



MARKET BRIEF

Courtesy Shuttle Trackers Put a Modern Twist on a Favorite Amenity to Increase Hotel Guest Satisfaction

The complimentary hotel shuttle is a huge convenience for travelers. It can make getting around considerably easier and more economical. Whether it's an airport transfer, or a free ride to downtown or site seeing attractions, this amenity can be the difference-maker for potential guests evaluating multiple hotels. In fact, courtesy shuttles are such a valuable, impactful amenity that hotels often prominently feature shuttle services in their marketing materials. Despite how attractive the idea of a courtesy shuttle may be, guests using this service often experience stress, uncertainty and feel that they waste a lot of time while waiting around for the next pickup. This friction can quickly devalue the entire experience, and in the worst cases even become a deciding factor for guests considering whether to book again in the future.

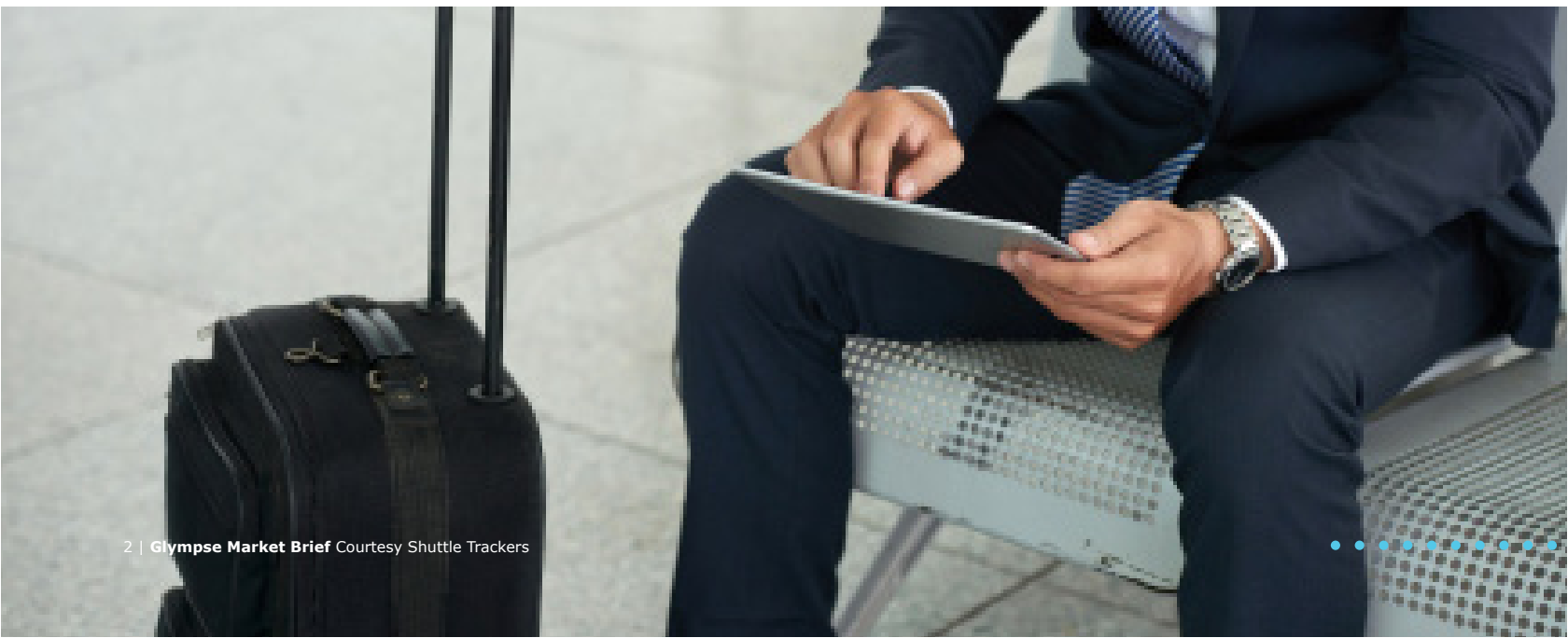


A shuttle is great amenity, until it's not worth the hassle

While courtesy shuttles present many opportunities to create better travel experiences, choosing to use a hotel shuttle opens up the opportunity for all sorts possible mishaps or potential disappointment. Whether a traveler perceives the shuttle experience as making their trip better or creating unnecessary headache often comes down to how timely the shuttle's arrival is at the designated meeting location.

Hotel shuttles that ferry visitors into town or to see attractions can be a big draw for families on a budget, but waiting for the ride instead of fitting in that one last experience or attraction can equate to a missed adventure from the guest's perspective. Business travelers that barely miss a shuttle because they were informed they had time to stop for a coffee can have their whole day ruined.

