Knowing the Traveler First

How Sparkboard's Agentic AI Bridges the 45-Day Inspiration Gap

Data, trust, and the future of agentic travel commerce.

✶ **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The silence before the booking

Independent travel advisors face an existential challenge that has nothing to do with the quality of their expertise. Expedia, Hotels.com, and the global OTA complex spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually to dominate the digital advertising landscape — a war that no independent advisor or boutique agency can win on spending alone.

But Expedia Group's own Path to Purchase research (2023) reveals something the big platforms would prefer to keep quiet: the traveler's decision-making journey is long, fragmented, and deeply personal — and the moment a traveler finally converts, the path that brought them there is almost entirely invisible to the industry that served them. Google's micro-moments research confirms this: travel decisions are shaped across hundreds of intent-driven interactions, and over 60% of travel discovery now happens outside traditional booking platforms entirely (Skift Research).

Travelers view an average of 141 pages of travel content across 45 days before booking. The entire journey happens in silence.

Sparkboard was built on a single insight drawn from this data: the problem is not that travelers don't want expert guidance. The problem is that advisors have no mechanism to reach travelers during the phase when they are most open to influence — inspiration — and no way to capture the rich preference data travelers generate during that phase.

Sparkboard solves both problems simultaneously. For travelers, it is a frictionless AI-powered tool that captures and organizes travel inspiration into structured, actionable profiles called Sparks. For the travel industry, those profiles become a real-time behavioral signal layer — showing exactly where a prospective customer sits in the purchase cycle and what to put in front of them next. The result is a two-sided marketplace powered by Agentic AI that gives independent advisors the one advantage OTAs cannot buy: knowing the traveler first.

✶ SECTION I

The silence of the funnel

Analyzing the modern path to purchase

In 2023, Expedia Group partnered with Luth Research to conduct one of the most comprehensive studies of traveler behavior ever published. Tracking 70,000+ consumers across seven countries in the 45 days leading up to a travel booking, the study mapped — with granular precision — what travelers actually do before they buy.

On average, travelers consume 141 pages of travel content in the 45 days before booking — and in the United States, that number climbs to 277 pages. Page views spike dramatically in the final days: from an average of 9 on the day before purchase to 25 on the day of booking itself.

141

pages of travel content consumed in the 45 days before booking (global avg.)

277

pages consumed by U.S. travelers — nearly double the global average

4 in 5

travelers visit an OTA before purchasing — even if they ultimately book elsewhere

Google's micro-moments research confirms that travel decisions are shaped across hundreds of intent-driven interactions across search, social, video, and editorial content. Skift Research establishes that over 60% of travel discovery now happens outside traditional booking platforms. The prior 44 days — where intent is formed and preferences crystallize — represent a massive strategic blind spot.

The booking window is compressed and frantic. The inspiration window is long, rich, and invisible.

✶ SECTION II

The invisible customer

Why the inspiration phase is the industry's greatest blind spot

The Expedia research identifies four distinct phases: Inspiration, Research, Planning, and Booking. The Inspiration phase is where decisions begin — an open, exploratory state where the traveler is maximally receptive to new ideas and most open to influence. It is also the phase where the industry is almost entirely absent.

What does a traveler actually do during inspiration? They scroll Instagram and save posts. They bookmark TikTok videos of boutique hotels. They screenshot a friend's travel photo. They add pins to Google Maps. They send links to their partner. Pinterest's own research confirms that saved content is among the strongest indicators of future purchase intent — and Meta's internal data shows that users who save content are significantly more likely to convert later.

All of that data — rich, behavioral, genuine, unfiltered preference data — lives entirely within their personal apps. It is never shared with the travel industry. Inspiration behavior is not unstructured. It is simply uncaptured.

By the time a traveler contacts an independent advisor, the inspiration phase is largely over. The advisor enters blind — no visibility into what content the traveler consumed, what they saved, what they ruled out, or how long they have been in the cycle.

