

## Search Engine Optimization: Application of Long Tail Theory on Accommodation Websites

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**Abstract-** Search engine marketing is currently the most popular form of online marketing. This paper highlights the importance of search engine marketing for hotels and the scope of Long tail keywords for search engine optimization of hotel websites. Search engine result pages (SERP) on Google for Top 11 keywords were analyzed to identify the top 10 search results (that is, accommodation providers) for Google search engine. It was found out that the webpages of providers of ‘niche’ products (such as specialized accommodation) are optimized to rank high in SERP for Long tail keywords. While popular keywords showed that webpages were optimized to appear with similar rankings on both search engines, the Long tail keywords indicated that webpages were optimized for either and not both of them. This reflects a lacuna on part of the niche marketers. This paper draws from three different streams of knowledge – Long tail theory, search engine optimization and marketing of accommodation products. Niche accommodation products can draw valuable lessons in optimizing their webpages for relevant Long tail keywords on search engine.

**Keywords-** Search engine optimization; long tail; niche marketing; hotel websites; keyword search

### 1. I. INTRODUCTION

Long tail theory describes the phenomenon that the distribution of demand across products has shifted away from best-seller products to niche products owing to several factors such as market fragmentation, low search costs and, growth of social media. It is a deviation from the famous 80-20 principle (a.k.a. Pareto’s principle) which highlights more (sales) of less (product) whereas the long tail advocates less (sales) of more (products). The long tail theory is an extension of an influential article published in Wired Magazine [1]. As a business concept, the long tail phenomenon is attractive because “products that are in low demand or have low sales volume can collectively make up a

market share that rivals or exceeds the relatively few current bestsellers or blockbusters if the store or distribution channel is large enough” [2]. The phrase ‘long tail’ is from the name of the low-frequency portion of a statistical distribution [2].

The tourism industry, comprising of travel and hospitality sectors, has experienced the long tail effect as evident from the emergence of new destinations, new products and services, and new customer segments. This is evident from Figure 1 that highlights the declining popularity of popular destinations and the increasing popularity of less popular destinations [3]. The marketing implications of long tail theory abound for the tourism

industry. It emphasizes the collective importance of the popular and less popular products. It reflects the diversity of supply and demand and spreading out of demand over more products. The long tail products are typically rare and unpopular, but they appeal to a niche market that is prepared to pay a higher price. As limited supply meets the right demand, increased profitability benefits the marketer. Long tail theory represents an exclusive opportunity for online marketers by transcending the limitations of space and time.

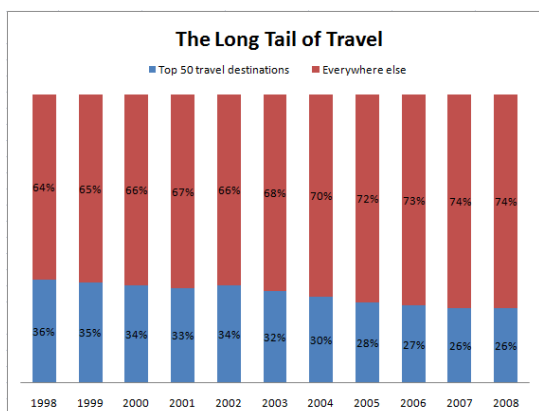


Figure 1. Travel data (1998-2008) showing the long tail effect among tourism destinations [Source: Anderson, 2009]

As an information-intensive industry, tourism stands to benefit from the Internet as a marketing platform. Despite the emergence of social media, search engines represent the most popular online marketing tool, primarily through two ways: Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Advertising (SEA). SEO is the process of improving rankings of a web page in the unpaid ‘organic’ search results by which a webpage increases its visibility and attracts more traffic. SEA (a.k.a. paid search) is a method of placing online advertisements for

payment on the search engine result pages (SERP). The long tail concept finds relevance in search engine marketing: in SEO when a website is optimized to rank high in a SERP for certain keywords; in SEA when an advertisement related to the searched keyword is placed prominently in the ‘paid search’ portion of SERP. Keyword research is the basis of all search engine marketing. Long tail keywords, when compared to the popular keywords for a product category, are longer and more specific keyword phrases that visitors are more likely to use when they are closer to a point-of-purchase. As shown in Figure 2, Long tail keywords work well for niche products and they bring less traffic, cost less, face less competition, offer scope for premium pricing and greater conversion from search to visit to purchase.