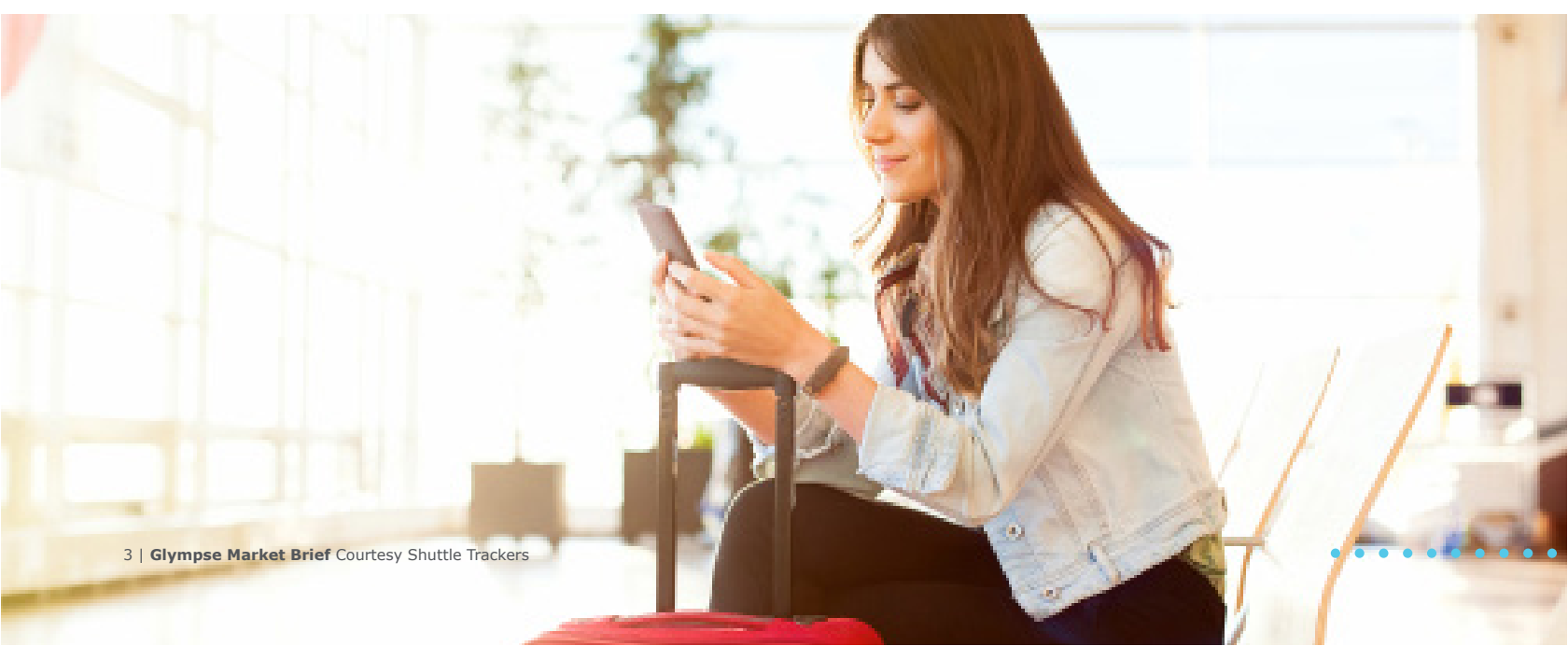
Shuttle services for airport hotels are a must-have and can be the primary reason travelers choose one brand over another. Some hotels will even promote "park, stay and travel" packages that are designed to entice travelers with early morning departures. These packages are intended to make it simple to park their car, spend the night and catch the shuttle to the airport in the morning, and are greenfield opportunities for airport hotels that compete on making it easier to catch a flight by staying nearby than making an early-morning drive. The whole point is easy transfer to and from the gate, so an ill-timed shuttle experience can tarnish the entire stay.



Even for hotel guests who prefer a free shuttle tracker over a paid ride or ride sharing service, the expectations created by companies like Uber and Lyft (knowing exactly where the ride is and when it will arrive) have put more pressure on hotels to provide a better shuttle experience. After waiting a short period of time, guests begin to wonder where their shuttle is, whether they are in the right place to catch the shuttle, and if they might be better off with alternate transportation. Anxiety can peak as a competing hotel's shuttle passes by and they doubt their choice in hotels.

To relieve some of this anxiety, customers will often call the hotel to check on their shuttle's estimated time of arrival (ETA). Of all calls made to a hotel's guest services desk, forty to seventy percent are regarding the hotel shuttle. More often than not, these calls are counterproductive as the hotel has no better idea of where the shuttle is than the customer. Consequently, they provide bad information in an effort to help, which only leads to more anxiety and frustration. When the hotel tells a guest that the shuttle will be there in five minutes but it doesn't arrive for another fifteen, the perception is that the hotel doesn't value a guest's time and perhaps does not deserve their future business. Most reasonable customers will understand that delays happen in real life, as long as they feel service providers are doing their best and communicating well. However, if a guest thinks a hotel simply doesn't care, frustration can quickly turn to anger.