The advisor's only intake mechanism is a survey that asks travelers to translate months of organic, emotional, visual inspiration into a form field. Most of that richness is lost in translation.

The result compounds on both sides. Travelers receive recommendations that miss the nuances of what they actually wanted. Advisors spend hours reconstructing a picture that was already fully formed — just invisible. Without knowing where the traveler sits in the cycle, the advisor is throwing darts at a dartboard.

✶ SECTION III

Demographic tectonics

The rise of the new traveling majority

Gen Z and Millennials now account for 50% of all travel spending — and they research, inspire, and decide in fundamentally different ways than the travelers who came before them. Over 50% of Gen Z uses short-form social video as their primary research tool. Their inspiration lives in TikTok saves, Instagram Reels bookmarks, and in-app collections — exactly the formats that legacy travel infrastructure is least equipped to ingest.

McKinsey's personalization research confirms that 71% of consumers now expect personalization as a baseline — and Gen Z treats its absence not as a missed feature but as a product failure. This creates a specific kind of translation loss: when a Gen Z traveler finally reaches an advisor, they can describe the vibe of what they want but not the specifics. Asking them to reconstruct visual, emotional inspiration in a questionnaire is like asking someone to describe a piece of music in writing — something is always lost.

What the new traveling majority wants

- **Personalization as a baseline:** 71% of consumers expect it; Gen Z treats its absence as a failure, not a feature gap (McKinsey).
- **Sustainability as a mandate:** 42% of Gen Z and 38% of Millennials actively filter for sustainable options — nearly double the rate of Baby Boomers.
- **Value-driven loyalty:** Millennials have strong loyalty program affinity (67%) but are highly sensitive to financial pressure. Relevance converts; generic offers don't (Deloitte).
- **Intentional experiences:** Gen Z is uniquely deliberate about how travel affects their wellbeing — seeking trips that align with personal values and lifestyle (Morning Consult).

✶ SECTION IV

The visibility gap

Why independent advisors cannot win the advertising war — and why they don't have to

The independent travel advisor's core problem is not product. It is visibility. OTAs do not dominate travel booking because they plan better trips. They dominate because they have effectively purchased the top of the funnel. Expedia Group spends over $6 billion annually on marketing. Booking Holdings spends over $7 billion. Together, they represent a wall of spend that structurally closes the digital advertising market to any independent advisor attempting to compete.

For the independent advisor, what remains are three organic channels: social media, word-of-mouth referral, and — for those with a physical location — walk-in foot traffic. Passive, unpredictable, unscalable. And yet the demand for expert guidance has not disappeared. ASTA data reveals that one dollar in every four spent on travel is still booked through an agency, and 35% of advisors have entered the industry in just the last five years.

$6B+

Expedia Group annual marketing spend

$7B+

Booking Holdings annual marketing spend

$1 in $4

spent on travel is still booked through a travel agency (ASTA)

The result is a market failure. Demand for expert travel guidance has not disappeared — it has been orphaned. The match exists. The mechanism does not.

You will never outspend Expedia. But you don't have to. The advisors who win the next decade won't have the biggest budgets. They'll be the ones who knew their customer first.

✶ SECTION V

From chatbots to agents

The evolution of travel AI — and why the moment is now

The travel industry is in the middle of a technical transition that most participants have not yet fully recognized. The AI tools that dominated the last two years — generative AI chatbots that answer questions, draft itineraries, and surface recommendations — are giving way to a more powerful and fundamentally different class of technology: Agentic AI.

Generative AI — the top-of-funnel assistant

Generative AI operates as a marketing and inspiration layer. Eighty-four percent of travelers who use generative AI tools report a superior experience — but these tools remain conversation-based. They are gateways to discovery, not engines of action. McKinsey data shows a 45% lower bounce rate among consumers directed to travel sites from generative AI sources — confirming that AI-informed intent converts better, but the gap between intent and transaction remains.

