

Travel agents focus on end-to-end, multi-platform consumer experiences

In the world of travel, old school appears to be making a comeback. Overwhelmed by the extent of travel information and choice online, consumers are returning to the travel agent, seeking a very different experience than what they would have expected even a decade ago.



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“Before the advent of online booking, the customer would visit a travel agent to book a flight or a holiday package. The travel agent of yesteryear transacted on behalf of airlines, tour operators and other suppliers. Their skills and effort were focused around the booking transaction and they were rewarded with supplier commissions for their bookings,” explains Otto de Vries, CEO Association of Southern African Travel Agents.

Owning the whole experience

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“Today the picture looks vastly different. Those travel agents that have survived the introduction of online bookings have had to evolve to remain relevant. The focus for travel agents today is on providing travel inspiration, planning, booking and even on-trip advice. Consumers expect their travel agents to provide an end-to-end service that extends beyond the booking transaction and those who offer this service have become indispensable and are more than holding their own against other travel platforms,” adds de Vries.

“We want to ensure we own the whole experience for our travellers through every phase – the dreaming, planning, booking, experiencing and sharing,” agrees Sue Garrett, Flight Centre Travel Group product and marketing general manager.

"Our opportunity lies in owning the dreaming and experiencing phases of the travel journey. As such, we've begun investigating various virtual tools that allow us to invoke the desire to travel down to individuals' emotive drives, allowing their dreams to evolve into reality."

Owning the whole experience means that the travel agent also needs to control the experience in the destination to a certain extent, explains Garrett. "Flight Centre Travel Group's recent strategy has been to invest significantly in products, services and assets in key holiday markets. By owning the product and local destination management companies we can confidently manage our customers' holiday journey and so ensure the destination experience exceeds expectations."

And the acquisitions will continue, says Garrett. "We acquired Buffalo Tours in Asia and Olympus in Mexico that allowed us to expand the in-destination offering and have also bought BHMA, a hotel management rights business which currently has 28 properties in Thailand with an additional 30 hotels under review in other parts of the world.

"Further investigation is underway with other DMCs in locations that would certainly benefit South African travellers. Possible expansion into other product offerings would see South Africa as the first country to acquire a business of this nature."

Multi-platform customer engagement

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In addition to owning the customer experience, travel agents that want to remain relevant and garner continued customer support are also under pressure to deliver that customer experience across multiple platforms, adds de Vries.

"The 21st Century leisure travel agent may have a store in a busy mall, but also a mobile app, a website and even a relationship with a non-competitive retailer like a supermarket, for example, to fulfil travel bought at their point of sale or website.

"It is the responsibility of that travel agent to 'touch' the consumer on the platform they are most comfortable with when they want that engagement so it is essential that the customer experience goes beyond face-to-face and incorporates technology with which customers are comfortable," concludes de Vries.

Flight Centre's vision has been to allow the customer to transact with the travel agent in whatever way is the most convenient to them. "I'm a firm believer that when an individual is investing in a holiday, they will always need and benefit from the reassurance of an expert. A customer should be able to start the journey online and finish their booking in-store, with an expert to validate their choices," says Garrett.

To achieve this, she says, FCTG is investing in its online platforms to ensure it captures the market's imagination in the dreaming and planning phase, and if it is the customer's choice, the booking phase as well.

Where South Africans are travelling to in 2018

Value for money will still be a key consideration for South Africans in 2018, predicts de Vries. "We hope to see further

traction for increased domestic travel this year and will be continuing to work with South African Tourism to position the destination as a favourable business-leisure destination for South African business travellers.”

“Mauritius, Zanzibar and Thailand will continue to be firm favourites in 2018, and we are seeing in our data that destinations like the Middle East, Italy, USA and Sri Lanka are starting to spark more interest.

“Travelling South Africa will also be a focus for us and we will be showcasing the beauty and affordability of South Africa through, among others, events and festivals which will also be promoted by our global network,” says Garrett.

Concludes Sue: “South Africans are looking to experience new places, but there’s still a lack of confidence in doing so, which is why person-to-person assurances from a travel expert have become so important in this market.”

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