

Google's DMA Tightrope: Navigating Search Result Battles Between Intermediaries and Direct Sellers in Online Travel

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Google captured most of the online travel industry's headlines this past week as it seeks to "balance" the competing interests of regulators, on the one hand, and intermediaries and direct sellers, on the other hand. As long as traditional search maintains its outsized influence on online travel, the outcome of these discussions will have a significant effect on the industry. Whether AI makes irrelevant this entire controversy remains to be seen - for now.

- **Closed Door Negotiations Produce No Definitive Solution for Google.** This past week the European Commission conducted two days of closed door workshops between Google and online intermediaries and direct sellers from the retail and travel industries. At issue were Google's latest proposals for presenting search results in compliance with the EU's Digital Markets Act (DMA) (or at least Google's interpretation of the DMA). Failure to reach a solution will likely lead the EU to impose significant fines against Google.

Two options were presented at the closed door meetings. The first option placed intermediaries at the top of search results where users could open an accordion style listing of the intermediary's products and services. Under this first option, direct sellers could only place links within the intermediaries' search results. The second option featured a box (below and separate from the intermediaries) where direct sellers could place links to their products and services. Between the two presented options, direct sellers generally favored the second option though questions around which sellers are featured in the box, how sellers are ranked, how sellers' content is sourced and how much content can be displayed remain unanswered.

Google's latest proposals underscore the challenging position that hoteliers find themselves. While Google is understandably motivated to avoid significant penalties under the DMA, its interpretation of the DMA, specifically, the requirement that it not discriminate against competing service providers (e.g., travel intermediaries) is leading it to favor competing intermediaries (e.g., Booking.com / Expedia) over hoteliers, who are owed, at best, an obligation to be treated fairly.

Headlines This Week

Travelers Increasingly Turning to AI for Leisure Trip Planning

July 10, 2025 via Phocus Wire

AI tools are becoming more common for leisure travel planning, especially with travelers from emerging markets.

Google's Closed-Door EU Workshops See Tensions Persist Between Sellers

July 10, 2025 via MLex

Two days of private workshops over Google's proposals for presenting search results in compliance with EU law continued to surface the friction between specialized comparison services and direct sellers, MLex understands. Google proposed two ways to break the regulatory stand-off, with the second option - where companies such as hotel chains or airlines have their own website section - gaining more support. But there was still disquiet over the proposal and the European Commission invited further feedback.

The Constant Battle: How Booking.com's Security Chief Fights Travel Scams at Scale

July 9, 2025 via Web in Travel

For cybercriminals, the travel industry has become a lucrative new target and it's not hard to see why. Big money, emotional stakes, digital self-service, and a globally distributed ecosystem of users and suppliers make the perfect storm for fraudsters.

Google Says Discord Over Search Results is Unresolved; Risks EU Antitrust Fine

July 9, 2025 via Reuters

Google said it failed this week to resolve disagreements with hotels, airlines and specialized search services such as Skyscanner over how it presents search results, putting it at risk of a hefty EU antitrust fine.

Google's Search Solution for EU Gatekeeper Law Favors Booking Over Hotels

July 7, 2025 via MLex

Google will this week present online sellers and specialist travel sites with a choice between two models for search results, hoping one will garner enough support to stave off a fine under the Digital Markets Act. Its solution will promote digital intermediaries in transactional services - like Booking.com or Kelkoo ...

Google Adds Price Comparison Feature to Meet EU Antitrust Rules

July 5, 2025 via Tech in Asia

Users can click through to platforms like Expedia or Booking.com, or access individual hotel or airline pages.

Booking.com and OpenAI Personalize Travel at Scale

July 3, 2025 via OpenAI

By integrating its data systems with OpenAI's LLMs, Booking.com delivers smarter search, faster support, and intent-driven travel experiences.

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