



# VACATION RENTAL MANAGEMENT GUIDE: CHANNEL MANAGER

Understand How Portals Work and  
How to Effectively Advertise on Portals to  
Increase Bookings

Kigo Vacation Rental Software

<http://kigo.net>

## What Will This White Paper Cover?

In order to succeed in Vacation Rental Marketing, property managers need to implement a variety of tactics to acquire new guests. These tactics can take the form of social media, multiple-portal listings, review management, SEO, paid search ads and content creation, to name a few. In order to help property managers successfully implement these tactics, Kigo will be rolling out a series of White Papers that will cover these topics.

In this particular White Paper will dive deep into understanding Channel Management and review advertising options for vacation rental managers by covering the following topics:

- A brief history of Channel Management
- Reviewing different types of portals
- How using portal sites can help increase bookings
- How to automate Channel Management tools
- Understanding different portal connection types
- Tips for choosing the right portal
- How to make your portal listings stand out from the competition
- Inter-agency advertising with Channel Manager

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For more information about Vacation Rental marketing and to receive regular marketing tips, be sure to subscribe to **Kigo Vacation Rental's Marketing and Channel Manager Blog:**

<http://kigo.net/blog>

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## What is Channel Management?



### A Brief History:

Ten years ago, the best way to get bookings was through hand-curated relationships with travel agencies and publications, repeat-customers, and great referrals, mostly through word-of-mouth. (In urban markets, there were a few other channels worth pursuing, such as courting companies needing corporate housing for their travelling employees.) At that time VRBO was starting to be a force, but Internet penetration in 2000-2002 was so low that almost no full-time agency could survive solely on it.

### More than meets the eye:

Today, things are vastly different. Of course, repeat customers and referrals are still the gold standards, but in a world where billions are connected to the Internet, online-marketing channels are fast-overcoming the old hand-curated relationship model: HomeAway/VRBO, HouseTrip, AirBnB, FlipKey, Holiday Velvet, Booking.Com are the name of the game. In addition to the above, if you are an agency in 2013 you also need to master Google Adwords, spreading the word online through reviews and testimonials, not to speak of blogging and social marketing. It's a lot to handle.

Because we help hundreds of agencies manage their websites and marketing, we have a pretty unique vantage point on the industry. The latest trend that we've noticed in 2012-2013, has been the proliferation of mid-sized vacation rental listing portals. Using the word "portal" isn't very accurate, actually, but neither are "marketplace" or "agency".

### What is a mid-sized vacation rental listing portal?

From the customer's perspective, these look like any other agency, except that they have a lot more properties: from 500 to 10,000 or more. The key difference with large agencies, however, is that these portals don't actually manage the properties; instead they list properties managed by local owners and agencies.

Now, this kind of middleman has always existed. It's just we're seeing a lot more of them today. Their specialty is two-fold. On the agency side, they enter into agreements to list properties with agencies and not owners (taking 3-15% of bookings, but are otherwise free to list). They add a ton of value in channeling the right customers to the right agencies, while providing some extra services (e.g., concierge). On the traveller-side, they tend to be very good at niche marketing, especially SEO. They might have a geographical specialty ("Tuscany"), or a reputation based on the quality of their properties ("high-end"), etc. Whatever it is, they market to their niche better than any one agency ever could because of their size and volume advantage.

The biggest reason for the proliferation of these players in the market between the large portals like VRBO, HouseTrip, and 9Flats and the agencies and owners is that the proliferation of APIs, channel managers, and other technological solutions has made it easier to manage listings onto multiple websites.