Agentic AI — the operations and commerce engine

Agentic AI goes beyond conversation to execution. These systems research, negotiate, transact, and complete bookings autonomously — communicating directly with backend services through protocols like WebMCP, bypassing the graphical interfaces that slow down transactions. OpenAI, Google, and Microsoft are all investing heavily in autonomous agents. Gartner identifies Agentic AI as a defining enterprise trend of the next decade.

McKinsey projects that by 2030, the U.S. B2C market alone could see up to $1 trillion in revenue orchestrated through agentic commerce, with global projections between $3 trillion and $5 trillion. What changed is not capability — it is consumer readiness. Travelers have crossed a threshold of AI acceptance that makes Sparkboard's core interaction feel natural rather than intrusive.

84%

of travelers using generative AI report a superior planning experience

$5T

projected global agentic commerce market by 2030 (McKinsey)

✶ SECTION VI

The Sparks model

Capturing, organizing, and activating the invisible signal

Sparkboard is built on a deceptively simple insight: travelers will not change their behavior for a new tool. But if a tool meets them exactly where they already are, the data they naturally generate becomes enormously valuable. A traveler sends content to Sparkboard — a link, a social post, a photo, a video — the same way they would text something to their partner. That is the entire interaction. No app to learn. No form to fill out. No behavior to change.

Layer one — extraction and Spark creation

Every piece of content submitted is analyzed for embedded travel data. Destinations, accommodation styles, activity preferences, travel party dynamics, price signals, seasonal indicators, and experiential themes are extracted and structured into discrete preference units called Sparks. Together, they form a traveler profile that grows richer with every submission — capturing the 45-day inspiration journey in real time. This eliminates translation loss entirely. Sparkboard reads the preferences travelers are already expressing through natural content behavior.

Layer two — personalization at scale

Sparkboard maintains a library of standardized, bookable itineraries — proven trip frameworks built around the world's most-traveled destinations. The AI uses each traveler's accumulated Sparks to customize these frameworks at the individual level. The output is not a generic Paris itinerary for a family of four. It is a Paris itinerary built for this specific family — the one with two boys who love Lego, who lives in Georgia, who has been to Europe twice before, and who has been saving boutique hotel content and food market videos for three months. The standard itinerary is the skeleton. The Sparks are what make it theirs.

The throughline across all four phases

- **Inspiration:** Travelers submit content naturally. Sparkboard builds their Spark profile silently in the background.
- **Research:** The platform drips increasingly targeted itineraries, destination content, and matched advisors back to the traveler via email and SMS.
- **Planning:** The traveler generates an on-demand itinerary, adjusts a pre-built itinerary, or connects with an advisor who already holds their full Spark profile.
- **Booking:** Advisors close with complete context. No cold start. No blank questionnaire. No lost richness.

The traveler does what they were already doing. Sparkboard just makes it count.

Traditional intake vs. Sparkboard

Feature	Traditional Intake	Sparkboard
Data Source	Static forms / questionnaires	Organic saves, screenshots, social
Timing	Post-research — right before booking	During the 45-day inspiration phase
Context	Limited to user-typed text	Full behavioral + visual profile
Interface	Manual GUI (clicks and menus)	Direct service communication (WebMCP)
Personalization	Advisor interprets self-reported preferences	AI extracts native behavioral data

✶ SECTION VII

Data trust and privacy

Responsible data handling as a competitive moat

Sparkboard operates at the intersection of personal content and behavioral data. Trust is not optional — it is foundational. Platforms that handle behavioral data responsibly will outperform those that extract it invisibly, because travelers who trust how their data is used will engage more deeply, share more freely, and convert more readily.

Core privacy principles

- **User-owned profiles:** Travelers own their Spark profiles. Data can be deleted at any time.
- **Explicit consent:** Content ingestion requires active opt-in. Sparkboard processes only what the traveler deliberately shares.
- **Transparent usage:** Travelers are told clearly how their Spark data is used and who can access it. Advisors receive profile access only when a traveler initiates a connection.
- **No data resale:** Sparkboard does not sell individual traveler data to third parties. Advertising placements are matched to anonymized Spark profile clusters, not personal records.

