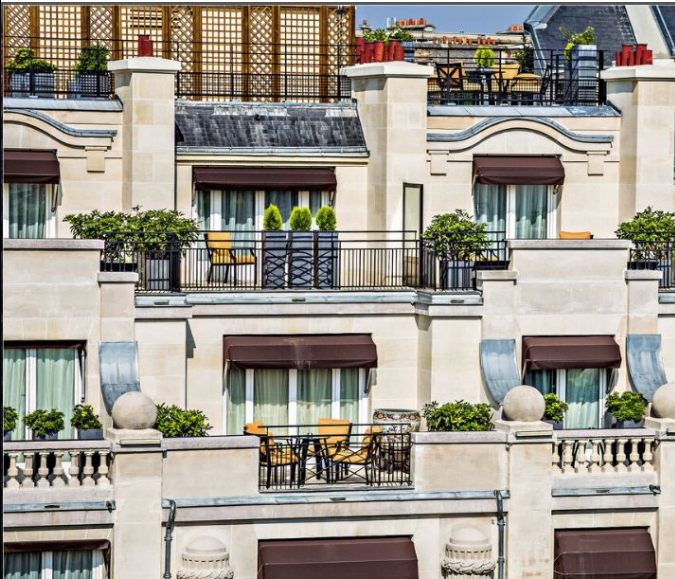
Week 1: Nano Usability Study

We asked 3 travelers to perform a single task on Marriott.com: find and book a hotel for an upcoming trip. This test provided the basis for a general UX assessment of Marriott.com and the Bonvoy mobile app.

Week 2: User Research Memo

We achieved executive sponsorship via a memorandum advocating for user research as the foundation of the redesign project.

Week 3: User Questionnaire

To provide quantitative attitudinal and demographic data about Marriott's users, we developed a survey to discover who our users are and what kind of experience they expect from a hotel booking site.

Project Background

Week 4: User Research Plan

With stakeholder input, we presented our assessment of the current state of Marriott.com and developed a plan outlining the goals, research questions both broad and specific, and recommendations for next steps.

Week 5: User Research Methods

As part of the planning process, we assessed various research methods, landing on user interviews as the most appropriate way to ascertain the perceptions, goals, and motivations of current and potential Marriott users.

Week 6: Interviews

We crafted an interview guide detailing research goals, questions, and hypotheses, which also served as the script for the interviews we conducted.

LAS ALCOBAS, A LUXURY COLLECTION HOTEL, NAPA VALLEY
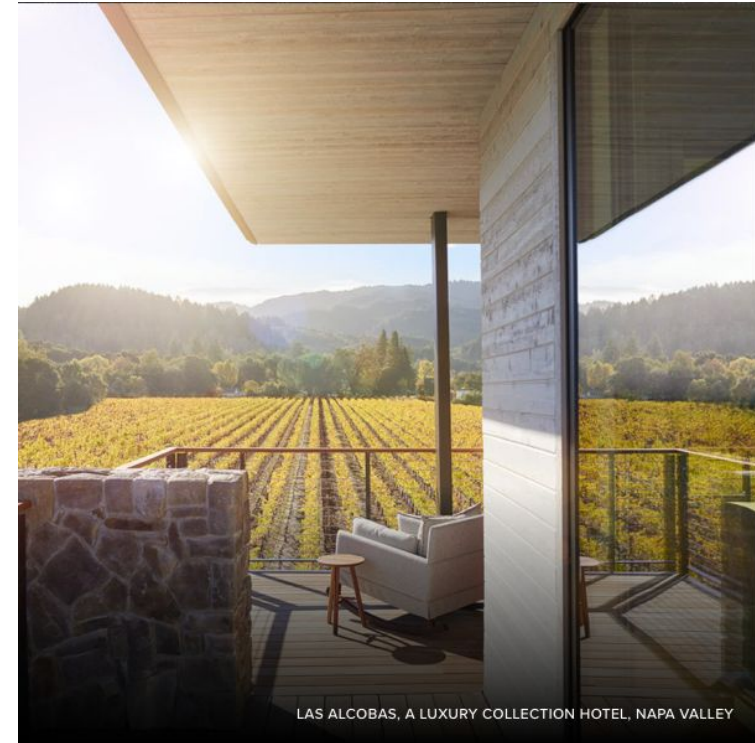
To design solutions that help users achieve their goals with Marriott.com, we needed to understand what those goals are and how they might vary based on the user's context, past experiences, and travel habits. To bridge the gap between user needs and Marriott's business objectives, we focused our interviews on achieving project goals for understanding where our users are coming from in terms of their travel habits and preferences.

