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The Invisible Shortlist

Pre-Stay

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Kurt Weinsheimer draws on 25 years in online travel to argue that the shift to AI-powered discovery is categorically different from every platform change that came before it. When a search returns five options instead of fifty, being sixth is the same as being invisible — and most hotels have no idea how they appear, or whether they appear at all, on the shortlists AI systems are already building.

HOW AI DECIDES WHICH HOTELS GET CONSIDERED BEFORE SEARCH BEGINS

Twenty-five years in online travel teaches you to spot a platform shift early. I've watched hotels scramble to master SEO, then metasearch, then OTA ranking, then paid social. Each time, the underlying game was the same: get seen. What's happening now is something different. The question hoteliers are losing sleep over isn't "how do we rank?" It's "how do we even make the list?"

Not long ago, a guest planning a trip would open a browser, search, scroll through a dozen tabs, and eventually land on a page where they could book. That journey still exists, but a growing share of travelers are skipping it entirely. They're typing a question into ChatGPT or Perplexity and getting back five options. Not fifty. Five. And those five feel like a recommendation rather than a list. The contest for hotel bookings is being decided earlier than ever, and in a layer most hoteliers haven't yet learned to compete in.

That shift is real, and it's impacting hoteliers today. According to BCG, about 37% of travelers already use AI-enabled sites to plan and book trips. McKinsey found that 84% of those who have used generative AI for travel report that it improved their experience, and that AI-referred visitors show a 45% lower bounce rate when they do reach a travel site. These aren't early-adopter numbers anymore; they're fundamentally changing how hotels get discovered.

FROM SEARCH ENGINE TO SHORTLIST ENGINE

Traditional search was generous with options. A Google query might return fifty results, and a guest would navigate, read, compare, and decide at their own pace. AI-powered search is the opposite of generous. As Accor's AI and data science chief put it recently: *"With Google, a search gives you 50 results; if you ask ChatGPT, it gives you five, and that is it."*

This compression changes everything about the economics of discovery. When fifty listings compete, a strong OTA ranking or a well-optimized metasearch feed is enough to stay in the game. When the shortlist is five properties, being sixth is the same as being invisible. As the funnel condenses, the margin for error collapses.

What makes the change even more significant is how AI assembles that shortlist. Traditional search engines indexed pages and ranked them by relevance and authority signals, a system that, for all its complexity, hotels had learned to work with. AI systems do something fundamentally different: they interpret intent. A traveler doesn't have to type *"boutique hotel Rome city center."* They can say *"a quiet place to stay in Rome that doesn't feel like a business hotel,"* and the LLM has to figure out what that means, match it to properties whose attributes satisfy the description, and return options it can confidently stand behind.

That confidence is built from data. And most hotels have less usable data than they think. The new shelf space isn't a search ranking or an OTA placement. It's whether AI can read a property clearly enough to recommend it.

WHAT THE MACHINE IS ACTUALLY READING

There are three layers to how AI systems evaluate and surface a hotel. Understanding them is the first step to competing for the invisible shortlist.

The first is data quality and consistency. Rate parity, accurate amenity information, real-time availability, and consistent policies are no longer just commercial hygiene; they're inputs into ranking systems. An AI agent that identifies pricing inconsistencies or availability that don't match what's bookable will deprioritize the property or remove it from consideration entirely. Transparency has shifted from a brand value to an operational requirement. It's no longer enough to intend to be accurate; the data has to be accurate at the point of retrieval, every time.

The second layer is semantic richness. This is where most hotels currently fall short. AI systems don't read a hotel the way a human reads a website. They parse structured signals and extract meaning from descriptions written for humans. A property that describes itself as *"a premier urban retreat with unparalleled service"* gives an AI very little to work with. A property that describes a west-facing terrace, a menu built around local producers, and a preference for guests who want a slower pace of city life gives the AI exactly what it needs to match against the specific, experience-led queries that now dominate AI travel searches. The shift to plain-speech search (*"a calm hotel with good light for working," "somewhere romantic without being stuffy"*) demands that properties describe themselves the way travelers actually think and talk.

The third layer is reputation as a trust signal. AI systems increasingly read review sentiment as a proxy for reliability. Properties with strong, consistent, and recent reviews surface more confidently than those with patchy or dated feedback. Responding to reviews promptly signals to AI models that a brand is active and accountable. This means that reputation management, long treated as a post-stay function, is now shaping the pre-stay pipeline. What a guest writes after checking out influences whether the next guest ever considers checking in.