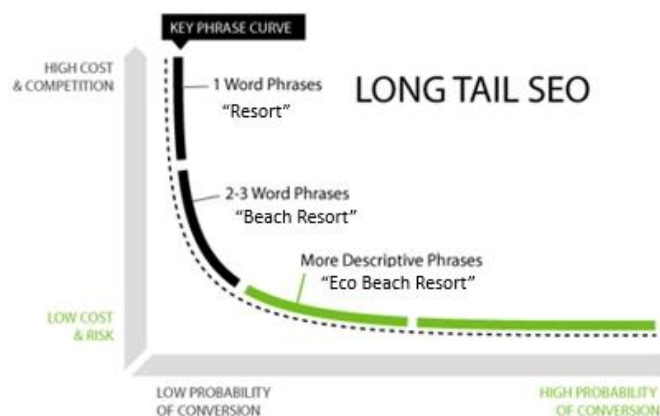


Figure 2. Illustration of Long tail in Search engine optimization [11]

According to [9], a full-service hotel internet marketing firm, more than half of website booking revenue (56%) across its client portfolio comes as direct referral from the search engines, including organic (33%) and paid (23%) search. These findings highlight the importance of search engine

marketing for hotels and the scope of long tail keywords for search engine optimization and advertising of hotel websites.

## II. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Search engine marketing is by far the largest source of revenue for Google [13], which is the market leader of search engine providers in most Western countries, usually clearly ahead of Yahoo and Microsoft's Bing [8]. However, in markets like China, Russia and South Korea, local search engines like Baidu, Yandex and Naver command a larger share of the market when compared to Google[15]. Search engine marketing efforts account for approximately 50% of all online advertising expenditures [10]. The main reason for this high share is that search engines have become the main tool consumers use to locate information [14][12]. Despite this huge importance for businesses, research on search engine marketing is still limited, which is not too surprising as this kind of advertising is relatively new when compared to other traditional media formats. Reference [16] suggested that two streams of research on search engine marketing exist: one dealing with the optimal design of keyword auctions and possible improvements to benefit the search engine providers and the other one dealing with advertising effectiveness to benefit the advertisers.

Researches on the marketing implications of Long tail theory are scarce as well. Though popularized by [1][3], the idea of Long tail was built upon work by [4], who showed that a large proportion of book sales come from books that are not frequently purchased. According to [17], there is an under-exploited spectrum of customers' tastes to which pre-Internet

retailers could not cater in a cost-effective manner because of the physical limitations of space and time. The existence of the Long tail phenomenon is also supported by [6] and [4]. Although [5],[7] and [16] did not observe such a shift, the popularity of long tail-thinking among practicing managers is very high as indicated by industry white papers and blogs.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the existence of Long tail concept in search engine marketing and observe the marketing of niche accommodation products in the long tail of search keywords among the search results. Originally, it was intended to study the Long tail effect in both SEO (that is, organic search) and SEA (that is, paid search). However, the initial observation of paid search results in the first 10 SERPs indicated paid search advertisements from just one accommodation service provider in the chosen destination (Pondicherry). The rest of the paid search advertisements were placed by intermediaries such as online travel agents or aggregator websites. Hence, it was concluded that there is no scope to study Long tail effect in SEA. But early observations of organic search results indicated that several accommodation service provider websites (webpages) were ranked high and displayed in the SERPs. Therefore it was decided to study the Long tail effect in the SEO of accommodation websites.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This descriptive research was performed by observing the SERPs of the popular search engine, Google. About 11 search keywords or phrases for 'accommodation' category in Pondicherry

