Black Friday Airfares Put Marketers ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’

With the holiday shopping season underway, airlines, cruise lines and hotels are doing what nearly every other business that sells goods or services to the public is doing: offering deals for Black Friday.

The only difference is, for travel and hospitality businesses, those deals come in the face of a warning from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for Americans not to travel.

More Americans are expected to travel for the holidays this year than at any point since the pandemic began, despite record-setting numbers of new Covid-19 cases. More than 50 million Americans were expected to travel this Thanksgiving, according to forecasts from the American Automobile Association (AAA), although recent outbreaks may suppress that figure. Already, nearly 1.04 million travelers passed through airport security on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, the highest single-day total since the pandemic began in mid-March. (Though it’s still less than half of 2019’s 2.3 million travelers on the same day.)

If consumers are more comfortable traveling, then brands want to take advantage. As part of a Black Friday and Cyber Monday deal, Alaska Airlines is offering $29 one-way flights from Los Angeles to Las Vegas and $89 from San Francisco to Newark, N.J. Southwest has fares for sale as low as $49 with a digital banner that features fall foliage and a pumpkin pie. Norwegian is offering 30% off deals, plus free Wi-Fi, an open bar and no charges for kids.

While deals exist and demand is low, airfare this holiday

season is actually a bit more expensive than last year, according to an analysis by The Points Guy.

“Airline marketers are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place right now, ” said Henry Harteveldt, president of the aviation consulting firm Atmosphere Research Group. “If they do nothing, bookings come in at a tepid pace. If they and their colleagues in the pricing department go out with a fare sell, the optics look bad.”

While it’s the same dichotomy that occurred over the summer—travel brands imploring customers to take a trip despite the pandemic—it’s a bit different this time around. Namely, cases are rising at a rapid rate, suggesting lockdowns may be imminent.

But this time, airlines and cruise brands have much more

lenient policies regarding the purchase of a ticket. Major U.S. airlines scrapped change fees in September, meaning customers have more leniency in their purchasing journey. And travel windows are much more flexible: Tickets purchased on Southwest are good until March, while Alaska has extended its travel window all the way until May, two months longer than in 2019.

While Norwegian is offering cruises for the first week of January, the cruise industry is still not legally allowed to operate out of the United States, according to the CDC. But that didn’t stop the brand from running a spot during the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. The ad got a bit of a backlash on Twitter, and Harteveldt pointed out that none of the talent are wearing masks despite the fact that cruise lines were hot spots during the first few weeks of the pandemic.

Guests that do book can still cancel up to 15 days before their departure for a credit toward a future cruise.

Additionally, airlines and airports have continued to expand testing opportunities for guests, which will only grow in the new year, and though not foolproof they will likely lift consumer confidence. And recent news of successful Covid-19 vaccines has also been a boon for the industry. Although it’s unclear when said vaccine will be distributed, airline stocks have risen steadily since Pfizer’s announcement on Nov. 9. Its impending arrival is also likely having an effect on consumer confidence in booking a trip.

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