We see this play out in data every day, in the billions of real-time intent signals that flow through the travel ecosystem, capturing what travelers are searching for, exploring, and comparing before they ever declare booking intent. That signal layer is increasingly where competitive advantage lives. The properties that understand their own data and make it readable by both humans and machines are the ones that appear where decisions are being made.

THE TRUST PROBLEM, AND WHY IT'S ALSO A PHILOSOPHY PROBLEM

Hospitality people talk about trust in human terms: the front desk agent who remembers my name as a guest, a problem in my room fixed before it's mentioned twice. That kind of trust is built slowly, stay by stay. AI operates on a different currency entirely. It doesn't remember a great check-in.

What it reads is whether your rates are consistent, your amenity data is up to date, and your reviews are recent. Machine trust, in other words, is just data integrity at scale. The interesting thing is how closely that mirrors what the best hotels have always done anyway.

A hotel that is honest about what it is (accurate about price, clear about what's included, transparent about its policies, and consistent in how it describes itself across every channel) builds machine trust automatically. A hotel that overpromises, carries outdated information in its listings, or lists amenities that were removed two years ago fails the machine test for the same reason it eventually fails the human test: it's not telling the truth clearly enough.

That's clarifying rather than threatening. The properties that struggle in AI-mediated discovery are often the same ones that have always struggled to convert, because inconsistency erodes confidence, whether the decision-maker is a traveler or a language model. Getting your data right isn't a technical project. It's a commitment to being what you say you are.

A PRE-STAY CHECKLIST FOR THE AI ERA

So where do you begin? Here are five things worth doing now, roughly in order of priority.

- **Audit for GEO, not just SEO:** Ask ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Gemini about your property. Ask them the kinds of questions your guests actually ask, not just your hotel name. What comes back? What's missing, wrong, or represented by a competitor instead? The gap between what you think AI knows about you and what it actually surfaces is your starting point.
- **Invest in semantically rich content:** Describe your property the way a traveler would ask for it, not the way a marketing team would headline it. Think in experiences and attributes: the kind of light in the morning, the feel of the neighborhood, what kind of guest thrives there. AI needs to match you to a vague human desire. Give it the vocabulary to do that.
- **Treat data quality as infrastructure:** Rate parity, accurate amenity data, and real-time availability are no longer just commercial hygiene; they're ranking inputs. A focused audit of your feeds across OTAs, metasearch, and your own site is worth more than any single campaign optimization right now.
- **Build reputation as a pre-stay asset:** Respond to reviews consistently and promptly. Encourage guests to leave specific, attribute-rich feedback rather than generic scores. Use in-stay tools to catch issues before they become public. Reputation is no longer something you manage after the fact; it feeds the funnel before it starts.
- **Don't abandon paid marketing; understand where it fits.** Paid marketing remains important. Google's AI Mode still surfaces ads alongside generative answers, and existing paid investments carry over. But GEO and paid now need to work in parallel, not in silos. Think of paid as capturing demand once a traveler has moved to active search; GEO is about shaping the shortlist before they get there.

THE HOTELS THAT WIN UPSTREAM WILL OWN THE STAY

Every distribution shift I've lived through has asked something specific of hoteliers. Direct booking meant owning your channel. Metasearch meant getting serious about rate discipline. OTAs meant your photos and reviews had better be good. This one asks for something that sounds almost philosophical but is really just operational: be legible. To systems that don't care about your brand story, your awards, or your renovation. They just need to be able to read you clearly enough to recommend you.

The good news is that what AI values and what great hospitality is built on are one and the same: consistency, honesty, and a clear sense of what makes a property distinctly itself. The hotels that get this right first won't just win more bookings in the short term. They'll compound the advantage, because AI rewards signal quality over time, and trust, once established in a system's memory, is hard to displace.

Expedia's CMO recently said he expects the next conversation to be agent-to-agent; AI systems negotiating directly with other AI systems on a traveler's behalf. I think he's right, and I think it's closer than most hoteliers realize. The window to get your data in order (your content readable, your reputation current) is open now. It won't stay open indefinitely. The invisible shortlist is already being built. The only real question is whether your property is on it.

RESOURCES

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AI has already built the shortlist.



...is **your**
hotel on it?

Sojern helps hotels become visible where AI-driven travel decisions begin. By turning billions of real-time traveler intent signals into actionable marketing, guest experience, and reputation insights, we help properties earn a place on the shortlist before traditional search even begins.

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