

# A practical guide to booking systems

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BUSINESS GUIDE

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# A practical guide to booking systems

If you're running a business that takes bookings, such as a B&B, glamping site or on-farm recreation (horse riding), your customers will now expect to be able to book, and often pay, online. Businesses that rely on taking bookings solely by phone (or email) will lose business to those that can make it easy for a potential client to confirm availability, book the accommodation or activity they want, pay for it and receive an email confirmation.

Choosing the right booking system for your business is vital. This is a decision you want to get right because moving from one booking system to another mid-season is very painful.

## Costs

From experience, the costs of these systems are falling as competition increases. In fact, the monthly, or more often annual, subscription costs are likely to be under £150/year for a five-bed B&B or five pitch glamping/camping site. The more significant cost is your time; choosing the right system for you, setting it up, testing it and tweaking it as your business evolves.

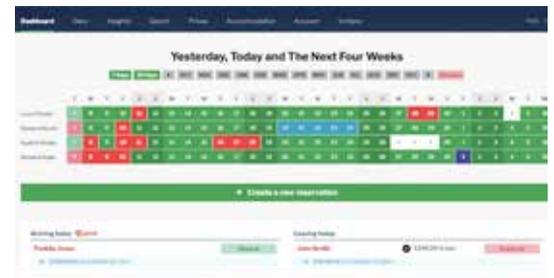
Many providers of systems to this market have also spotted that their clients lack a basic website, so are including this feature as part of the basic package. That might be attractive, but of course, might mean that you are even more 'tied-in' to their subscription if you choose to change suppliers.

## Choosing a provider

There is a huge variety of providers, but don't be overwhelmed. Many provide similar features. It pays to do your research though. Ask them to identify three or four of their customers who are similar to your business in both scale and type. Call them and see how they like the system and what, in practice, are the pros and cons.

Systems broadly break down into two types. The most common are for 'overnight' accommodation owners, such as B&B's. However, these aren't suitable for on-farm activities such as horse-riding or paint-balling so, if you are running this type of venture, choose an 'appointments' type system that can handle time-of-day based slot booking. We haven't yet seen a system that handles both types on one platform.

Some suppliers help you to integrate or connect with other platforms such as Airbnb, Pitchup etc. If this is important to you now, or in the future, ensure they have the right 'connectors' in place and what their charges are for connecting you.



*"Businesses that rely on taking bookings solely by phone (or email) will lose business to those who make it easy for clients to confirm availability, book accommodation or activities and pay online."*



## Getting started

Test, test and test again. Take advantage of the free trial periods offered by most suppliers. Set your system up following their tutorials or advice and then ask the supplier to review your setup. Get as many friends and relations as you can to create 'test' bookings before you go 'live'. Then make sure you 'wipe' all these bookings off.

One of the major advantages of online bookings is that it helps you build a detailed customer list. Ensure the supplier allows you to download and re-use the data on your customers and that both you, and they, comply with the new GDPR rules.

## Checklist

When it comes to choosing the right system for you and your business, here is a useful checklist to ensure you are getting what you need out of the system:

- **Pricing:** Some systems are per year, per month. Others are based on the number of bookings or take a percentage of the credit-card transaction or a combination of the above.
- **Visuals:** Take a look at both the 'front end,' what the customer sees and the 'back end,' what you see. Can that 'front end' be included or colour-coded with your existing website? Incorporate your logo / phone numbers etc. Do they offer you a 'free' website as part of the package?
- **Mobile friendly:** Can both you as the business owner but more importantly your customers book online from a smartphone or tablet? Test this thoroughly. Increasingly, transactions are now done by smartphone.
- **Language:** Many such systems are designed for B&B's and hotels and routinely use the term 'room' throughout. Make sure you can change this to 'bell tent' or 'fully furnished pod' etc.
- **Integration:** Ensure you can 'integrate' the booking system into your own website/Facebook page utilising 'widgets' or similar. The customer expects the experience to be seamless.
- **Phone bookings:** Can you also manually take a phone-booking? Does it show you the difference between a phone booking or a web-booking?
- **Rates and deposits:** If you vary your rate at different times of the year, have 'minimum stays' take a one night or percent deposit, can the system be set up to allow this?
- **Occupancy changes:** How does the system cope when you want to swap a booking from one pitch / pod / tent to another? Can you 'drag and drop' a booking so that you can maximise occupancy?



### Suppliers:

There are many suppliers and new ones seem to pop up every month but to get started these ones are more geared towards smaller tourism-based enterprises, take a look at:

- [Anytime Booking](#)
- [Bedful](#)
- [Bookalet](#)
- [Free to Book](#)
- [Innstyle](#)

And for an appointments-base system:

- [SimplyBook.me](#)

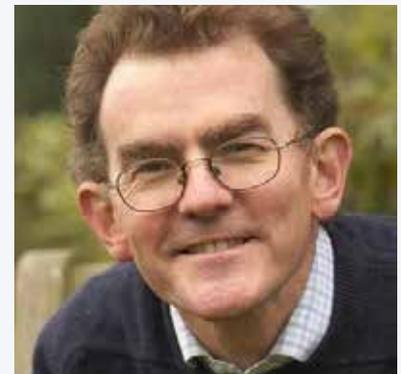
If you are running an enterprise with many (10+) options for clients to choose from the list of suppliers increases.

- **Ease of use:** Is all the information about a customer on one screen, or do you have to juggle between various tabs?
- **Notifications:** Do you get an email-alert when a person books, so that you can review the booking?
- **Flexibility:** Can you access the system from your phone whilst away from your PC? If so, you can then add days to a booking as you talk to a customer and persuade them to stay longer or see how much they owe you.
- **Customer contact:** Does the system show you which emails it has sent to a customer - and if they have been received or bounced?
- **Taking credit-card payments:** If you want to add this, will it allow you to integrate with a credit-card supplier such as Stripe?
- **Taking confirmed or provisional bookings:** If you want to 'vet' the booking before accepting it (perhaps to check it doesn't conflict with a phone booking taken by a family member) make sure your system allows this.
- **Customisation:** Can you ask custom questions as people book? For example, you might want to know the type of dog they are bringing.
- **Automated emails:** Ensure you can customise these and they allow you to confirm a booking, send a 'deposit received' note, a pre-arrival note and a day of departure or follow-up note.
- **Growth:** If you are considering expanding at some future point, will the system allow for this, and how much will it cost?
- **Analytics:** Does the system produce useful daily or annual reports that alert you to when people are booked to arrive or tell you what the average occupancy was in each month / year / last year etc.
- **Accounting:** Does it allow for cash, cheque, BACS etc. deposits and balance payments? Can you do a refund?
- **Data capture:** Can you export the data on all your visitors, so that you can import that data into another system such as Mailchimp for future email marketing ensuring it complies with GDPR?

*"There are a huge variety of providers, many providing similar features and therefore it pays to do your research."*

*"Once you have chosen your system, test, test and test again."*

## Author information



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Countryside Marketing has been established by Ted to help rural businesses with their marketing and systems. He has set up and evaluated a number of online booking systems both for clients and his own tourism businesses. To find out more visit [countryside-marketing.co.uk](http://countryside-marketing.co.uk)

