

Business travel companies need to adapt or risk disruption

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In 2016, the hot topic on the lips of everyone in both business and leisure travel was mobile booking capabilities. The expansion of this technology was set to impact the industry in major ways. What a difference a year makes.

The sixth annual Travel Question Time, hosted by DataArt, this year focused on digital transformation in corporate travel. All of the senior executives on the panel highlighted the real need for companies to interact not just with the corporate client as an entity, but with each individual traveller. Today, travellers are provided with more choice than ever before and a great ability to shape their own travel.

The pace of change in the travel and hospitality sector is perhaps faster than we have ever previously experienced. Technological innovation, generated both from within and from outside the industry, is changing the way passengers travel and interact with the world, and forcing companies to upgrade existing technologies or introduce entirely new ones.

Firms like Airbnb are disrupting from within the travel sphere while financial services firms and those in other sectors are upending and reshaping expectations. In response to this technological *tour de force*, established, previously traditional, firms are reacting and changing the way they engage with travellers. Across all areas of the industry, four key themes are developing that will shape the travel trade in the years to come:

Urgency – the pace of change

With mobile now a standard technology, attention has swiftly turned to artificial intelligence and machine learning.

At the DataArt Question Time event, Hilary Roberts of Skyscanner warned against getting stuck in the present, when the future is right round the corner. She stated that the focus of personalisation and customer analysis should be to identify not just what customers do now, but “what customers will do next.”

Jo Dobson of Carlson Wagonlit Travel summed up this sheer pace of technological change, stating: “Not just travel companies, but those in every sector, cannot carry on behaving in the traditional way. If they do, they just won’t exist in the future. Previously,” she continued, “we released a product every two years, now it’s every quarter. You have to get updates and products to market sooner, otherwise you are out of date.”

With new technologies emerging at a faster pace than ever before, companies must ensure they are adaptable and flexible to any and all developments.

As Phil Scully, CTO at Whitbread, said, change is “the measure of success” in today’s market.

Personalisation

In the modern landscape, customer preferences are not just shaped by travel providers, but by what they experience from every service and product they use. Travellers, both corporate and leisure, expect to be seen as individuals and be provided with information that is tailored around their preferences, needs and wants. The success or failure for travel firms will rely on their ability to engage with audiences and provide content (and even offers) that fit in with what each individual desires.

Phil Scully identified this as “intrinsic to success.” He outlined at Travel Question Time how understanding customers at a deep level, and being responsive to their behaviour across all points in their journey – including even after they leave, is now a must-do for travel firms.

Artificial Intelligence

Travel and hospitality brands are now actively embedding artificial intelligence into their search process and chat platforms. Across the travel industry, AI driven chatbots are now mimicking human conversations to such an extent that it is often hard to tell who is human and who is a bot. Firms such as Expedia, Skyscanner, Hilton and Lufthansa are utilising chatbots at different stages of traveller journey. This is improving customer service and driving up engagement.

With AI and chatbots set to spread into more and more areas of our lives, not just travel, individuals and corporations will expect them to be part of anyone's offer and for them to work. Like much of technological development, this has moved from an added extra to a must have.

One example of this in action is a Telegram chatbot that combined AI and human intelligence for trip planning. This piece of tech allowed users to interact with a bot, which imitates human speech, to get information on flights, hotels, attractions and the like. The chatbot was also able to provide travel offerings that met stated parameters such as date, location and times.

Sharing economy services

Research by the Global Business Travel Association found that in 50 per cent of corporate travel policies ride-sharing services like Uber or Lyft are part of the offer. This research also found that while home-sharing options such as Airbnb and HomeAway were less common among business travellers, over the past six months these too have been gaining ground.

It is in this area that corporations will have to tread most carefully. While sharing economy services can provide clear cost savings and are convenient for users, each have unique risks, benefits and legal considerations. However, this new trend is changing the rules across the travel spectrum.

Across all these areas of rapid transformation, internal and external pressures and new digital competitors mean that corporate and leisure travel firms need to undertake digital transformation like never before. It is a matter now of do so and survive (and even thrive); don't and fail.

DataArt is a global technology consultancy that designs, develops and supports unique software solutions, helping clients take their businesses forward. Organized as a global network of technology services firms, DataArt brings together expertise of over 2,300 professionals in 20 locations in the US, Europe, and Latin America. DataArt has earned

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