

7 Innovative (But Simple) Ways Hotels Can Survive the Covid-19 Travel Crunch

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Before Covid-19 slammed the breaks on air travel, the revenue forecasts for the global hotel trade were looking rosy. Corporate travel expenditure alone was projected in some forecasts to grow into a \$1.7 trillion industry mega-segment by 2023.

But, thanks to coronavirus, instead of harvesting one of the biggest revenue growth-spurts in the history of hotels, hoteliers are facing the toughest time in industry history.

It isn't all doom and gloom, however. Around the world, travel bubbles and corridors are forming, facilitating new flows of movement and consequently, hotel room occupancy. According to an August 2020 CBRE report on the state of the Australian travel industry, what would have otherwise been international travel has turned inward. Regional travel within Australia is on the rise, with one leading hotel industry publication declaring a 'renaissance' in domestic travel. Other's report the emergence of an Australia-NZ travel bubble which will help sustain the tourism industry in both counties.

This pattern is being followed around the world as governments enter into new agreements, opening borders for business and, after a proven testing period, possible tourism. Until then, tourism and business travel markets everywhere are turning

inwards, as people choose domestic destinations for pleasure, and pursue commercial opportunities at home when they can't be pursued abroad.

While the industry as a whole is known as an early adopter and embracer of digital disruption, many segments of the hotel trade have lagged, either due to having a well-established customer base or brand recognition or simply being lucky enough to be in a highly desirable location with reliable tourism activity.

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As someone who's worked in the hotel and hospitality industry, I empathize deeply with hoteliers, who are experiencing some of the worst of Covid-19's economic fallout.

These are 7 Innovative, but simple ways hotels can maximize booking at their hotels and access newly emerging domestic markets, and with a healthy dash of good luck, outlast the coronavirus.

1. Try a chatbot competition

Successful marketing strategies using chatbots, such as engaging Messenger users with giveaway competitions with the chance to win exciting travel prizes (made even more attractive by the prolonged lock-down) are both simple to set-up and scalable to fit the size of the hotel or campaign. Chatbots like ManyChat leverage the much higher opt-in rates shown for Messenger communications when compared to other formats to drive high digital marketing investment ROI. They also provide hotels with a new a rich source of market data to draw insight from or drive product innovation with – an asset every hotel needs if it wants to remain relevant to its customers and ready to respond nimbly in a volatile market.

2. Make your hotel shine visually

Ultimately, hotels are spaces – and being more competitive by offering customers a better pre-inspection experience is an approach dating back to when someone first uploaded (via dial-up) a grainy jpeg of a hotel room, taken on their flashy, new top-of-the-range 4-megapixel camera. Now, the variety of visual experiences hotels can now offer as part of their customer experience range from ultra-zoomable 4K images through to immersive, interactive guest inspections conducted through everyday smartphones. But offering a great visual experience isn't just about glitz. Travelers are more cautious than ever and having a better pre-arrival viewing option in hotel marketing can soothe a range of guest security and safety concerns – far more prevalent now globally than at any time in recent history. The desire for better viewing experiences at the research and consideration stages of the customer journey is likely to fuel massive innovation in the near future. Expect VR marketing to make a bold reentrance in this space to address these new top-of-mind priorities for hotel guests.

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3. Strategically leverage your email list

Many established hotels, who have been operating for decades, have developed considerable email lists, but haven't used them to fuel their social media marketing. Taking the time to clean your email lists (polish-up the excel skills if you must) and uploading them to Facebook (for example) gives a hotel a chance at reconnecting with their previous customers. It's important to make your recontact count and engagements strategic. Engaging with people about your hotel during a time where some people are in lock-down needs to be done with

sensitivity. But silence isn't a viable option. Markets exist and are waiting to be spoken to about travel options – and who better to start with than people who already know your brand?

4. Invest in PR

As the saying goes, a crowd attracts a crowd, and the conversation (or lack of) around a hotel's brand in social media can make, or break it. Brands are judged by what others say about it – hotels are no exception. As competition grows around a small market suffering a bombardment of marketing messages, they will increasingly rely on social proof to validate their decision making. Strategic investments in PR, through either a digital agency or strategic internal hire, will pay dividends as audiences apply ever-higher levels of scrutiny of brands and their offers by looking at what others say about them on platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

5. Beware of third-party booking sites

It cannot be overstated how much a bad third-party booking experience can destroy a Hotel's revenue potential. The ever-present demands for seamlessness, simplicity, and security whenever making a purchase or transaction means if a hotel's websites link to a slow or less-than-transparent third-party booking site – guests will turn away. It is vital hotels select their booking partners wisely and make sure each step of their potential guest's journey is smooth and trust-inspiring, especially when they are about to make payment!

6. Harness the power of data

It's so simple, but not enough hotels do it: collect survey data. Once again, Chatbot technology provides hotels with a viable way to carry out reliable surveys and provide accurate

customer feedback about their experience throughout their stay. By getting near-real-time insights about guest experiences at key moments, such as after a meal at a restaurant, or using a bookable facility, hotels can pin-point where satisfaction levels are at their highest – and where they need the most help.

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7. Optimize your website

Unfortunately, most hotels have stuck to the brochure theme with their websites, offering a flat, one-way digital experience to prospective guests. This ‘Brochureware’ approach has been eclipsed by developments in both eCommerce and digital technology. Here, the hotel sector can learn a lot from retail. Retail has matured to the point where even the smallest brands have highly functional eCommerce websites, offering audiences enormous scope for pre-purchase research and play during decision making. Optimizing user experience in ways they are already familiar with will make any brand stand out, and given the low base of hotels in most markets – even more so.

Travel and hotel demand will return

Heart-warming reports of industry growth and the optimistic outlook of some of the world’s largest hotel chains, like the one shared by Saville Group in this most recent quarterly wrap-up, delivered in April this year. While the 2023 target of 1.7 trillion for corporate travel expenditure may be put off for a while due to the unforeseeable speed-bump of 2020, there is broad confidence that a new form of ‘business-as-usual’ will be achieved and economies will be allowed to function normally once again. For most small hotels, though, getting through the next few seasons will be touch-and-go.

Ultimately, the secret to getting through this crisis is for hotels is to adopt the same sort of customer-centric and technology-leveraged approach adopted by other small brands in other sectors. This may force a sharp learning curve, but it's one that will, in the long-term, improve how hotels are marketed and operated long after 2020 and coronavirus is behind us.

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