# Chapter Four: Model of Distributing Hospitality Products

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CHAPTER FOUR: MODEL OF DISTRIBUTING HOTEL PRODUCTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will present the development of a model for distribution of hotel products. It is divided into three phases (see figure 4.1). The first phase is an analysis of the literature and is presented in section 4.2. The actual model emerging from this phase is presented in section 4.3. The second phase of the development involved editing feedback from the audience at the ENTER 2006, CHME 2006 and ENTER 2007 and this appears in section 4.4. The third phase is concerned with designing the final model and is presented in sections 4.5 and 4.6. Section 4.5 includes experts’ and hoteliers’ feedback about the revised model. Section 4.6 presents the final hotel distribution model. A summary of the chapter is presented at section 4.7.
4.2 Hospitality Distribution Models from the Literature

Bowie and Buttle (2004) identified key hotel distribution channels as including: direct to customer; referral network; travel agent; tour operator. However they did not use the terms disintermediation and re-intermediation and made no mention of EDCs (Turban et al., 2006).

Figure 4.2: Overview of Global Distribution Network


In contrast, Emmer et al. (1993) nine years earlier than Bowie and Buttle (2004) included different EDCs, e.g. Switch and GDSs. They divided the ED process into five phases. These phases were: hotels; CRO or Rep Company; Switch Method; computer-reservation system (they identified in this phase telephone
link); and travel retailers and corporations (see figure 4.2). According to Turban et al. (2004) this distribution model identifies disintermediation and re-intermediation (see figure 4.3). However Emmer et al. (1993) did not include many types of channels which appeared later in the market (e.g. online travel agencies and hotel websites).

Adopted from Emmer et al. (1993)

Choi and Kimes (2002) did not divide EDCs into phases. They identified four EDCs (online agents, GDS; Switch; CRS) linked to a Property Management
System (PMS) (see figure 4.4). This model excludes any hotel without a property management system. Their model is customer-centric and represents a customer looking for a hotel. In their model they limited travel agents’ ability to book a customer into a hotel unless this hotel had a link with a GDS. Choi and Kimes (2002) did not include a direct link from the GDS to the hotel. It is important to note that hotels do not necessarily need a switch system if they are connected to only one GDS as the function of the switch system is to facilitate the uploading of hotel information to multiple GDSs.

Source: Choi and Kimes (2002)
Nassar’s (2002) model presented an attractive picture of hotel distribution to the reader although he did not explain how these channels work and how they exchange information (Figure 4.5). Nassar built it as a customer looking for a hotel as his research focused on hotel websites. He classified channels as direct and indirect. Indirect channels could be offline and online. The indirect online channels were categorised as internet intermediaries and no internet presence i.e. hotel broker and travel agency. He struggled to include all the other channels in his term “third – party sites and portals”. This model summarised hotel distribution channels and gave a brief idea about the distribution of hospitality products but neglected to show how these distribution channels worked together and the information flows from hotel to customer.

Source: Nassar (2002)
Another perspective for distribution was presented by Hudson (2008) in his work on tourism destination marketing (figure 4.6). He drew the information flow starting from the customer to an individual operator website. He mentioned certain details regarding the browser and search engine which were used by customers. These two boxes could not be considered as distribution channels. Even if these two were considered as intermediaries, he neglected to draw an arrow from “search engine” to corporate website which was presented as a chain hotel website. This missing arrow could help hoteliers or destinations to enhance their position in the market or to save some money which they would pay for intermediaries. The hotel or destination would save money if they can optimise their use of search engines to secure a high rank position (Murphy and Kielgast, 2008). “Via cross marketing” highlights the importance of building relationships with other websites and is a tactic used by sillyjokes.com - one of the 2004 e-commerce award winners in UK - to increase the number of hits on its property website (DTI-INTERFORUM, 2005). Most of the online intermediaries could be summarised under “electronic brokers” although merging these complicated concepts into one box would hide a lot of information that would be useful for hoteliers. One of the channels that might be hidden or missed was GDS. As this model represented intermediaries involved in the online distribution, it neglected to represent the direct link between the customer and the individual operator website. However, Hudson later in his book illustrated this direct link and its importance.
Other authors have added more channels to reflect this increasingly complicated environment (O’Connor and Frew, 2002). Morrison (2002) edited IDTV into the previous models and summarised the ED system in the following components: CRS, GDSs, Hard storage devices, Internet, Marketing Consortia, National Tourism Organizations (NTOs), Reservation Companies, Switch Companies, Web/Interactive TV, Travel agents and wholesalers/tour operators. However, some of these distribution channels could not be considered as distribution channels; according to the definition of O’Connor and Frew (2001 and 2002), since customers would not be able to buy from them.