Research Goals

1. **Learn about users' background, motivations, and context for travel.**

2. **Discover what tools, information, and steps users take to plan their trips and book hotel stays.**

3. **Shed light on users' recent hotel experiences in terms of finding, booking, and staying at hotels.**

Knowing why users to prefer one site over another, what their priorities are for booking a hotel, what they value in a rewards membership, and when and how they might use a mobile app or book a travel package will help Marriott produce more competitive digital properties that attract and retain customers.

Marriott's Business Goals

1. **Increase hotel bookings via digital properties by 10%.**

2. **Increase reservations for our Luxury and Lifestyle Collection hotel categories.**

3. **Gain 10,000 incremental members of the Marriott Rewards loyalty program in the first quarter after the redesign.**

4. **Decrease by 20% the number of people starting and then abandoning a reservation.**

5. **Increase by 5% the number of people choosing a hotel and flight package (vs. just booking their hotel alone).**

User Research Methodology

For our research interviews, we recruited and recorded one-on-one conversations with 3 potential Marriott users. For participant comfort and convenience, we met them in their homes and tried to eliminate as many distractions as possible. For rapid turnaround, we recruited participants using a friends-and-family approach. These users were fairly representative in terms of gender, income, reasons for travel, and travel frequency, though they were less diverse in age, occupation, and race.

Our Interview Guide provided the questions we wanted answers to as well as those we asked participants directly, focusing on themes outlined in our research goals.

The structure of the interview was composed of 3 parts:

- **Warm up.** We asked a few easy questions to both break the ice and set the tone for the rest of the interaction.

- **Interview.** This was the meat of the conversation. Specific questions we asked users varied based on their responses.

- **Cool down.** We signaled the end of the interview by asking about users' upcoming trips and to share their "craziest" stories about hotel stays.

Data Analysis

Research data from our interviews was analyzed using a mix of techniques. First, we transcribed the recordings, paying special attention to responses that seemed to reveal something of interest about that user. Next, we used various approaches to drill down into users' underlying needs and generate resultant insights.
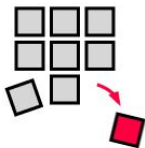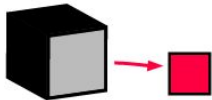
Deconstruction
We broke down the transcripts into their constituent parts, analyzing user responses semantically.
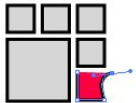
Manipulation
We re-arranged responses in columns by to more easily pick out patterns and differences in participant responses to the same question.

Abstraction
We looked beyond the details of users' anecdotes to surface the common themes that point to underlying motivations.
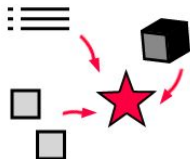
Synthesis
We incorporated previous findings from the Nano Usability study, Marriott's business needs, and interview responses to generate insights that will define the direction of the redesign project.

- To help Marriott satisfy their goal of increasing reservations for their Luxury line, we wanted to find out how brand-loyal users are when it comes to hotels. It turns out that this is highly dependent on users' motivations for choosing their hotel in the first place.

- Our hypothesis was partially validated particularly for non-rewards members, who want the best value for their money regardless of the hotel chain. On the other hand, hotel rewards membership embeds brand loyalty by virtue of users' motivations to earn as many points as possible, which they can only do by sticking with their chosen hotel chain. "A lot of times though we just go directly to the hotel websites, so even if we're not using rewards points, we'll still stay there because we're accruing more rewards points."

- The rewards members we interviewed (who also travel more frequently) commented on the importance of "quality" when choosing hotels, which may drive them towards specific brands they know will meet their expectations. "We do like a little bit upgraded hotels. We're beyond the *Motel 6* and stuff like that. We don't like it anymore."

- All 3 users revealed that they are unlikely to complain about a poor or mediocre hotel stay, choosing instead to avoid that particular hotel in the future. "I just live with it. I don't complain. I just say, 'Eww, I'm not going to stay here again.'"

Hypothesis

Users are more likely to avoid certain hotel brands based on negative experiences than to book a hotel because it's their favorite brand.

- Marriott wants to increase bookings via digital properties by 10%. To accomplish this goal, it is imperative that users feel they are getting the best value for their money by booking with Marriott.

- We discovered through our interviews and Nano Usability study that finding the best deal on hotels is critical for less frequent travelers and non-rewards members. These users are more likely to book with hotel aggregator sites because they can more easily compare costs across different brands. "It all starts with the price…What do you get for the money? All things being equal, amenity-wise, then of course the lowest price wins. Unless you're like a brand-snob or something."

- For hotel rewards members, the ability to accrue points takes precedence. The business traveler we interviewed reported that when planning his family vacations, "My wife tells me where she wants to go, and then I see how many points I have wherever. I then I look at the top 3 places where I have the most points to see where we can go the cheapest, or free."

- Even though hotel booking behaviors vary among rewards and non-rewards members, the root motivation for both is finding accommodations that can best help them keep travel costs down.

