



How Can Hotels Best Serve Managed Travel in a Socially Distant World?

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Months after the shock of the abrupt global shutdown of business travel as the pandemic spread through every corner of the world, travel managers, travelers and hoteliers are trying to figure out how best to work together for the eventual return to travel. While muted demand and continued government travel restrictions remains in most areas, some business travelers appear ready to hit the road again, and an increasing number of hoteliers are ready to welcome them back with safety and distancing measures in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many travel executives have expressed the opinion that travel's come-back from the pandemic will be led by leisure travel, primarily to hotels in drivable distance. Even so, some managed business travel is happening, even if at volumes far lower than pre-Covid, and travel managers are working to adjust policy, talking with suppliers and instituting measures to help ensure their travelers' safety and health.

This white paper is designed to spotlight hoteliers' role in building would-be business travelers' confidence in the safety of travel suppliers' offerings and working with travel managers to ensure appropriate steps



are taken to protect those who are traveling from the spread of Covid-19. It also addresses the communication strategies that could be implemented to ensure travel managers and business travelers alike are aware of the changes hotels have made to protect health and safety.

READY FOR A COMEBACK?

Though many buyers, suppliers and industry executives at the outset of the coronavirus crisis hoped the effect on business travel would be limited to a few months of lower demand, that outlook proved too optimistic. Some business travel has continued, particularly in industries like trucking, logistics, construction, pharmaceuticals and the government. Higher-end and international business travel, however, continues only at drastically reduced volume, hindered particularly by government border restrictions and quarantine edicts.

Still, some companies are ready. In fact, 67 percent of regular business travelers are ready and willing to travel again, according to a June poll of 233 respondents from 35 member companies of TravelpoolEurope, a travel buying consortium of companies that annually spend on average €500,000 to €13 million on business travel. Another 30 percent indicated that they might travel, depending on the circumstances, leaving only 3 percent of these predominately SME travelers entirely unwilling to hit the road.

While cabin fever surely plays a part in such a hankering for travel, it's likely not the main driver. About 42 percent of TPE respondents indicated they believe they cannot accomplish their work unless they travel within the next three months, with another 31 percent setting that window within four to six months at the latest.

That said, only 15 percent of 704 member travel buyers and procurement professionals surveyed by the Global Business Travel Association July 7-13 though that "most" of their organizations' employees would be ready to resume business travel six months after restrictions are lifted. Also, only 15 percent of 821 companies surveyed in June by Mercer indicated

their employees will not be able to decide whether to travel, with the remaining 85 percent expecting to provide employees with some level of latitude in that decision.

HOTELS' OBLIGATIONS

These surveys show generally some appetite for business travel, but not a wholesale return to what was, at least immediately. As such, some persuasion on hoteliers' part likely will be necessary to welcome willing but wary business travelers into their properties. Perhaps the most effective way to do so, according to another recent survey, is to implement and demonstrate new safety and health policies and procedures.

About 73 percent of 5,000 travelers in a July Travelport survey in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and India indicated they would not consider a hotel stay unless the hotel demonstrated enhanced cleaning and disinfection procedures. About 66 percent said likewise for the implementation of social-distancing measures, and 64 percent they wouldn't consider staying at a hotel that did not mandate face masks.

To those ends, hotel chains throughout the world have created and deployed Covid-19 safety programs that, while different, all center on widespread cleaning and disinfectant efforts, limiting traveler touchpoints, and keeping guests apart from employees and one another. To meet traveler expectations, some chains also include requirements for face masks, health checks and demonstrations of compliance to stated policies.

In the United States, the American Hotel & Lodging Association has developed a set of standards called "Safe Stay" that are designed to give would-be travelers confidence in hotels' cleaning and social distancing practices, as well as workplace protocols. (Access these standards at <https://www.ahla.com/safestay>.) Every major U.S. hotel chain has adopted these standards to help travelers understand what to expect during their stay and reassure them that their safety is hoteliers' top priority.



AHLA executive vice president and chief operating officer Kevin Carey during an August webinar staged by The BTN Group and sponsored by Cvent said that the development of the Safe Stay guidelines was driven by a need for industrywide clarity on the methods it would take to ensure a clean environment and protect travelers from Covid-19. “We identified a real imperative to speak with a single voice,” he said.