Licata et al. (2001) agreed with Morrison (2002) by defining IDTV (IDTV) as an EDC. Furthermore, Licata et al. (2001) added mobile phones and expected that IDTV and mobile phones as two new channels will be more important in the future since customers will be able buy from the online travel agencies and IDTV companies as intermediaries.
On the other hand, O’Connor and Frew (2002) neglected to include mobile phones and IDTV. The reasons behind this could be that until recently mobile phones were not being used as an active online distribution channel and IDTV did not get involved in distribution. O’Connor and Frew (2002) tried to present in their model the relationships between hotels and EDCs and were also keen to draw the internal relationships between EDCs. They mentioned in their model
CRS, GDS, GDS-based web site, Switch companies, Switch companies’ web site, DMS (Destination Management System), DMS web site, web intermediary, representative company, representative company web site and Tourist Information Centre (TIC) as EDCs. In addition they replaced NTOs, with DMS (see figure 4.7) and called their model “Hotel electronic distribution” although they included non-EDCs e.g. TIC and Travel agents.

O’Connor and Piccoli (2003) mentioned examples in their model for most of the channels. They added airline sites, affiliates; web Switches, tour operators, chain website, hotel website and other on-line retailers to Choi and Kime’s (2002) model. They divided travel agents into two elements; ‘travel agents’ and ‘travel agents websites’. They replaced the term “Property Management
System” (PMS) in Choi and Kimes’ model with “hotel” (see figure.4.8). O’Connor and Piccoli’s (2003) model in comparison with O’Connor and Frew’s (2002) omitted both DMSs and Tourist information centres (TICs) from the hotel distribution channels. Instead of listing GDS-based websites, they listed the names of these websites with arrows to different GDSs (e.g. Sabre, Worldspan). O’Connor and Piccoli neglected to include a direct link from the hotel to the GDS.

In all previous models, the common comment was they failed to represent some channels (e.g. mobile phones, IDTV) or certain relationships. Presenting the nature of relationship between channels was crucial. A hotel distribution model was supposed to reflect the distribution environment to the reader and how hotels could deliver its products to customers. The previous models needed to be updated with these neglected channels and relationships to present the current distribution environment to hoteliers or readers. These missed channels of distributions were critically important, whilst some of these channels have become more important and relationships have strengthened.
4.3 Initial Hotel Distribution Model

After studying various models and the differences between each of them, an initial model could be designed to represent the relationships between hotel and EDCs. This model added IDTV and mobile phone companies as future electronic distribution channels. Regarding mobile phone companies in near
future (this initial model was designed in December 2005) customers will be able to reserve their flights or rooms through their mobile phones using this service which will be provided soon by mobile phones companies (Franki, 2006; Cook, 2006)

The initial EDC model was divided into bricks (for channels which have physical appearance, e.g. Travel agencies); clicks (channels have internet appearance and could have physical appearance); other channels (channels which were expected to be appeared in near future as an effective distribution channels). Some terms were defined differently than in other models, e.g. Web intermediaries in this model represented ‘airline websites’ and other on-line retailers. Colour codes were used to facilitate tracking of the relationship for the reader. Similar colours were used to reflect the close nature of certain channels, e.g. TIC, DMS and DMO (see Figure 4.9).
4.4 The revised model

The model was revised through presenting it to specialised conference audiences. The initial model was presented at the 13th and 14th International Conference of Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism (ENTER 2006 and ENTER 2007), and the Council of Hospitality Management and Education (CHME) Conference 2006 (Elsayed, 2006a; Elsayed, 2006b; Elsayed et al., 2007).

