

What does the future hold for the retail travel industry?

 By Jenna Berndt

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I recently sat down with Sue Garrett, Sue Garrett, general manager of marketing and product at Flight Centre Travel Group (FCTG), to talk about what the next 25 years will look like for the retail travel trade in South Africa.



Image source: [Gall/Getty](#)

What changes have you witnessed over the last 25 years in the travel industry?

The industry was very different back in 1994 when FCTG opened its first store in South Africa. Travel was generally more expensive, and flights were few and far between. Disposable cameras and postcards were what travellers hauled around the world. There was no iPhone or GoPro in sight. Travel was about ticking off all the sights in a destination. Amadeus processed the first e-ticket in 1997. Smoking on planes had yet to be entirely banned by 1993!

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Today, the world is more accessible than ever, thanks to a slew of low-cost airlines and more flights and choices than ever before. The traveller is seeking authentic, immersive experiences, off-season travel and venturing off the beaten path. Most travel inspiration and research, planning and booking is done online.

Is there a future for the local retail travel trade? Is there still a need for bricks and mortar travel agencies?

Definitely – yes to both.

The travel industry is in for a tough year ahead. Retailers looking to maintain growth need to ensure they're offering their customer the best value, but also need to get creative with how they deliver value.

In this day and age, travel agencies need to have an omnichannel strategy. We're not just travel agents, we're full-service travel businesses – incorporating leisure and corporate travel elements and focusing on multiple channels of communication. Optimising technology will remain a key priority for the retail travel trade.



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It's essential to give the customer what they want. If they want to engage with you online, on a website or app, make that option available and ensure it works seamlessly! Other customers prefer face to face interaction, sitting down with a cup of coffee while browsing a brochure (yes, a paper/printed brochure!). The South African take-up of online payment remains slower than our global counterparts.

Many customers browse and book online if they want package holidays and non-complex flight routings. For more complex flight bookings and tailored itineraries and the like, many still prefer to pop into one of our 115 retail outlets throughout the country.

Diversifying and attracting new customer markets is going to be crucial for travel retailers wanting to survive in 2020 and beyond.

So what you are saying is that people are still at the heart of technology?

It's perhaps a beautiful irony that we are turning full circle. People are still the beating heart and the strongest asset in any business. This includes staff and the customer.

The customer of today wants to interact online, but it needs to be a seamless experience. If customers can see flaws in your systems, they will get frustrated and look elsewhere. The technology works best when it's invisible.



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Harness the power of data to create personalised travel experiences for all your customers. A 2018 Personalisation Pulse Check from Accenture Interactive reported that 91% of consumers prefer to buy from a retailer that knows their name, preferences and history – and can offer personalised suggestions.

Then, take this valuable data and give it to your people so that they can go above and beyond to wow the customer with personalisation. This is how to cultivate brand loyalty.

Your people, your staff remain at the core of your business. At FCTG, our people have always been, and remain, key to ensuring that we're keeping our customers happy. We use technology to help them achieve this.

“ With the right set of keys in hand and mindset of adaptation and flexibility, the travel retailer will be able to navigate the turbulent path ahead to unlock the door into the future of the travel industry. ”

Giving staff training, learning and leadership opportunities ensures that time invested in them is profitable. This leads to a high staff retention rate, essential for any company. Through doing this, we've achieved an all-time-high percentage of staff retention, seeing a 50% increase on previous years. For 14 consecutive years, we've ranked as one of Deloitte's Best Companies to Work for in South Africa too.

What's in store for the retail travel trade in the next 25 years?

The retail travel trade is in for challenging times. But in today's unpredictable world, dealing with a reputable company brings incredible peace of mind to South African travellers.

The retail travel trade still has a future if it continues to focus on putting customers first, delivering that human touch and personal experience that just can't be recreated by technology.

With the right set of keys in hand and mindset of adaptation and flexibility, the travel retailer will be able to navigate the turbulent path ahead to unlock the door into the future of the travel industry.

ABOUT JENNA BERNDT

With a curious mind and a love for travel and tourism, Jenna Berndt has over nine years' marketing experience in the travel industry. She is currently a brand owner for leisure travel brands at Big Ambitions, a specialist Cape Town-based travel content marketing consultancy.

Jenna has a journalism degree specialising in graphic design, a keen eye for visual and written communication and is focused on achieving brand goals through content creation and PR, marketing strategy, SEO copywriting and social media.

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