### Why should this trend matter to you, owners and agencies?

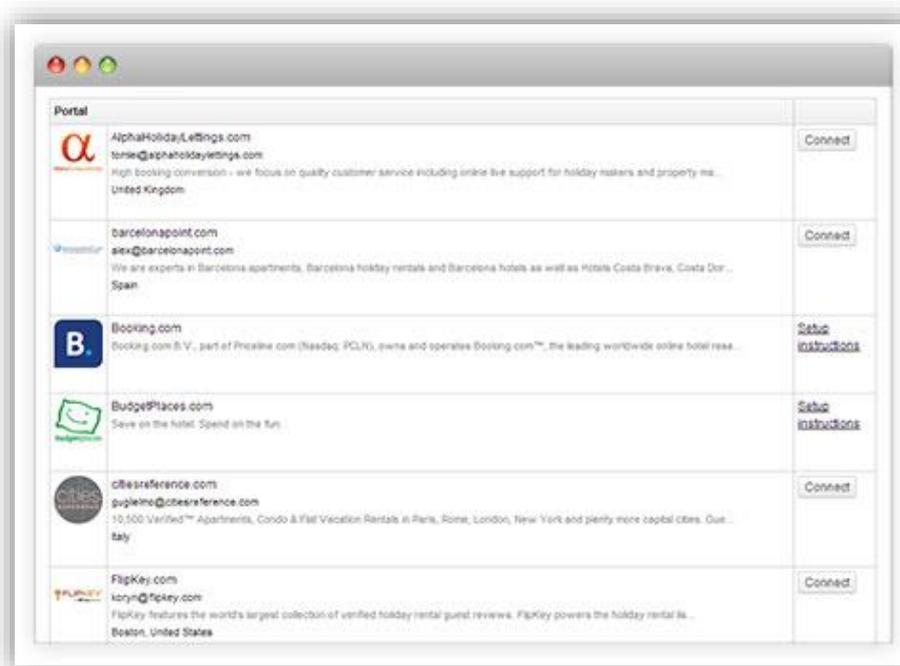
Listing your properties on as many channels as possible is the easiest guaranteed way to increase your bookings and fill your availability calendar. To do this effectively, it isn't enough to use all of the big players, however -- it pays to also list on these mid-size portals. After all, if you're an owner or agency, you should care most about occupancy and marketing.

The only pain-point in doing extensive multi-listing of your properties is the time it'll take to manage calendars and bookings. Today, however, there are plenty of channel-managers that will do that for you (Kigo's channel manager being a leading example). With a channel manager, each additional listing increases your odds of a booking, and as long as you are careful about picking only high-quality portals and marketplaces, you can expand your reach while keeping control of your brand.

So don't ignore this opportunity and start identifying smaller portals in your market that can help you grow your business. Remember, you only have to pay commissions on actual bookings, so as long as you are using a streamlined channel manager, there is no cost to listing all of your properties on multiple portals and advertising channels.



How using portal sites can help vacation rentals agencies increase bookings:



One question that we get asked a lot is “If I have an independent website, why should I want to connect with anyone else’s?” and there are a number of key reasons why connecting to portals is a good idea. Connecting to both the large scale portal partners and smaller volume, niche portals to increase your inquiry volumes and get more bookings makes sense. So why should you use portal sites?

### Maintaining the ecosystem

The online world is like an ecosystem, you have to have a number of channels performing well for you to achieve great things. So you can have a great website, will lots of fantastic functionality and a great approach to your SEO and PPC activities, but there is no way you can optimize for every customers’ search query or compete for every high volume, high cost keywords through Adwords or Adcentre. This is where expanding your reach through a portal site will really bring you customers that you otherwise could not effectively market to.

### Cross-industry confirmation

If you look at similar industries, they make good use of portal sites too. Take Booking.com as an example. Big hotel brands like Accor and Hilton still use them, even though they have huge search budgets and highly optimized websites. They see the value in having a presence on these sites and the unrivalled benefits of expanding your reach this way.

### Bigger scale, bigger budget, bigger volume

The sheer scale of some of the larger sites makes them attractive too. Large scale portal sites generally have hundreds of thousands of unique visitors every year, with the majority of them having some purchase intent. The budgets of HomeAway and

Holiday Lettings, for example are enormous. They will spend huge amounts of money on their SEM efforts to ensure they are top of all the search engines, something which agencies of all but the highest volumes and budgets can really afford to do.

#### Database expansion

Another benefit is that a number of portals provide you with the contact data for your inquiries. This is really useful as they can go into your database and you can start marketing to them, they are pre-qualified leads who have an interest in your property, so getting them to convert at a later date should prove easier than converting new customers.

#### Cost effective

Portals are also usually very cost effective. Whether you pay on performance (so a percentage of the overall booking cost) or by listing or per inquiry, we've generally seen really good CPA's when we talk to our agencies about this, with some reporting CPAs as low as \$23. So they are really cheap way of expanding your reach too.

#### Comparison engines?

Increasingly, these sites are becoming a one-stop-shop comparison site with a number of loyal users who will trawl through the listings and inquire on a number of properties without visiting other sites. For these users, it is imperative that you have presence on their, otherwise a perfect booking opportunity for your agency could fall into the hands of your rivals.