city were generated through expert opinion in such a way that they represent a wide spectrum of products available ranging from ‘hotels’ to ‘heritage hotels’ or ‘resorts’ to ‘beach resorts’ to ‘eco beach resorts’ and so on in the destination - Pondicherry. Searches on Google are performed for each of these 11 keywords/phrases. The number of search results (as indicated below the search box on the SERPs by the Search engine) indicated that certain keywords were more popular than others. For example, the search phrase ‘hotels in Pondicherry’ returned 21,90,000 search results while the search phrase ‘heritage hotels in Pondicherry’ yielded only 3,19,000 research results. This clearly showed that ‘hotels’ is a popular keyword, whereas ‘heritage hotels’ is a Long tail keyword. While it was attempted to extract the top 10 search results for all the search keywords/phrases, for practical purposes, only the first 10 SERPs were analyzed. Hence it was not possible to identify the top 10 search results for all the search keywords/phrases. However, research indicates that 91% of searchers do not go past page 1 of the search results and over 50% do not go past the first three results on page 1 for navigational searches where the searcher has a good idea of what he/she wants [18]. But informational searches often require a deeper dive into search results. Hence the researchers considered up to 10 SERPs. The exclusion criteria include online travel agent (OTA) webpages (such as Expedia pages), social media pages (such as TripAdvisor pages) and aggregator pages (such as Stayzilla). The inclusion criterion is a website/webpage of an independent, commercial ‘accommodation’ provider located in Pondicherry.

An illustrative SERP to highlight paid and organic searches are shown in Figure 3. A data entry table (as shown in Figure 4 in appendix) was designed to indicate the top 10 search results (that is, accommodation providers) for each of the 10 search keywords/phrases on Google. The presence in the Google and Bing search result pages were differentiated through a colour contrast scheme.

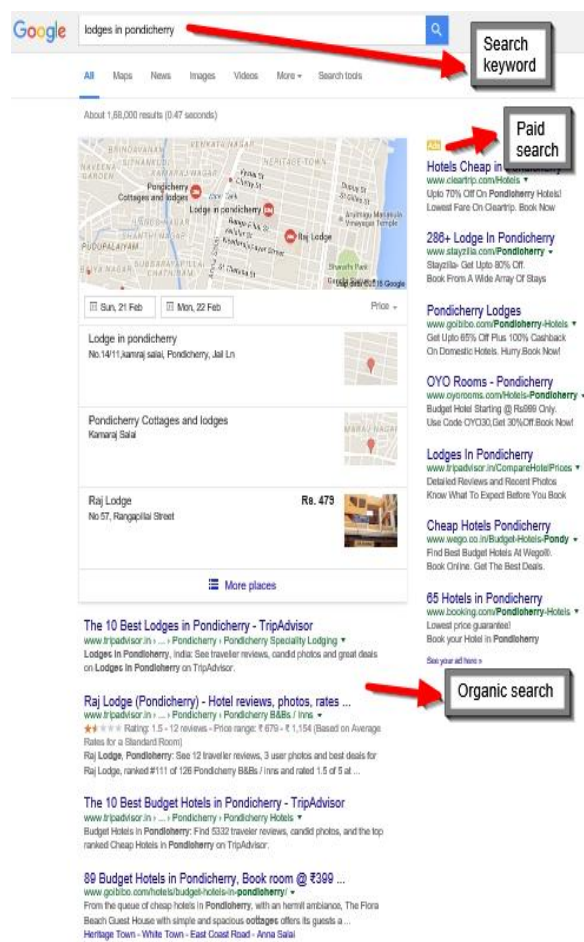


Figure 3. Illustrative Search Engine Results Page showing paid and organic search results

## IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The results indicate the presence of Long tail keywords as there are more results for general accommodation keywords (such as ‘resorts’) and less results for niche accommodation keywords (such as ‘eco beach resorts’). A comparative analysis of the top 10 search results for each of the keywords/phrases show less overlap between popular and Long tail keywords, and it indicates that the webpages of providers of ‘niche’ products are optimized to rank high in the SERP for long tail keywords. These results may be attributed to the product positioning of the respective accommodation providers.

