

The End of Keywords? Travel Marketing Faces an AI Reset

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Good Saturday morning from San Diego . . . Our weekly Online Travel Update for the week ending Friday, May 1, 2026, is below. As the number of stories included in our weekly Update indicate, it was a busy week in online travel with Booking Holdings' quarterly earnings release (a complete copy of the earnings call transcript is linked below) and a newly announced partnership between Uber and Expedia. Enjoy.

An End to Keywords? A question that many of us have been asking for some time now - particularly as we reconsider the keyword provisions that we've relied on for years now. Google's recent announcements may provide an answer. Now that Google has introduced AI platforms that may soon replace traditional organic and paid search, Google has now turned its attention to monetizing those platforms. This past week, Google announced changes to its AI Max advertising products that will match ads to users' conversational queries, not just a keyword or two. With these newly announced Google tools, marketers may define messages, audiences and exclusions, but Google decides (not the marketer) when such messages, audiences and exclusions match users' intent and appear. What will markets pay to be part of this new uncertain system? Only time will tell. For those of us struggling with keyword provisions and their enforcement, it is time to re-think our approach.

Swiss Authorities to Examine Keyword Restrictions. The Swiss Competition Commission has announced two new investigations into search engine advertising, including advertising by three package travel companies. At issue are alleged agreements among companies to refrain from bidding on keywords associated with each other's competing brands. Given our first highlighted story, one has to ask how relevant this investigation might be in a year or two.

Uber's SuperApp Aspirations. On Wednesday, Uber announced a series of new products and features targeting travel. The biggest (and by far, the most publicized) new feature is the soon availability of hotels to Uber users in the U.S. through a newly announced partnership with Expedia (Dara is back in travel). Ultimately, Uber expects to offer 700,000 hotels with Uber One members earning 10% back in Uber One credits with each booking and hotel discounts (up to 20%) on a rolling list of hotels. As part of the newly announced partnership, Uber rides will also soon be integrated directly into the Expedia app. Other announced features include Uber Travel, which includes curated travel recommendations, Open Table reservations and Uber's new "room service," which arranges for food to be delivered to the hotel room you just booked on Expedia. Exactly how the promised hotel room discounts would be provided or funded by Expedia wasn't made clear.

Booking Holdings Issues First Quarter Earnings Report. I will let others far more knowledgeable speak to Booking Holdings' newly announced first quarter financials. Here are a few of my takeaways from the OTA's first quarter earnings release:

- Booking.com's continued focus on the U.S. market is now producing real results. U.S. room night growth accelerated in the first quarter (fourth consecutive quarter) to the low teens largely through domestic bookings. Booking.com's growing U.S. strength wasn't just limited to hotels, but extended across flights, cars and packages. According to Booking, its strong U.S. numbers make clear that Booking is now taking share from its U.S. competitors (hello, Expedia).
- Booking estimates that the Middle East conflict has reduced room night growth by approximately 2 percentage points (with similar effects on gross bookings). Booking expects these effects to continue (and even escalate) into the second quarter, but it is expecting a third and fourth quarter rebound.
- With regard to popular AI platforms, CEO Glenn Fogel believes that the so-called "performance marketing platforms," will ultimately be very advantageous to Booking. Among other things, Booking believes that AI platforms will increase the number of travels willing to purchase travel digitally.

Claude Announces New Connectors. Anthropic announced this past week a list of new apps that users can connect with Claude. By connecting third party apps, users can interact with multiple apps while in a single Claude conversation. Once connected, these apps become part of the Claude conversation as Claude recommends apps it believes most relevant to users' preferences, context or conversation. If two or more connected apps are relevant, users may see several apps. The newly announced "connector" apps include Booking.com, TripAdvisor and Uber (and now by extension, Expedia?).

Have a great week everyone.

Google's AI Max Positions Travel Ads for AI Overviews and AI Mode

April 30, 2026 via Skift

Google built the AI search surfaces displacing travel's organic traffic. Now it's bringing travel advertisers into the system that powers them - and the price is the keyword control paid search has run on for decades.

DirectBooker Announces Hotel Partners, ChatGPT App

April 30, 2026 via PhocusWire

DirectBooker, an aggregator connecting hotels to artificial intelligence (AI) assistants, has announced supply agreements with five hotel chains including BWH Hotels and Radisson Hotel Group.

Travel Sites, Casinos Face Swiss Probe into Keyword Bidding on Search Engines

April 30, 2026 via MLex

Three travel companies and almost all online casino operators in Switzerland are under investigation for alleged collusion in agreeing not to compete on bidding for keyword son search engines. The Swiss competition authority has started two separate probes into ...

Uber Expands into Travel with Hotel Bookings and New In-App Features

April 29, 2026 via Uber

Uber Technologies, Inc., the world's leading mobility and delivery platform, announced a new set of products and features at its annual GO-GET product event, including hotel bookings and new travel tools.

Booking Holdings, Inc. Q1 2026 Earnings Call

April 28, 2026 via Booking Holdings

We began 2026 with solid execution across our global business. Our results this quarter reflect the continued momentum of our long-term strategy and progress in advancing our mission: to make it easier for everyone to experience the world.

Hilton Says ChatGPT App Is Coming and to Expect More 'Select' Deals

April 28, 2026 via Skift

Hilton wants AI platforms to need it more than it needs them. That's a bold position for a company still describing its tools as "early days."

Google Cloud Uses Travel to Show What Agentic AI Can Actually Do

April 25, 2026 via Skift

Google Cloud Next highlighted travel to show that "agentic" AI can collapse trip decisions into a single flow, using the cruise business as the top example.

New Connectors in Claude for Everyday Life

April 23, 2026 via Claude

Today we're expanding what you can connect to Claude. Alongside the work tools you already use, you can now connect the apps you use throughout your week, including AllTrails, Instacart, Audible, Tripadvisor, Intuit TurboTax, and more.

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