With visibility and communication lacking, there's a big risk that guests will decide the cost of a ride sharing service is inconsequential given the hassle of tracking down a courtesy shuttle, ultimately eliminating the competitive advantage for hotels offering this amenity in the first place.




The costs of a poor shuttle experience

First impressions are always important and can be very difficult to undo. Hotels spend millions of dollars designing an impressive lobby to make a good first impression. Yet, the reality is that outside of the booking process, catching the courtesy shuttle at the airport is typically the first time that guests are exposed to a hotel's service. Not when they enter the lobby. Those millions spent on an awe-inspiring lobby to create a grand first impression are close to irrelevant if a cranky guest arrives too distracted to care. Likewise, the shuttle experience on the return trip to the airport can be the last impression guests have of a hotel, and thus the brand's final chance to make a lasting impact. A bad trip home can erase all memory of lavish suites and amazing on-site amenities.

Sharing both good and bad experiences is faster and simpler than ever thanks to mobile phones and social media. Guest reviews play a significant role in a prospective guest's decision-making process; sixty-seven percent of hotel shoppers read reviews when deciding where to stay.¹ These reviews are amplified by real-time context. A guest is much more likely to get online and document a poor experience if they have downtime or if the poor experience creates a ripple effect for the rest of their trip. Perfect example: the annoying extra moments a guest spends waiting on a shuttle that's missing in action, plus the anxiety they likely have over whether a late shuttle will cause them to miss a flight or planned activity. This makes the shuttle pickup experience a make or break moment for hotels that rely on positive customer reviews. A frustrated customer with extra time to spare is a recipe for a social media tirade.

Of course, there's also the hard costs required to run a shuttle service – vehicles, labor, insurance, etc. If customers don't appreciate the courtesy shuttle, don't use it or if the overall impact on customer satisfaction is negative, a shuttle is not a good use of resources. Not to mention that when the majority of calls to the service desk are regarding the shuttle, and each call costs \$15, a shuttle service can actually cause the business to incur additional costs.

¹ <https://www.stevecurtin.com/blog/tag/value/>



40-70 percent of calls made to hotel guest services are to inquire about the status of a hotel shuttle.



Shuttle trackers offer a solution

Running a shuttle service is not an exact science, and reducing wait time is always a challenge. Shuttles can't be in all places at all times. While logistics are tricky, customer satisfaction can be improved and the challenge of timely shuttle arrival can be addressed without expanding shuttle fleets or adding new routes. Changing guests' perception of wait time is an economical way to reduce anxiety and increase satisfaction.

Consider the implications from studies about people waiting for a bus.² Results showed that people could more accurately predict how long they waited when they had access to accurate ETA information. Those that did not have estimates on when their bus would arrive estimated their wait was 50 percent longer than it actually was. By simply providing accurate ETAs, shuttle services can reduce perceived wait time without any additional investment in more shuttles or drivers. Satisfaction is not always driven by great service, but by the perception of great service. Providing guests with better visibility will help them feel less anxious, and also demonstrate that work is being done on their behalf. Guests that know shuttle services are doing their best will be more forgiving.

Some hotels have turned to mobile apps or digital viewers (accessible on any browser on any smart phone) to offer real-time ETAs and shuttle tracking services that respect customers' time. Embedding a shuttle tracking experience in a loyalty app, for instance, can improve service as well as provide a new captive digital channel for hotels to connect with guests. Shuttle ETAs are a great incentive to download property branded apps that can lead to new opportunities for engagement. Once guests are focused on the shuttle tracker, hotels can make offers, get feedback and promote enrollment in loyalty programs. Engaging with shuttle riders while they wait also provides a distraction to help further reduce perceived wait time.

In cases where shuttle trackers have been a success, hotels are also considering other ways to leverage location sharing and arrival/departure visibility to enhance the guest experience on the hotel property. If guests are willing to "check in" to a hotel shuttle (with a known route and ETA at the hotel), or share their real-time ETA with guest services, hotels can optimize operations and ensure that the guest's room is ready. Hotels could even take that knowledge one step further, enabling front desk employees or automated systems to proactively begin the check in process on behalf of guests while they are on route to the property. Bypassing check in completely can save valuable time and streamline the complete guest experience.

² <https://www.citylab.com/transportation/2014/01/why-technology-forever-changing-psychology-waiting-bus/8158/>

Glympse for courtesy shuttles and guest engagement

The Glympse location platform enables hotels to create a custom shuttle tracker – including planned routes, real-time location and ETAs for each stop or pickup location – within a hotel branded app or website. Glympse also offers unique location sharing capabilities that empower guests to share their location with the hotel, and consults with hospitality brands on how to leverage location data to deliver exceptional guests experiences like proactive check in. One multinational hotel chain saw an immediate reduction in calls to the front desk and customer satisfaction after implementing a shuttle tracker powered by Glympse for its airport shuttle services.