So there you have just some of the reasons why we would always recommend portal sites to our agencies. And anyone else, for that matter. They are a cost-effective channel that can bring you huge volumes customers that may well have otherwise missed-out on. When put in those terms, it really is a no-brainer!

## Understanding Portal Connection Types

An easy, contained, cost effective solution to drive more bookings and reach new customers, portals are an excellent way for vacation rental agencies and owners to grow quickly and maximize their bookings. But there are a fair few things to understand about these connections and how to harness the huge potential of these sites...

### Understanding how the sites list your properties

There are a number of models of payment across the portals. Sites like HomeAway and Perfect Places will offer annual subscription offers, whereby you can pay a fee to list on their sites for a fixed period of time. More and more, they are also offering subscription models whereby you simply pay a set fee per lead, with no costs to list.

Other portals, like Booking.com and Holiday Velvet, take a commission of your booking value. So for a small percentage of the value of the booking, you can reach thousands of new customers and benefit from all of their marketing expertise and budget.

Another pricing model is that of adding a fee to the existing price. So the agency sets its' prices, then portals like AirBnB and HouseTrip will add a small percentage on the value and keep the difference. This is a cost effective way to market your vacation rentals and essentially means you can list on these sites for free.

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### How the calendar sync works...

Connections from a Kigo website to portal partners can be one-way or two-way. This means the direction of the updates is either single or reciprocal. A one-way connection means that Kigo will update the calendar for the portal site (so bookings that are taken on that site will be blocked out on the portal calendar), but bookings taken by the portal will not be automatically input to

the Kigo calendar. So when a booking confirmation is received from, for example, Wimdu, the agency needs to update their Kigo calendar manually to ensure that all calendars are up to date.

A two-way connection means that the calendars are reciprocally updated, so booked dates made on a Kigo website will instantly be updated in the calendars of, for example, RentXpress. Equally, when bookings are taken through RentXpress, the dates will appear on the relevant Kigo calendar as booked too. This ensure that over booking will never occur. A tow-way connection is obviously preferable, but there are plenty of great sites that currently use a one-way link, and they are still really valuable sites.

### iCal Links

Sites like 9Flats and AirBnB currently have an iCal connection. This means that we can provide a link that is pasted into the listing description in these sites and can then be refreshed at regular intervals to ensure that the availability is up-to-date. This is a one-way connection, from Kigo to the portal.

### Photos, rates and property data

Many portals can also access the property data and photos for each property using the API. This enriches the listings that agencies and owners have with them, and is constantly synced to reflect changes made in the Kigo account, meaning that the whole online presence can be managed from one centralized place. Portals can also access prices, both basic To/From prices and detailed rates through the API, too.



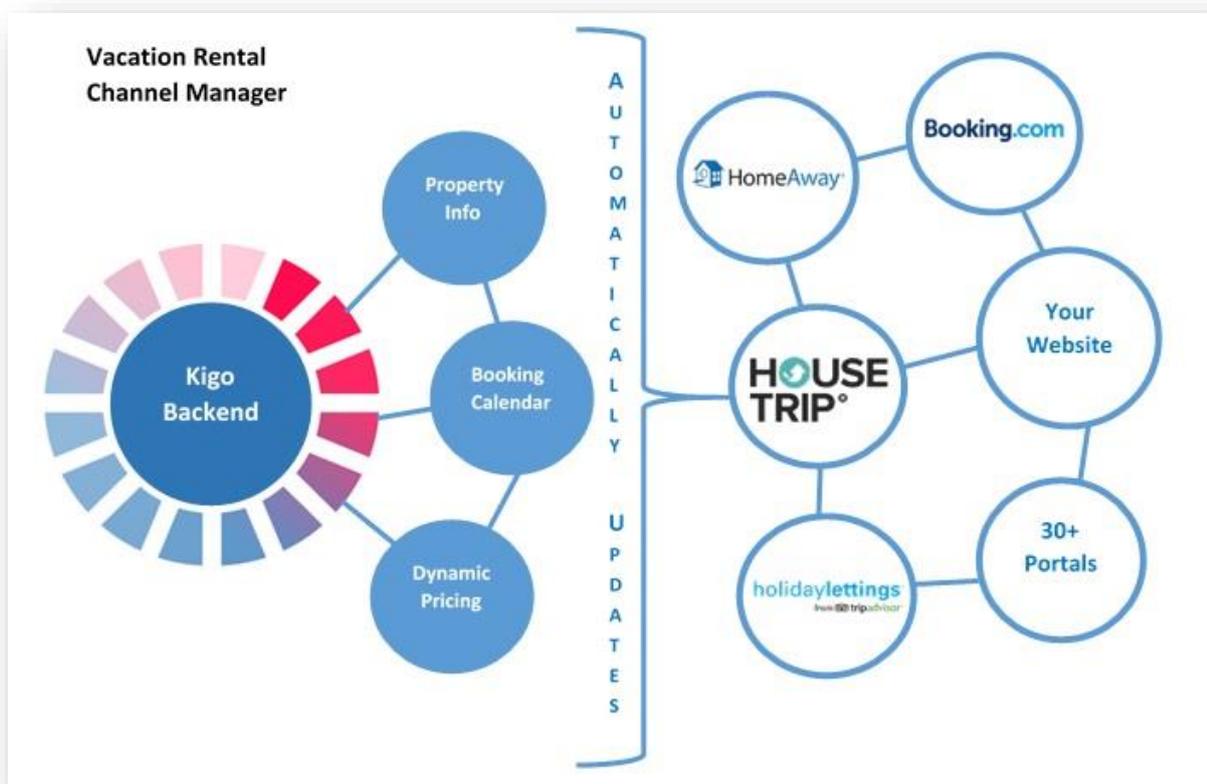
So, in summary, using portals is a great way to save money on your vacation rental marketing and to reach new customers. Using this information, it should be much easier to decide which portals fit your agency or property best, and what type of payment model and connection you are looking for. Using a Channel Manager to connect to them makes the process much more streamlined and simple.