Hypothesis

Clear and upfront pricing is critical to leisure travelers when deciding on whether to book a hotel.

- Marriott wants to gain 10,000 incremental members of the Marriott Rewards loyalty program in the first quarter after the redesign. To help Marriott achieve competitive advantage, we wanted to know about users' rewards memberships and what value they get from them.

- In our Nano Usability study, one user cited that she would book and join Marriott rewards in the hopes of getting a free night at a hotel. In our interviews, user Paul explained that he's never joined a rewards program because, "Those are for people who travel frequently. For business, particularly. What kind of rewards can you get for going to a hotel once a year?"

Hypothesis

Users aren't inclined to join travel rewards programs unless they travel for business as well as leisure.

- Business travelers are both more likely to join rewards programs and to prioritize quality when choosing a hotel. "Initially, I used to just stay at the Holiday Inn all the time cause points were easy to come by, but Hilton is a step up from Holiday Inn so I shifted over there. The points are a little harder to come by but the quality is a little better, so that's where I take the family."

- User Byron joined Hilton's rewards program to be able to stay with his colleagues while on business trips. "...because most of the guys I travel with, we often meet from different cities. They're all members of Hilton, so I joined Hilton so that we could stay in the same hotel." He also reported choosing where to stay based on recommendations from colleagues who are based out of his business destination.

- None of the users we interviewed were inclined to book travel packages, for different reasons. For our two rewards members, the structure of their programs restricts how and where they can book services. Our non-rewards member reported traveling most often via car, though he also mentioned combining his flight and rental car for a recent trip due to "price and convenience."

- Marriott rewards members might be more incentivized to book packages if they can earn or use more points by doing so. "I probably could, but more often than not, they're all separate entities. I don't think National has anything to do with Delta, or, I think Delta supports Hertz, so... I get more points going through National, but maybe if they were all together, it could create a bigger points package."

- Travel packages could potentially be more enticing to infrequent travelers for the money they could save by combining bookings. The challenge here may lie in presenting cost savings opportunities to these users at the right time and generally making them more aware of the benefits.

Hypothesis

Users tend to book travel packages only for longer, higher-cost trips, such as cruises or international travel.

Research Results: Mobile use

MARRIOTT BONVOY™

- Results of our interviews revealed that users have a strong preference towards the full site experience when it comes to conducting financial transactions with hotel websites.

- Low mobile app use is due to a combination of factors, including lack of awareness of hotel app capabilities, mistrust of mobile phone security for financial transactions, and habituation to routine interactions on the full website.

- User Byron cited familiarity his hotel chain's website: "I know it better, because when I'm at work and I'm booking things I just don't mess around with my phone that much."

- User Paul is concerned about security: "I prefer to use an actual computer because I feel more secure that way. I generally try not to do credit card transactions on my phone."

- User Rebecca explained that she regularly uses her iPad and iPhone to research potential vacation destinations and accomodations at home, but she uses her device's built-in browser rather than a dedicated app.

- Although our hypothesis in this case was not validated, we strongly suspect that broadening our interview pool to include other types of travelers may reveal different patterns of mobile use.

Hypothesis

Users are more likely to use a mobile app to book a hotel stay if they are business travelers or are already in-transit.

Recommendations

Further Research
To better assess mobile travel planning, we recommend conducting interviews with more diverse users, followed by usability tests for the Bonvoy mobile app. This will allow us to better understand user attitudes and expectations for mobile booking.

Brand recognition
To increase rewards members, Marriott should focus its marketing efforts towards business/frequent travelers, as these users are the most likely to be brand loyal because they get the most value from traditional rewards programs. Because Marriott is already known for the high quality of its hotel lines, the company is well positioned to capitalize on their reputation with business travelers.

Increasing Rewards Membership
To drive rewards membership among less frequent leisure travelers, Marriott should front-load incentives to join, such as more points for the first stay or upgraded rooms for the first booking. This would have the added benefit of increasing brand loyalty and encouraging more transactions via Marriott digital properties.

Recommendations

Sort by Price

To encourage users to book on Marriott.com rather than aggregators like Expedia, we recommend adding the ability to sort search results by Price on the website. Advertising a rate discount to users who encounter Marriott hotels within an aggregator site could also help drive more web traffic towards Marriott.com. To get that discount, of course, users would have to book directly with Marriott.

Group rates

Some business travelers might be incentivized to join a hotel rewards program by virtue of networking opportunities and workplace camaraderie. Offering these users more points for group bookings could help increase conversion rates.

Hotel reviews

Two out of 3 users we interviewed reported relying on reviews and recommendations from other users. Incorporating this type of content more visibly on Marriott's site may help users feel more secure in making the best choice of hotel.