The audience feedback from the CHME conference (2006) was concerned with the terminology. The debate was about “mobile phones” and “IDTV” as the two
terms were referred to as terminals or platforms not as distribution channels according to Buhalis (2003). Another discussion focused on the term “other channel” which was seen to mislead the reader and was ambiguous. This debate disappeared at ENTER 2007 as the model had been modified. The three terms were modified to be “mobile phone companies”, “IDTV companies” and “future channels” to reflect the nature of distribution rather than the platform for these channels and its prospective future (figure 4.10).

Figure 4.10: The Revised Model

[Diagram of the Revised Model showing the distribution channels and their interactions]

CUSTOMER

Mobile phones companies
Interactive Digital TV companies

Travel agency website
Online travel agency

Hotel website
Switch

GDS
Web intermediaries

Representative company website
Representative company

Future Channels

Clicks

Bricks

CRS/CRO
GDS
Switch

Property Management System

HOTEL

DMO
DMS
TIC
4.5 Experts and Hoteliers’ Feedback about the Model

To increase the model’s credibility, a series of interviews were held to obtain feedback. Interviews were held with an expert panel (researchers and academic authors) and hoteliers. The common selection criteria for those interviewees were that they had to be familiar with ED environments. Some of the interviewees were authors of the previous models mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Most hoteliers did not make many comments on the model. Most of them agreed with it. Two asked for a copy of the model to use it in familiarising their staff with the distribution environment (HMC2 and CH4). One of those two (HMC2) added an arrow between GDS and DMS (Figure 4.11). On the other hand the expert panel views were very critical. Their feedback was concerned with: terminology; the relationships between the EDCs; unrepresented channels; the design of the final figure.
4.5.1 Model Terminology

Some terms in the initial model needed to be expanded as some of them were abbreviations and other terms had more than one meaning. EXP5 highlighted that: “I think these boxes need to be more clearly defined”. She gave an example for an abbreviation which could have more than one meaning: “For example what do you mean by DMS?” She continued, “it could be destination management system, or it could be destination marketing system”. EXP2 confirmed this point of view by commenting on Web intermediary as a term: “It is grey. Web intermediaries have a lot of different shapes and sizes.” This debate questioned whether certain boxes had to stand alone or be merged with other boxes. EXP2 suggested including online travel agencies under web intermediary although this could confuse the reader as “web intermediaries” was used to reflect the online auctions and any other web intermediary was not included under the other terms.

EXP11 was more rigid. He objected to the researcher’s understanding of web intermediary and online travel agency. He wondered: “What is the difference between that [web intermediary] and this [online travel agency]?” the researcher answered him: “web intermediaries like Active hotels and hotels.com, are not like online travel agencies such as Expedia”. EXP11 objected: “Activehotels is exactly the same as Expedia. The same structure and the same business model” The interviewer wondered: “Is it able to distribute airline tickets, holiday packages and other things like Expedia.com.” He explained:

*Activehotels has now priceline.co.uk which is a full service travel agency; there are different brands of the same things. The same*
things like bookings, so I mean how you do distinguish between these things. How do you define them? Where I normally look at them. I normally define them in terms of business model. And then when you start looking in terms of business model, what a hotel company actually is. For example, Marriott, to me Marriott is closer to Expedia than a traditional hotel company like Intercontinental because Marriott sells distribution services, Expedia sells distribution services in terms of fees.

His understanding of each term referred to the business model that is applied in each company. The researcher when distinguishing between online travel agency and web intermediary, meant to reflect the different business nature of each, “Web intermediary” included online auctions websites, name your own price websites and any other web intermediary which were not included in the other boxes. “Online travel agencies” meant these websites which do the same function of a travel agency, but online. To accommodate the views in the final model (especially those of EXP2, EXP5 and EXP11) a simple definition and examples would be included in the final model and the term web intermediary would be changed to be “other web intermediaries” (figure 4.12).