## How to Automate Channel Management Tools:

Implementing a channel manager into your vacation rental marketing strategy will enable you to automatically update any property info, availability calendars and pricing adjustments all from one dynamic platform. It means that you can keep your vacation rental information organized from the backend and operate a professional and consistent frontend; leading your guests to no confusion on date availability while encouraging a smoother booking.

In order to help you understand how the channel manager works, we have created a useful chart explaining the channel management process.

The channel management process:



Kigo's backend works hard for you so that you don't have to; from there you can sync together your property info, booking calendars and dynamic pricing system with multiple portals and your own vacation rental website. Each time you update one of those features in the backend, it will automatically update your website and portal listings.

The channel manager eliminates the time consuming task of having to update each listing every time you wish to make a change. So, if you decide to include a last minute pricing special to fill any availability calendar gaps, you can effortlessly update the new price in Kigo's backend and then from there we will take care of ensuring that the new price appears on your multiple listings and vacation rental website. The channel manager is a great tool for automating your business and maximizing booking opportunities.

## Tips for Choosing the Right Vacation Rental Portal

Connecting your vacation rental properties to multiple property listing portals is an excellent way to expand your marketing reach and increase bookings. With a myriad of options available many agencies and owners have difficulty with knowing which vacation rental listing website to you choose. There are a number of factors to consider when choosing the best portal for your vacation rentals, and a few things to look out for when finding the best fit for your properties.

### Pick a portal with high search engine ranking:

You want to make sure the portal you choose receives a significant amount of visitor traffic. With guests preferring to find vacation rentals through search engines, you want to make sure that the portal you choose ranks high on search engines. A quick and easy first step is to search for keywords such as "vacation rentals in XYZ", "holiday rental homes in XYZ" on Google. This will give you a good indication of which sites have good search engine juice. If your audience is more international, you can use international search engine ranking tools to see which portals pop up for search queries in other countries. In addition to these, it's worth looking for more niche markets to focus on too, like pet-friendly portals or family-friendly sites. The visitor traffic numbers may be less, but the visitors will be more likely to book as they are searching for something far more specific.

### Find a suitable pricing model:

Another factor to consider is the pricing model in which the portal operates. When it comes to receiving payments, some portals take full payment upfront, others might keep payment until the stay is completed or until the first day of the holiday. When it comes to the cost of using a portal, some will take a commission from the booking and others will add a commission to your vacation rental listing prices and just keep the difference. Another charge you may incur is pay-per-inquiry models and annual subscriptions. A few good questions to ask yourself are: Do your rental owners want to receive payments as soon as the booking is made? If so, do you have enough liquidity to pay the owners and wait for the commission to come through? Do you have enough up front to buy a years' subscription for all your properties? Can you afford a cut in your commission to go to a portal?