Regulatory alignment

Sparkboard is designed for compliance with GDPR in Europe and CCPA in California — the two most consequential consumer data privacy frameworks in the Western market. As data privacy regulation expands globally, this alignment represents a structural advantage over legacy platforms built before these standards existed.

In a world where data extraction is the norm, data transparency is the differentiator.

✶ SECTION VIII

Competitive landscape

Where Sparkboard sits — and why nothing else occupies this space

Trip planning tools like TripIt and Wanderlog organize confirmed travel plans after decisions are made — logistical tools, not intent tools. OTA platforms are optimized around the moment of transaction, not the 44 days that precede it. AI planning tools like Utrip rely on survey-based input, reintroducing exactly the translation loss problem Sparkboard eliminates. Social platforms like Pinterest and Instagram are where inspiration actually lives, but that data stays siloed within their ecosystems. Sparkboard is none of the above — it is a behavioral signal capture and activation layer, the infrastructure that sits between where inspiration happens and where the travel industry can act on it.

Platform	Category	Captures Inspiration?	Sparkboard Difference
Expedia / Booking.com	OTA	No	Enters at booking; no inspiration layer
TripIt / Wanderlog	Trip Planning	No	Organizes confirmed plans; misses intent phase entirely
Utrip	AI Planning	Partial	Survey-based; reintroduces the translation loss problem
Pinterest / Instagram	Social Discovery	Yes (siloed)	No travel extraction; intent data stays inside the platform
Sparkboard	**Signal Layer**	**Yes — natively**	**The only platform that captures, extracts, and activates inspiration data across the full 45-day journey**

✶ SECTION IX · CASE STUDY

The 45-day journey

Sarah — planning a honeymoon

The following case study illustrates how Sparkboard functions across the full path to purchase for a high-value traveler. Sarah and her partner are planning their honeymoon — a significant, emotionally charged trip with high personalization stakes and strong purchase intent.

✶ WEEKS 1–2 · INSPIRATION

Sarah begins saving TikTok videos of the Amalfi Coast. She screenshots boutique hotels from Instagram. She shares posts with her partner and pins locations to a private Google Maps list. She has not contacted a travel advisor. She has not typed a single preference into a form.

Sparkboard: ***Destination cluster: Amalfi Coast, Positano, Capri. Aesthetic: boutique, intimate, coastal luxury. Party: couple. Occasion: honeymoon. Budget tier: premium.***

✶ WEEKS 3–4 · RESEARCH

Sarah begins searching flight prices and comparing destinations. She adds Rome as a potential extension. She reads two travel magazine articles about Southern Italy.

Sparkboard: ***Destination narrows to Italy with high confidence. Rome flagged as itinerary extension. Curated 10-day Amalfi + Rome honeymoon itinerary delivered via email. Matched advisor with Italy specialization introduced via SMS.***

✶ WEEKS 5–6 · PLANNING AND BOOKING

Sarah clicks through the itinerary Sparkboard sent. She adjusts two hotels and removes one activity. She opts to connect with the matched advisor.

Sparkboard: ***Advisor receives Sarah's full Spark profile before the first call — 45 days of behavioral data, curated preferences, adjusted itinerary, and identified budget tier. No intake questionnaire required.***

Outcomes

- **Faster conversion:** advisor enters at Planning with full context already established — no cold start.
- **Higher satisfaction:** itinerary reflects actual stated preferences, not self-reported approximations.
- **Precision upsells:** advisor knows budget tier, aesthetic preferences, and occasion from the first conversation.
- **New revenue created:** Sarah pays a concierge fee. The advisor collects both the fee split and the booking commission — revenue streams that did not exist before Sparkboard.

