

Business travel trends: The travel consultant of the future

By [Linsey Schluter](#)

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Much has been written about Covid-19's impact on the travel and tourism industry and there's little doubt that travel agents have proved their mettle. Shrugging off the image of a simple "booker" forever, today's agents are specialist travel consultants who use technology, experience and proven networks to navigate an increasingly complex landscape.



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With a brand-new vaccine rolling off the shelves, 2021 is looking a lot more positive as the industry begins to recover and rebuild. What can we expect from our travel consultant in the future?

According to Bonnie Smith, general manager of FCM, Flight Centre's global travel management company, travel consultants will be left behind if they're not masters at complex problem solving, critical thinking and creative solutions:

"A recent report from Amadeus gives an insightful look into the ['Travel Consultant of Tomorrow'](#). And what's clear is that the role of the travel consultant is going to be more relevant and pivotal than ever. Travellers will demand more from their travel agency. Forget transactional booking agents, travel management companies that are able to support their clients at every stage of the traveller journey, providing them with all the information and resources they need, will have a distinct advantage in the future."

Looking for a TMC partner in 2021? Smith says the travel consultant of the future will:

1. Embrace technology

"Tech is now an integral part of each and every facet of the travel industry," explains Smith. "Not only in terms of booking platforms and how travel will be bought and sold in the future, but how travellers manage their own journeys – and how TMCs use data for real-time reporting, decision-making and designing highly-personalised travel solutions."

FCM, for example, has developed data technology that can optimise business travel programmes by uncovering patterns and trends in data. Smith believes this means companies can now make effective decisions in terms of their future travel planning and spend:

"The volume of data held by travel providers, including TMCs, such as traveller profiles, transaction history and personal preferences, make travel and tech (including artificial intelligence) ideal bedfellows. At the highest level, AI has the capability to improve customer service, to make that service more personal and improve travel planning."

2. Manage disruption

"Covid-19 gave everyone a lesson in disruption," says Smith, "and travellers now look to their travel consultant for up-to-the-minute information about border control guidelines, safety protocols, departure and arrival requirements and more."

At the heart of managing, 'disruption' is the duty of care. What happens when a border closes – or an unexpected crisis hits? The greatest responsibility of a travel agent is to bring their clients home safely. This includes vetting all travel service providers (airlines, shuttles, accommodation and more); evaluating the risks a traveller might face; alerting travellers to any issues as soon as they arise and liaising with local embassies or consulates when necessary.

"Of course," says Smith, "tech also plays an important role in duty of care. An automated and centralised travel management system is one of the best tools for ensuring traveller safety. Travellers benefit from access to real-time, pertinent travel-safety information on the ground, while managers receive comprehensive traveller tracking capabilities – allowing them to immediately see who is travelling, when and where. Rest assured that should an emergency or threat arise, your TMC partner is ready to deliver a swift and adequate response."

3. Consider the entire journey – and ensure they're along for the ride

As travel resumes, travellers might find that planning their next trip is a bit more complex and challenging.

A TMC worth their salt will look at the entire journey: from ticketing complex routes and suggesting the best connections; confirming transit and arrival requirements; to personalising a traveller's journey in terms of preferred airlines, lounges, shuttles and hotels. In addition, they'll be on hand 24/7 to offer support and advice.

4. Have empathy – and grit

While hard, technical skills will be in demand, travel and tourism is still all about people.

"Soft skills like empathy, communication and the ability to listen are more important than ever," says Smith. "Travel agents need to be engaged and responsive (especially when things go wrong), and willing to go the extra mile. Grit, adaptability, flexibility – the list goes on. The travel agent of the future is an expert, a specialist, a therapist and someone to lean on."

5. Deliver savings

Behind any reputable TMC sits a vast network of vetted suppliers and global buying power – benefits that can be passed onto your company in the form of reduced rates and exclusive privileges.

Travel expenses can add up. Think fare changes, taxes, and visa charges to name a few. A travel expert will know to incorporate these expenses into your travel policy – or how to avoid them in the first place. Travel experts also know a few tricks of the trade that will help any company get the most out of their airfares – and they'll keep their finger on the pulse to ensure they deliver savings wherever possible.

For Smith, when tech, data and expertise come together you can expect more savings, a more personalised service and a partner that will take your travel programme into the future: "Today's travel experts have moved from agents to consultants to invaluable allies – and we're ready for 2021."

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