### Find information on forums:

There are a number of useful blogs and forums where vacation rental owners inquire about the best vacation rental portal, including LinkedIn groups for vacation rental owners. HomeAway also has a large community section, where all portals are discussed. It's worth looking around the internet to see what people think of the



portal you are looking at, if they have a history of positive feedback and if their current customers are happy with them.

## How to make your portal listings stand out from the competition

There are millions of listings across thousands of portals all over the world, from small, location-based niches to the mammoths like Booking.com and HomeAway. And this plethora of options is a great thing for the vacation rental industry; these huge volumes are what keep customers coming back to these sites and making bookings on your properties. But in among all this noise, how do your portal listings stand out from the crowd? Everyone is jostling for top spot, or to be more visible, but how do you stand out from the completion on portal sites?

### Make sure your title is not packed with generic superlatives

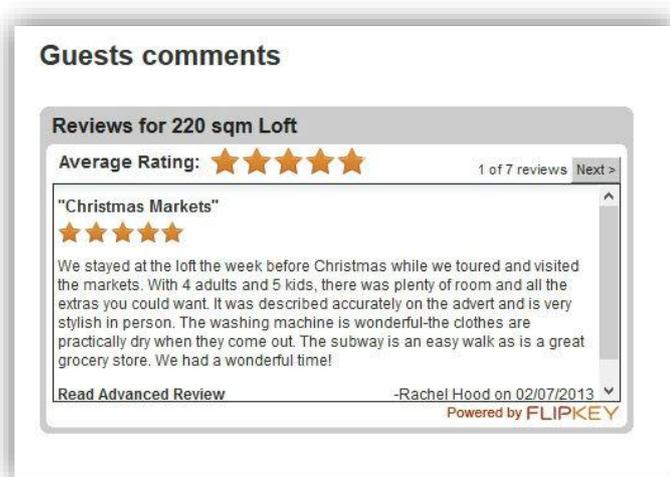
Scan many portals and you will find hundreds of “Charming” townhouses or “Victorian” abodes, but these generic descriptions, while reading very nicely and looking good, will not get you noticed. It’s a far better strategy to focus on one primary element that makes your vacation rental unique, like a stunning view, or a secluded, suntrap garden, than simply to highlight what everyone else is highlighting. Your properties may be far better than the competition, but unless you can drive consumers to click-through and see that for themselves, they will not realize. Putting a unique Listing Title will really help you to do this.

### Choose a lead image wisely

So many great listings are spoiled by a weak lead image. It’s the first point of contact for a customer; it will be the greatest driver of click throughs to the listing and is one of the major denominators that travellers will use to differentiate your properties from the competition. But choose wisely; make sure it really is the best feature. Many listings opt for a shot of the bedroom, but again, this is a popular choice so it won’t get you noticed, unless it has a really special feature. Opt for a garden or lounge with a view, anything that really brings your vacation rental into the customers’ focus.

### Reviews on your portal listings

We talk about this a lot on the Kigo Blog, but once again reviews mean bookings. Portal sites are a really easy place to harvest review content from your previous guests, while harnessing the huge power of TripAdvisor through a listing with Flipkey or Holiday Lettings is a really good idea to get more reviews for your vacation rental site. But almost every portal site has the option for



reviews to be left, so it's important for you to drive previous happy guests to leave their feedback. Many portals will also allow you to add reviews from your site to the corresponding listing, and this is also a great way to drive more portal bookings.

#### Use translations

If the portal offers the option to have your listing in multiple languages, accept it of course. But find someone through a service like E-lance to do the translation properly, make sure that the correct terms are used and the dialect is appropriate, it will really help to boost conversion if the customer doesn't have to try to decipher a listing in a mangled version of their native language.



#### Write about the City and Areas near Your Vacation Home

You can entice customers by mentioning the lesser known facts about your vacation city/town. Tell them about the nearby places and how accessible they would be from your rental. You can also give a general idea of tourist activities near your place, the best times to visit, how to reach, etc. These things make you appear more concerned, genuine, and quality oriented, leading the customer to have a stronger belief in you than the other renters.

While making an ad for your rental home focus on quality and maintain a professional standard. Keep in mind all of the above mentioned points and infuse into them your own creativity to make an outstanding advertisement!