✶ SECTION X

The marketplace and network effects

Why Sparkboard gets stronger as it grows

Sparkboard is a two-sided marketplace whose value compounds with scale. More travelers generate richer Spark data, which makes advisor matching more precise and advertising placement more effective. More advisors improve the fulfillment layer, which attracts more travelers. Sparkboard addresses the cold start challenge (Andrew Chen, The Cold Start Problem) through the traveler side first: the inspiration capture tool delivers immediate value to travelers independently of how many advisors are on the platform.

The flywheel

- **More traveler inspiration content** richer, more diverse Spark profiles.
- **Richer Spark profiles** more precise itinerary recommendations and advisor matching.
- **Better matching** improved advisor outcomes, attracting more advisors and higher-quality inventory.
- **Stronger advisor network** better traveler fulfillment, driving word-of-mouth growth and retention.
- **More data and advisor activity** better advertising signal, increasing revenue and platform investment.

At scale, Sparkboard doesn’t just serve the travel market. It becomes its intelligence layer.

✶ SECTION XI

The marketplace

Revenue architecture and participant value

Sparkboard is not a CRM for travel advisors. It is not a trip-planning app for travelers. It is a marketplace — a two-sided platform whose revenue model is aligned with the path to purchase itself, and whose value grows as both sides scale.

For travelers

A personal travel intelligence layer that organizes inspiration without requiring any behavior change. Their dream trip — assembled over months of scrolling, saving, and sharing — is structured, accessible, and ready to become a real itinerary the moment they are.

For travel advisors

Qualified, data-rich leads at the moment of peak intent, with full Spark profiles attached. The Human-in-the-Loop model is preserved and elevated: Agentic AI handles repeatable, data-heavy tasks while the advisor handles the complexity, empathy, and judgment that autonomous systems cannot replicate.

For tourism boards and hospitality brands

Intent-matched marketing — placement matched to the specific Spark profiles of travelers already dreaming about relevant destinations or experiences. Not impression advertising.

Revenue architecture

- **Advertising revenue** from tourism boards, hotels, and hospitality brands targeted to travelers whose Spark profiles signal active interest.
- **Planning and concierge fees** a premium fee structure, split between advisors and the platform, creating new revenue that did not previously exist.
- **Booking commissions** the traditional commission structure preserved and automated through Agentic AI.

Sparkboard doesn't disrupt the advisor's existing revenue. It adds revenue streams that didn't exist before — funded by value the platform itself creates.

✶ SECTION XII · THESIS

The only advantage OTAs can never buy

The Expedia Path to Purchase data makes the opportunity undeniable. Travelers are spending 45 days and consuming 141 pages of content — generating the preference signals that would make perfect, personalized travel experiences possible. They are ready. What has been missing is the infrastructure to capture those signals, make them visible to the industry, and connect them — at the right moment, with the right context — to the advisors and brands best positioned to serve them.

By 2030, the global agentic commerce market will reach an estimated $5 trillion. The first-mover advantage belongs not to those who spend the most, but to those who know the most.

The only way to compete against the major OTAs is to understand the customer better. Sparkboard is how.

For independent travel advisors, Sparkboard is the mechanism to enter the purchase journey earlier than any advertising budget could achieve — and to arrive at the planning conversation already knowing more about the traveler than the OTAs ever will.

For tourism boards and hospitality brands, Sparkboard is the first advertising platform in travel where placement is matched to genuine, behaviorally-derived intent — not demographic proxies and keyword bids.

For travelers, Sparkboard is the tool that makes their dream trip feel achievable — organized, personalized, and waiting for them when they are ready.

The OTAs will always spend more. But spending more is not the same as knowing more. And in travel — where every trip is deeply personal, where the gap between a generic itinerary and a perfect one is the difference between a forgettable week and a transformative experience — knowing more wins.

Sparkboard is not simply a product. It is infrastructure for capturing and activating the most valuable signal in travel: inspiration.

✶ SOURCES

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