The keywords are shown in columns in Figure 4, and they are sorted in the descending order of the number of search results for each of those keywords. As a result, keywords such as ‘hotels’ and ‘accommodation’ maybe termed popular keywords and keywords such as ‘eco beach resorts’ and ‘homestays’ maybe termed Long tail keywords. The smaller red circle highlights the popular keywords and the corresponding search results. For illustrative purpose, the popular keyword ‘hotels’ may be considered and the top five search results returned by this keyword are identical across both Google and Bing search engines. The larger red circle highlights the Long tail keywords and the corresponding search results. For illustrative purpose, the Long tail keyword ‘eco beach resort’ may be considered. It returned eight search results from Google search result. Out of these, only two (namely, Soorya and Dune resorts) are identical across both the search engines. Google search returned five unique search results and Bing returned two unique search results. This shows that these websites/pages

are not search engine optimized for both Google and Bing. As a result, a search engine may turn a blind eye to a website if it is not optimized to rank high through a search engine’s unique search algorithm.

The right half of the larger red circle indicates scattered yellow boxes which represent websites of niche accommodation providers such as heritage hotels, lodges, eco beach resorts and homestays. None of these accommodation providers appears on the left half of the larger red circle that indicates conventional accommodation providers identified through popular search keywords such as hotels or accommodation. It clearly indicates niche search engine marketing by specialized accommodation providers whose websites/pages are optimized specifically for Long tail keyword search. This finding is further strengthened by the fact that certain accommodation providers showed up only in the SERPs of a particular Long tail keyword (such as Anantha Heritage Hotel for ‘heritage’ keyword and Serenity homestay for ‘homestay’ keyword).

## VI. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the Long tail concept in SEO for accommodation products. An accommodation provider needs to map its product positioning onto the webpage content in order to rank high and show up among the search engine results for relevant keywords. Industry data from [9] highlights the importance of search engine marketing for hotels. For niche marketers, Long tail keywords ensure higher rank and probability of a click-through to the webpage and corresponding conversion. Therefore, niche accommodation providers can draw valuable lessons in optimizing

their webpages for relevant long tail keywords. Also, they need to optimize their webpages for different search engines since no uniform SEO solution can be applied to all search engines.

The search keywords considered in this study were drawn through an expert opinion. If it can be executed based on the actual keywords used by tourists to Pondicherry, the set of keywords and the SERPs may be different. If the study can be replicated in a more mature and organized tourism destination, more clear findings may emerge. It may be observed from Figure 1 that several conventional accommodation providers' websites showed up in the SERPs for Long tail keywords as well. This appears

to be a traffic garnering tactic rather than a precise positioning based on the accommodation product characteristics. This study may be extended to compare the SEO and SEA results at a destination where accommodation providers are practitioners of both. In the given context, it was possible to study SEO results only. Nevertheless, this study reflects a pioneering attempt to study the Long tail effect in the SEO of accommodation websites. The Internet helps businesses to transcend the limitations of time and space, besides lowering the search costs and finding relevant information for customers. As niche products and customers' preferences evolve, Long tail marketing will prove to be a cost-effective and well-targeted solution for businesses.

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## Appendix

Figure 4. Data table showing top 10 (maximum) search results for popular and Long tail keywords/phrases

	HOTEL	ACCOM-	GUESTH-	RESORTS	SERVICEA	BED&BF	HERITA	HOMES	BEACH	LODGES	ECO B R
	B1	B2	B5	B4	B3	B7	B8	B	B6	B9	B10
Ginger											
Atithi											
Promenade											
Aurosociety											
Corbelli											
Sriarobindoashram											
Hotel de											
Sarovar											
hotel de pondicherry											
Lotus pondicherry											
Lorient											
Windflower											
The accord											
Pondicherry guest house											
Meeranjali											
Soorya											
Nalla											
Duneeco											
Purple resorts											
Ashok resort											
Full moon											
Ocean spray											
Club mahindra											
Leshbiscus											
lamaison blache											
vatika guest house											
World guest house											
Hotel alps											
Raj classic											
castleservice											
La maison											
anantha heritage											
gratitude heritage											
hotel de parc											
Villabagound											
leciel											
Dumas											
Residency											
raj lodge											