#### Make Things Easy for Your Prospective Guests

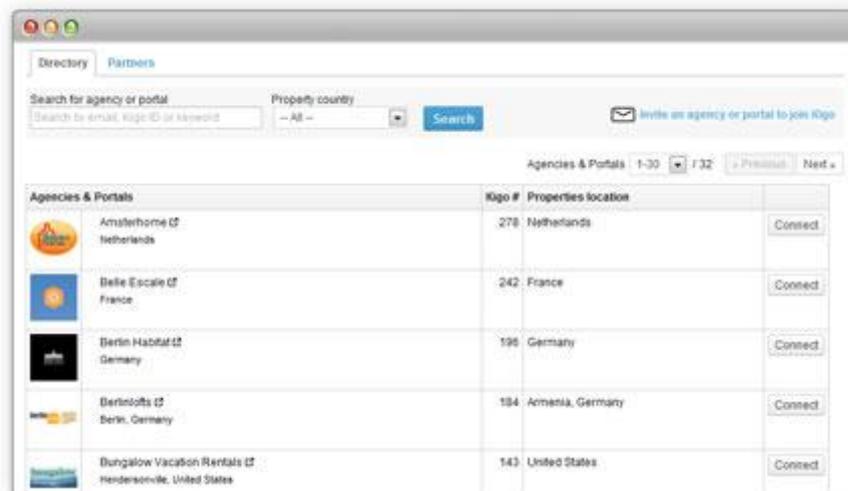
The function of your ad is best served if it provides all the information that a client needs before contacting you for a booking. You risk losing the customer's interest if you give incomplete or hard to view information in the advertisement. So, try and provide all information that a guest would want to know about your vacation rental. And do so in an easily comprehensible way, for example, you should provide concise information in the form of bullet points and avoid long descriptions where possible. If your guests find what they want effortlessly, they'll be more likely to stick to your page and make an immediate enquiry.

## Channel Management with a Twist: Increase Your Bookings with Inter-Agency Advertising

Marketers are known to have an insatiable appetite towards finding and consuming as many advertising opportunities as possible. As long as there is a sufficient budget to work with, each penny spent is an investment towards more bookings. Many vacation rental marketers are familiar with the typical advertising avenues, from SEO to advertising on portals, but many are missing out on a booking gold-pot: inter-agency advertising.

### What Is Inter-Agency Advertising?

Inter-agency advertising is an integrated part of Channel Manager which is pioneered by Kigo. It enables vacation rental agencies within Kigo's network to connect with each-other to promote each-other's properties. The aim is to provide a mutually beneficial partnerships where both parties increase both bookings and revenues.



### How Does Inter-Agency Advertising Work?

**Inter-Country Packages:** A vacation rental agency, let's call them Home Sweet California (HSC), logs into the Kigo back-end. Once in the Channel Manager section, they will have access to a list of hundreds of agencies who are part of the Kigo network. These agencies are based all around the world and the majority of them have an independent website.

Within Kigo, HSC is able to directly connect with the property managers from different countries where they want to create a rental package for guests (a vacation package of USA-Mexico-Panama). Through Kigo, HSC partners with 2 other agencies, and all 3 vacation rental agencies create a package for guests, where they can book a tri-city rental package.



**Local Advertising:** HSC also wants to grow its local presence within California. During the summer season they are fully booked, but have difficulty filling in their spring season. HSC finds two other vacation rental agencies in California through Kigo, and partners with them so that when HSC is fully booked they can feature the properties of the other agency on their website. During the spring seasons, they can promote their own properties on other agencies' websites for increased exposure.

### What Are the Benefits of Inter-Agency Advertising?

The advantages of using inter-agency advertising are two-folded: increased profits and increased bookings. With Kigo's inter-agency advertising you will be able to:

- Increase exposure by having your properties on other agency's websites
- Ability to create creative vacation rental packages
- Never have unavailable properties by promoting other properties during your busy-season
- Make a profit with commissions for 3rd party properties being booked through your agency's website
- Fill last-minute openings by promoting your property on other agency's websites
- SEO: Inbound links from other agencies to your website

For vacation rental agencies who are looking at increasing their marketing agency, we definitely recommend giving inter-agency advertising a try. Aside from the increased revenue and bookings, it is a tremendous networking opportunity.



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## Channel Manager:

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If you are in the market for a new [vacation rental website](#) or better [vacation rental software](#) to manage your inquiries, bookings and marketing, consider using Kigo. You can contact one of our vacation rental software experts:

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