

The value shift - how the travel customer has changed

By  Natalia Rosa

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No matter who you are, or where you are right now, our shared experience as human beings this past year has been that of riding a 'coronacoaster'.

There have been many questions, sadly not that many answers. "Is it safe to venture to the shop, or should I order online?" "Will I run out of wine before we hear those sweet words 'My fellow South Africans...?'" "Is it still safe to travel?"

For those of us who work in the travel industry, we know that travel as we knew and loved it, is over. As consumers grapple with uncertainty during this time, their purchasing behaviour has become more erratic and quite frankly almost impossible to predict.

So, what do we know?

We know that people are a lot more risk-averse in times of Covid than they were before Covid. We know that travel and tourism is often the lens through which the spread of the pandemic is viewed. We know that people's habits have changed, been forced to change, very quickly as a result of restrictions on movement. We know that people are afraid and need more support. And we know that the new normal is a Covid normal and it's not going anywhere anytime soon.

Here are 10 things we can count on as travel experts going into 2021:



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1. We've all become germophobes

There's every likelihood; you'll be looking at the world through a new lens – one that is covered with a thick layer of hand sanitiser and social distancing. Travellers will have significant concerns over health and hygiene for the foreseeable future.

The type of travel we're going to seek out as germophobes will be different because of our heightened concern over safety and health – goodbye queues, over-tourism and dense crowds. Hello outdoors, destinations with low-density travel and travel contained within your own social bubble – family and close friends.

2. Budget is tight – corporate or leisure

Whether you're travelling for business or pleasure, money is going to be much tighter than it was going into this pandemic. That doesn't mean that we're going to be looking for cheap. Our new risk-averse nature means we will be deeply suspicious of a travel deal that is too good to be true.

With lower disposable income and stress and anxiety about the future, we're also going to be a lot more focused on conscious consumption, steer clear of wastage and be cautious about our purchasing decisions.

3. Online or bust, baby

From zero to 100, Covid has forced even the most Luddite of us to digitise. The virus created a seismic shift towards online shopping; a catalyst that online companies couldn't even have hoped for. Instead of an organic, gradual change to online-

first, we've been forced into it overnight.

As a result, customers are much more comfortable with online commerce than they were even earlier this year. Will this shift to an online channel be permanent? It's too early to say, but with new hygiene and health concerns, it is possible, for the foreseeable future, that consumers will think twice about venturing to crowded public spaces to shop with the same carefree abandon as before.

The lesson for travel businesses which have not only been slow to go online but failed to institute an online-first strategy is that you better fast track your digital consumer engagement, e-commerce offering and cashless payment technology if you want to stay in the game.

4. Caring for our fellow humans

The superheroes of our new normal are those who have rushed to the frontlines and cared for their communities – nurses, doctors, essential services. These people, whose job it is to care for others, are the ones we celebrate. It is their courage and selflessness we admire.

You will have seen, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, people and communities coming together to help. While we've grappled with the uncertainty, there's been a distinct drive towards collaboration, community, humanity.

For travel companies, this means taking steps to become more 'human'. Start with re-evaluating your values, really understanding who you are and responding authentically based on a new order of priorities: trust, safety, and connection.

There is an expectation that companies are putting the safety and wellbeing of their staff and customers first, before profits. But more than this, those brands that are authentic in their desire to help others and make a difference, not just to get marketing mentions, but to make a difference, will win hearts and minds.

5. Caring for our planet

Covid-19 seems to have created the space for a 'do-over'; an opportunity for us to start again and put greater focus on what's important, like saving our planet. Customers don't just want businesses to care about them; they also expect companies to care about the earth. They also expect businesses to be accountable for their environmental and social impact. They will acknowledge companies which attempt to do good.

6. Self-care – Because you're worth it

Covid-19 upended our daily routines, our plans, and our lifestyles. We became fixated on how to manage stress, sleep, physical activity, eating well, and taking care of ourselves. We're also looking for exhilarating and refreshing to soothe the psychological impact that the extended lockdown has caused and relieve the stress of house arrest.

7. Flexibility in times of uncertainty

When things are uncertain, you want a little flexibility. Brands which are less strict about fees for changes and cancellations and more focused on providing as much flexibility in their T&Cs for customers will do better than those who are inflexible. Consumers won't forget.

Travel businesses similarly need to be agile, read the mood in the room and respond based on where their customers' mindsets are, and that means being prepared to deal with shorter booking windows, last-minute bookings and flexible cancellation right up until the day before or of travel.

In a Covid world, the top three customer service qualities that consumers value during the pandemic are speed to resolution, empathy and flexibility, and the ability of agents to answer questions quickly.

8. A return to the expert for support

A recent study by McKinsey indicates that now more than ever, consumers need extra information, guidance and support to navigate a novel set of challenges. They want a resource they can trust, that can make them feel safe when everything seems uncertain, and that offers support when there are so many unknowns.

For travel businesses to be successful, they have to ramp up their customer support and highlight their value proposition of holding your customers' hand in a complicated environment.

9. We have way more screen time, and we're using it

All over the world, people have flocked online as a critical news source to understand the latest updates on the Covid-19 global health pandemic. Non-stop news has become even more pronounced than usual. Now more than ever, our online audience has become highly engaged.

Online videos and TV streaming are in... physical press and podcasts are out. And usage of social media, especially video-based like TikTok, and WhatsApp, have increased dramatically.

Interestingly, social media has evolved into what it was meant for in the first place, social connection, as we are starved of that connection. Similarly, events on virtual platforms like Zoom, Teams, Skype, etc., have soared.

How many virtual meetings do you have a day now instead of merely picking up the phone?

10. How we travel has had to evolve

Stringent health and hygiene protocols have been introduced across the travel value chain, and that's going to impact on the way people travel like increasing the length of time to get through the airport check-in and aircraft boarding process and rising costs.

We've also seen that it's not necessary to be in the same place for a meeting or even a conference. We see that a new kind of travel – the travel of living – will emerge. Instead of taking a holiday, you may decide to work remotely and enjoy your work and play at the same time.

So now what?

If you do choose to reimagine what your travel business will look like in 2021 as a result of all these trends, there are some necessary lessons you can adopt for success:

- 1. Be customer-centric:** This was the case before Covid-19. It has endured through the pandemic and will continue beyond. Ask your customers what they want.
- 2. Track leading indicators:** Identify which indicators are essential to your customers and business and track these religiously, so you know which direction to go.
- 3. Take action swiftly:** Whatever you do, be agile. This situation requires supreme flexibility, so make sure you're monitoring what's happening and have a team that can move quickly to ensure you're taking the right action.
- 4. Repair while you fly:** Done is better than perfect and if you're waiting for perfect before you start flying, you're going to stay grounded. It's far better to draw a line in the sand and move forward even if you have to fix the plane while you're in the air.
- 5. Accelerate digital transformation:** If you weren't thinking about your digital strategy before Covid-19, you have no

choice but to do it now. It is non-negotiable.

6. Be kind, trustworthy and caring: Your customers can sniff inauthenticity and self-promotion a mile away and are incredibly opposed to it. Find the humanity in your brand and make sure you're connecting with your customers from a place of genuine empathy.

And beyond this, take 2021 forward with an infinite mindset. A great deal of how you choose to tackle the impossible you've been hit with this past year is about attitude.

ABOUT NATALIA ROSA

Natalia Rosa is the MD of Big Ambitions, a specialist travel and tourism communications and marketing organisation which helps tourism and travel organisations connect with their members and customers.

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