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<tr>
<th>Figure 4.12: Demonstrating the Terms and Abbreviations in the New Model</th>
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<td><strong>Key terms:</strong></td>
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<td>VTCs: Virtual Travel Communities e.g. trip advisors.</td>
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<td>DMO: Destination Management Organizations.</td>
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<td>TIC: Tourist Information centres.</td>
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<tr>
<td>DMS: Destination Management Systems.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Representative company website:</strong> as a term included online hotel representative companies and representative companies websites E.g. classicbritain.com, Activehotels.com, Laterooms.com.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Web intermediaries:</strong> E.g. eBay.com, priceline.com, Travelsupermarket.com, uk.travel.yahoo..com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GDS:</strong> Global Distribution System e.g. Sabre, Galileo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Switch:</strong> E.g. Pegasus.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Online travel agencies:</strong> expedia.com, lastminute.com, TravelRes.com.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CRS/CRO:</strong> central Reservation Systems/Offices.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mobile Phone Companies:</strong> e.g. Three.</td>
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Selecting “GDS Website” and “Switch website” were not good choices. EXP5 and EXP14 were confused. They thought the two terms reflected Switch Company / GDS website. These two terms were supposed to mean websites which were based on switch system or GDS. This confusion would be handled in the new model as these two boxes would disappear (Figure 4.13). After revising the model and checking it, these two were included under online travel agencies and GDS-based websites and Switch-based websites incorporated as well-known online travel agencies, e.g. www.travelWeb.com and TravelRes.com (O’Connor and Piccoli, 2003). TravelRes as an example was included in the key terms in the revised model to reflect these types of distribution channel (Figure 4.13).
Chapter Four: Model of Distributing Hospitality Products

The Initial Model

Figure 4.13: Merging Switch Website and GDS Website with Online Travel Agencies

The New Model
4.5.2 Relationships between EDCs

The relationships between different EDCs were another issue that experts contributed to. EXP14 noticed some missing relationships. He drew an arrow from hotel to DMS and from online travel agency to web intermediary. His first contribution would be accommodated but his second would be modified. The direction of distribution flow, from hotel to customer, came from the hotel to online travel agency which had relationships with other web intermediaries. It meant the arrow would be from the online travel agency to other web intermediaries (Figure 4.14).

Figure 4.14: Adding Missed Relationships to the Model
Another participant reordered the EDCs. EXP5 suggested listing GDS website lower than hotel website and to put travel agency with DMO and GDSs, according to the historical approach. She justified her opinion with:

*Because the GDS website sells the property before the hotel website started to sell things online, so from historic prospective this would need to be lower down. [...] just the way you did the travel agency website I think the GDS website needs to be lower down and also I think the travel agency should be down here where GDS and DMO.*

Her opinion could be seen to contradict the design process as sometimes to give more space for arrows to stand out; it should move this box or that to make it clearer. Unfortunately, this opinion could not be applied as the model clarity was more important than the historical perspective.

EXP1 implied adding a link from the PMS to the TIC. This point could be modified and accommodated. Especially, EXP14 pointed to changing the position of PMS from the left hand side to the right hand side at Hotel box. EXP14 indicated that should be in a different model to represent these hotels which did not have enough money to get a PMS or CRS. The modified box should be drawn as “hotel / hotel management system” as “hotel” expressed small hotels and “Hotel Management System” would present the other hotels which had PMS, and then a link would come from this box to the TIC (figure 4.15).
EXP2 proposed to modify the arrows’ direction at DMS, TIC and DMO. He said:

*DMO, TIC, DMS… I find this quite difficult part. If I think about the connections you use. Your arrows are going from here to here in terms of distribution part. It is not really how it works. It is very much bi-directional and you know if you didn’t have the arrows initiating from the hotel, the customer will still be searching for the information looking for possible transactions.*

Bi-directional arrows would contradict with the design as the initial model illustrated how a hotelier could deliver his/her products to the customer. As a result the arrows were supposed to flow from the hotel to customers.

EXP2’s comment about DMS as a difficult part would be clearer if EXP13’s contribution was applied. EXP13 reordered the three. He put DMS between the hotel and the DMO as the hotel upload his inventory on it to be seen by customers through DMO’s brochures, website and call centres, and TICs. Especially, he stated DMS did not sell directly to customers but the DMO and the TIC. EXP2 agreed with him and drew arrows coming out of DMS connecting DMS with call centres, central reservation and unit level, etc. In the new model,
there would be a link from hotel to DMS to DMO and TIC. In DMO box, different examples would be listed e.g. call centres, central reservation…etc. “Call centres” had other supporters – EXP1, EXP7 and EXP13 - who would like it to be listed in the new model, which will be adjusted to be included in DMO box (Figure 4.16).

