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**If you want to restore consumer confidence, get cruise ships sailing again.**

That needs to be the rallying cry of the travel industry, whether you sell cruises or not; whether you're a hotelier, tour operator or destination management company. People who cruise don't just sail. They fly to and from the ship, they stay in hotels before and after, they take tours, dine at restaurants, shop in ports and visit cultural sites. This is a case where a rising tide truly floats all boats. When the cruise lines successfully sail again – and I'm confident they will – it will bolster trust in traveler safety.

Because the public needs to see travel reopened in a meaningful way, the cruise lines have taken this task on themselves. Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings has teamed up with Royal Caribbean Group to develop the Healthy Sail Panel, a group of public health officials and scientists who have created a comprehensive, 74-point plan across five areas of focus. This week they presented their findings to the CDC in an attempt to demonstrate that cruise passengers will be some of the safest travelers anywhere in the world, with science serving as the basis for these universally applied protocols. Cruise lines are willing to fight the fight for the rest of us, working with local governments throughout the world to allow U.S. visitors to return. Yet, they are being held to a different standard with stringent oversight that's not being applied to the same degree to any other sector in travel, even air.

The world has been focused on air travel, and they have done an impressive job of showing how their filtration systems exceed standards. They've taken their own measures towards enhancing cleaning protocols. Some are doing away with change fees and leaving middle seats empty – a bold move when you consider their yields are predicated on squeezing as many bodies as possible onto each flight. But it hasn't revived the travel industry and that's because relying on air travel implies business travel will be the first to return. Business travel usually jumpstarts the industry after disruptions. This time it's different for a variety of issues – tighter budgets, new ways of collaborations, the list goes on. Our efforts need to focus on the leisure traveler.

Coordination amongst governments for testing, the implementation of travel corridors, even to assess threat levels in a universal way has yet to materialize. And lobbying on behalf of an industry that few politicians understand in its totality, let alone fully appreciate, can only carry us so far. When the pandemic caused travel to halt in the spring, the focus was on flattening the curve. Since then, the conversation has evolved to waiting for a vaccine before travel fully resumes. While that's a goal worthy of aspiring to, it has not been the case with other threats that disrupted travel.

Sadly, terrorism wasn't eliminated before we got back on planes following 9/11. Zika wasn't cured before we returned to the Caribbean. In no way do I want to minimize the severity of COVID-19 or a global pandemic, but the reality is that like other threats, it becomes part of the traveler's risk profile. Our job, as travel professionals, is to help travelers make informed decisions based on all factors, including their personal risk tolerance.

In a recent poll of Virtuoso's travel agency members, 83 percent said that the greatest factor in restoring consumer confidence was flexible cancellation and postponement policies. Our partners are doing a good job there, but that practice needs to continue. The same poll showed 40 percent of new bookings were for ocean cruising – higher than any other travel category – and 37 percent of Virtuoso clients said they are ready to cruise again. The appetite for cruising's return is there.

Time and again, the travel industry has proven its resiliency and willingness to pull together in times of crisis for the collective good. Now is one of those times. And for all our sake, we should be working to get cruise ships back on the seas.