AHLA subsequently developed a guest checklist (available here: https://www.ahla.com/sites/default/files/safestayguestchecklist071620_updated_0.pdf), a set of requirements for guests to follow for their own and hotel employees’ safety and comfort. The requirements include the use of a face covering in public areas of the hotel, a stipulation several U.S. chains have adopted.

AHLA’s advisory council of industry executives continues to seek ways to offer standards for hotels and travelers to safely hit the road. “We recognize that this would evolve over time, and as we look ahead beyond the guest checklist, we also recognize that there’s an interest in guidance in other important areas of the business for the hotel and lodging industry, such as group meetings and events, so stay tuned for more to come,” Carey said.

THE BUYERS’ STANDPOINT

Still, chainwide or industrywide health and safety initiatives need to be properly deployed at the property level to be effective and worthwhile.

“In Germany, we have a saying: paper is patience,” said webinar panelist Annette Maag, global hotel lead for IBM. “The challenge for hotels will be to demonstrate that they adhere to the standards and build the confidence of travelers again.”

Any number of measures exist for travelers to assess hotels’ cleanliness and distancing measures, from word of mouth to online hotel-review platforms to social media. But for webinar panelist Travis Steed, travel services consultant for Anthem, the best evidence was provided by his own eyes.

“Two of my local hotels in Indianapolis invited me to look at their process in real time, to do a tour and see all their procedures first-hand,” he said. “From my perspective, it was really helpful to see how these different components were working together to create a safer experience for the traveler. One of those hotels were asking employees if they feel safe ... and I thought that was important, because those employees are the front line and the best source of data for the hotel.”

Still, Steed can’t personally visit every property in Anthem’s hotel program even in the best of times, so he relies on a traveler feedback and hotel reputation platform TrustYou to help assess them.

Anthem, Steed said, has been partnered with TrustYou for several years, using overall scores in the hotel request-for-proposals process. “We now are going to expand that relationship to bring in their cleanliness score,” he said. “It’s a great way to measure traveler sentiment and measure any changes, so if that cleanliness score starts to go down, we can have a conversation with that hotel to see why and work on a mitigation plan.”

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Implementing a cleanliness and distancing program, however, is only half the battle. Many wary would-be business travelers will need to learn the details of those programs and feel comfortable with those processes before they hit the road.

Webinar panelist Julie Sickel, managing director of Europe, the Middle East and Africa for strategic communications firm Dots & Lines, cited marketing research that indicates consumers must hear a message seven times before they fully retain it. The same concept should apply to hotels’ communication of their cleanliness and safety programs, she said.

“You may get sick of communicating to your employees or travelers, but at this point there is no such thing as too much communication—as much as possible, as consistent as possible,” Sickel said.



This holds true even though there is widespread scientific consensus that the coronavirus is primarily an airborne pathogen, with almost no cases of Covid-19 worldwide definitively attributed to surface contamination. No matter, said Sickel, who compared the traveler-reassurance value of the changes hotels must make due to Covid-19 with the changes airports made to security measures after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Those airport security changes “were meant to keep us safe, but they were also really important in helping people feel psychologically okay to get back into the air again after the trauma of 9/11,” Sickel said. “It really needs to be pretty significant visually to show travelers what you’re doing to help them feel safe, because there is going to be a psychological hurdle for a while.”

Sickel recommended hotels take visible action that travelers could point to as changes due to Covid-19, including removing furniture from lobbies to dissuade

gathering, posting signage reminding travelers of new regulations and installing barriers to increase distance between guests and employees.

CONCLUSION

While 2020 arguably is the most trying year the global hospitality industry has ever faced, at least some business travel nevertheless remains with the possibility of a slow comeback ahead. Hoteliers have a part to play in any resumption of business travel, by creating and deploying comprehensive programs with their properties that ensures heightened cleaning measures and promotes social distancing. It’s critical to work with travel managers to help spread the word to their employee travelers that such programs are in place and enforced to help reassure those wary of travel that safety is paramount. Communicating those changes to travelers repeatedly and through a variety of channels will be critical, as business travelers begin to return to the road.

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