EXP3 and EXP13 agreed on moving the position of Switch to be between the hotel and GDS. EXP3 justified his opinion:

*The Switch typically is here (between the hotel and GDS) not here after the GDS? This is how it works, because Switch is something that allows you to have a single interface to more GDSs. So I would put it here.*

This relationship would be presented as arrows coming from the hotel to Switch then going to GDSs or from the hotel to GDSs directly as some hotel did not need switch as they deal with limited number of GDSs (HMC4) (see figure 4.17).
The colour of CRS box and its dotted arrows confused EXP11. This “CRS” colour would be changed to another colour to represent the relationship with the hotel (Figure 4.18).
“Mobile phone companies” attracted the attention of EXP5 and she asked to change its position to be in clicks instead of in the future as it was already in use. The researcher clarified that it was listed in the future section as booking can be done through its WAP and there were many expectations that its use in bookings would soon increase dramatically (EXP3), especially if companies like Orbitz start using mobile phone WAP to give their customers information about different travel components and different call centre numbers (Orbitz mobile phone website, 2008 and Harteveldt, 2006). The author checked different companies to check if they offered an active mobile booking facility and found that eBay had launched a mobile enhanced website and marketed it on the 3 network in the UK. For this reason an extra link was added from other web intermediaries to mobile phone companies as it started to distribute (figure 4.19).

EXP14 moved GDS and Switch to be in clicks instead of bricks. He suggested to call “bricks” “traditional” and to call “clicks” “online” if the researcher wanted
to keep them at their position, a suggestion which would reflect the nature of these EDCs. The previous terms confused EXP14 but on the other hand the new terms reflected the familiarity of the bricks channels to hoteliers and it did not ignore the IT nature of GDS, CRS and Switch (Figure 4.20)

<table>
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<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Online</th>
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4.5.3 *Non-represented channels*

Different channels were edited on the model by the expert panel. According to the increasing importance of VTCs (VTCs as a term which embodies: virtual communities, forums, blogs, wikis and role playing games) (Stepchenkova, *et al.* 2007 and Schegg, *et al.* 2008), it would be included in the new model. This opinion was supported by interviewees (EXP1, EXP4, EXP8, EXP9, and EXP10) despite the fact that they used different terms to talk about it including: Web2.0; C2C channels; broadband social groups; online social networks; blogs; youtube.com, myspace.com; and trip advisor.com). These terms are captured in the model by the term VTCs. It should be noted that Web2.0 technology could be used in other distribution channels to enhance customer relationship management (Sigala, 2008) and that Youtube.com, social networks and broadband social groups are not specific to tourism or travel. This term could reflect to the model reader any common social network while it would be better to reflect specialised travel communities (Figure 4.21).
“Tour Operator website” was edited by EXP2 as it was different from travel agencies, an opinion confirmed by O’Connor and Piccoli (2003) who listed tour operators in their model although they failed to add tour operator website as another channel. Consequently, tour operator and tour operator websites were added to the new model. On the other hand, EXP2 objected to including TIC in the model because it is not electronic channel (although in fact this contradicted his own model (O’Conner and Frew, 2002) of “Hotel Electronic Distribution” which lists TIC as one of its channels. EXP14 suggested including internet kiosks in the model but this could not be applied as it is considered a platform not a channel as it would be used to surf the internet. EXP10 pointed to add a box for management contract companies as a distribution channel. This point was included under CRS/ CRO since these companies had a central reservation system to distribute its products (Figure 4.22).
4.5.4 Model Layout

It is crucial that a model layout is easy to understand and this design had to accommodate future changes as stated by EXP4. Some interviewees provided feedback regarding the design and the classification of channels. In the first group EXP4 presented an open model without specifying the name of the channels to accept future changes (figure 4.23).
In contrast, EXP7, EXP8, EXP9 and EXP15 agreed on the initial model (Figure 4.9) and edited some modifications as mentioned earlier in this chapter. EXP3 agreed on its general layout but he proposed to make it horizontal (Figure 4.24) instead of drawing it vertically. He justified his opinion as it would be easy to read and to understand. First layout by EXP4 was very open and would not tell the reader or hotelier any new information. EXP3’s layout would be used as it would make it more intelligible for the reader.

