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Online Travel Update: Virtual experiences may remain relevant over the long haul; hospitality industry plans for post-pandemic group travel; Google aims to eliminate third-party cookies

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This week's Update features stories on Google's recently announced online third-party tracking changes, the (permanent) nature of virtual experiences, growth of "digital" kitchens and important updates on what group events may look like post pandemic. For those of you who missed our mid-week update on Tripadvisor's troubling plans for obtaining discount rates for its Tripadvisor Plus subscription service, we've also included that story again. Enjoy.

[Are Virtual Experiences Here to Stay?](#)

("Why virtual tours and activities will stick around after the pandemic," *March 4, 2021 via Phocus Wire*)

One small Seattle-based company seems to think so. Even months before the pandemic began, Amazon was working on its virtual experiences offering. With the launch of Amazon Explore in September, Amazon joined Airbnb, Viator and Klook in offering "risk-free" virtual experiences and activities. Now with the pandemic's end in sight, members of the travel industry are asking whether these travel alternatives will remain relevant. Amazon and other experience platforms believe that these offerings will continue to be used as both an alternative to travel and as a compliment to travel (think Rick Steves). Actual suppliers of the virtual experiences report mixed results, though most recognize they may play an important sales and marketing function in the future. What will be most interesting to watch in our post-pandemic world is whether lessons learned (and the supplier connections made) by Amazon while offering virtual experiences will lead the behemoth e-commerce platform to transition

to actual experiences and activities.

Early Indicators of Post-Pandemic Group Travel

("IHG first to launch GroupSync Engage," February 25, 2021 via Hotel Business)

("The Hottest Company in Virtual Events Just Raised Another \$400 Million," March 4, 2021 via Event Manager Blog)

Last week, Intercontinental Hotels Group (IHG) announced plans to begin offering online group booking functionality at approximately 30 of its U.S. hotels. The functionality, GroupSync Engage, is the result of a collaboration between IHG and Groups360 that allows meeting planners to book guest rooms and meeting space, select food and beverage and A/V offerings, and configure meeting rooms. IHG hopes the new functionality will not only accelerate the return of group business meetings but will also allow meeting planners and hotels to avoid the dreaded RFP process. While one company hopes to facilitate the return of in-person meetings, another seeks to allow meeting planners to avoid in-person meetings altogether. Meet Hopin. Last week, Hopin announced that it raised an additional \$400 million in a Series C funding round at a jaw-dropping \$5.65 billion valuation. The company now claims to have 82,000 organizations hosting events on the company's platform. Last month, Marriott announced that it was working with Hopin (and other platform providers) as part of its Connect with Confidence hybrid meeting solution.

Google to Put an End to Third-Party Cookies

("Google pledges to avoid user-identified tracking when phasing out third-party cookies," March 3, 2021 via MLEX Insight)

It wasn't that long ago that we [covered](#) Apple's decision to limit third-parties' ability to track the online activities of its iOS users. Now comes Google. Last week, Google announced changes to its platform, which will prohibit third parties tracking cookies to monitor users' online movements. At the same time, Google pledged not to offer third parties other alternative means of tracking online usage.

Other news:

Hospitality Companies Follow Pandemic Demand by Offering Villa Rentals

March 2, 2021 via Skift Travel News (subscription may be required)

A luxury short-term rental company's expansion into Mexico is yet another sign hospitality brands like what they see in the future of high-end vacation home rentals. Los Angeles-based AvantStay is expanding into the Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, market through a partnership with luxury villa rental brand Blue Desert Cabo, the companies announced last Tuesday exclusively to Skift.

Expedia Group and Booking Holdings Slashed Marketing by \$6 Billion in 2020 (But Airbnb Now Makes an Entrance)

March 2, 2021 via Phocus Wire

The combined marketing muscle of Expedia Group and Booking Holdings fell to its lowest level in years during a pandemic-slammed 2020. The pair spent \$4.7 billion of sales and marketing in 2020, down almost 60 percent on the figures they produced in the record-breaking 2019.

[Tripadvisor Takes Unusual Route With Private Equity Help to Build Its New Subscription Offering](#)

February 28, 2021 via Skift Travel News (subscription may be required)

Tripadvisor acknowledges that it is building its new subscription program, Tripadvisor Plus, with wholesale rates from "aggregators" - that it refuses to identify - covering 100,000 hotels. Skift has learned, however, that most of these hotel discounts and perks are coming from an unconventional source - travel agency brands within private equity firm Certares' portfolio.

[An Accor-SBE Venture Puts New Spin on Burgeoning 'Ghost Kitchen' Trend](#)

March 3, 2021 via travelweekly.com

When it comes to hotel food and beverage, the future appears to be digital. Digital kitchens — also known as ghost or virtual kitchens — have gained significant traction amid the pandemic, as diners remain homebound and demand for food delivery surges. The concept typically involves a shared kitchen space, which is utilized by a variety of delivery-only brands looking to leverage economies of scale.

[Why Omni and Loews Opted for Partnership Over a Merger](#)

March 3, 2021 via Skift (subscription may be required)

Hotel industry analysts shouldn't see a new sales partnership between Omni Hotels & Resorts and Loews Hotels & Co. as the beginning steps of some kind of pandemic-induced merger of necessity. Omni and Loews launched a cross-marketing and sales partnership this week aimed at giving their respective customer bases more options in markets where the two brands don't overlap.

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