Buhalis’ (2003) mentioned different platforms for commerce. They include: call centres for cCommerce, TV and IDTV for tCommerce, walk-in centres for wCommerce, internet for iCommerce and mobile phones for mCommerce. These platforms influenced the other group of interviewees. EXP11 offered two layouts based on type of the channel and the platform or media used. Firstly, he
suggested to classify them into media (includes: Mobile, IDTV and internet) and channels or companies. His argument was that the model should be based on channels and media such as internet, mobile phone and IDTV. In his second initial model, he classified channels into wholesaler; companies and affiliates (Figure 4. 25). EXP11’s initial model would cause confusion as it added to the existing number of arrows another group between the channel and the media. The other suggested model based on the type of the channel whether it was wholesaler or affiliate. This suggestion would not contribute to the initial EDC model as the aim of this model was to make a clear and descriptive picture for hotelier. This picture was supposed to help them understand how to deal with these different EDCs. In the proposed model, this classification would be difficult to apply as some channels would include affiliates and companies at the same time.

![Figure 4.25: EXP11’s Initial Layouts for the New EDC Model Adopted From EXP11’s Words](image_url)
EXP12 agreed on the current model layout but he modified the term to be “bricks” and “digital” instead of “clicks”. EXP14 almost agreed with him. He suggested replacing “bricks” with “traditional” and “ICTs” or “online” instead of “Clicks”. At the end of this discussion, EXP12 recommended drawing different pictures for the electronic distribution reflecting its rapidly changing environment. EXP11 narrowed down EXP12 suggestion and summarised the difficulty of drawing this image:

*Of course it is very difficult to draw as you know; the problem is it changes and changes and changes. So you have to take a snapshot at a particular moment of time. This is what it is looking like. Because you never gonna to get it 100% right.*

### 4.6 The Final Hotel Distribution Model

The final model is based on experts’ feedback and the researcher’s modifications after revising the model and discussing the experts’ contributions, e.g. “mobile phone companies” were connected to “other web intermediaries” as they have a current active link with online auctions websites e.g. eBay which enabled customers to buy online through the phone. This channel also was highlighted as an effective hotel distribution channel in certain countries (Fuchs, *et al.* 2008).

All other expected links which were drawn to connect with Mobile Phone as a future channel were deleted since it was moved to “online” instead of “future channel”. On the other hand, The IDTV was removed since the expert panel and the industry panel did not heavily support it in chapter six (see table 6.12). Even the justifications of those who disagree with its role in the future were
stronger than the supportive group. The reason behind it was revealed by EXP3: “All of the experiments done have failed.” This model (figure 4.26) was just an attempt to represent the current picture of hotel distribution at certain period of time to help in understanding of distribution for hoteliers. Also, it is very difficult to consider the issue from different perspectives. i.e. customer; supplier; intermediary. Therefore this shape can be redesigned in future to represent these different perspectives.

4.7 Summary

This chapter presented different hotel distribution models. These models investigated the relationships between the hotel and different distribution channels. There were discrepancies between them. These discrepancies initiated the idea of designing a model which is supposed to represent the current picture of hotel distribution. An initial model was designed. To improve its validation, different feedback was collected. The initial model was presented at different conferences to obtain feedback from the audience of these conferences. The initial model was edited to accommodate audience feedback. The model was examined through holding series of interviews which were held with hoteliers and experts. Hoteliers’ feedback was generally positive. They admired the model and CH4 and HMC2 (who belong to chain and marketing consortia) asked for a copy of it to be used to familiarise their employees with the hospitality distribution. One of them added a relationship between the channels. Experts’ feedback was very valuable as some of the selected panel were the authors of the models that were presented in this chapter (4.3). They
discussed the initial model deeply with the researcher. They pointed to critical parts which were in need to be enhanced or to be modified. They even suggested to modify the model lay out to be easier for the reader. Their justified comments were edited in the new model. The experts’ unjustified comments were examined and the applicable comments were accommodated. The model itself was revised to make it clearer to the reader. Colour codes were used to make tracking of the relationships between channel more obvious and understandable.
Figure 4.26: The New Hotel Product Distribution Model

Key Terms: