

Asata launches updated 21st century travel agent study

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Source: Supplied

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The first study, conducted three years ago, provided an overview and framework, but that was pre-Covid-19, and the landscape has changed irrevocably since then. The impact of the pandemic has been devastating and debilitating, and as the sector rebuilds, it has to come to grips with a new kind of traveller — one with new requirements, who defines true value differently to before.

This has necessitated an update to the study, to help travel brands and agents understand these shifts and adapt accordingly. "The sector has always been complicated; now it is even more so," says Otto de Vries, Asata CEO. "With our study, we wanted to extract the most important changes, while helping travel agents understand the new corporate and leisure mindset."

Key takeaways

The leisure traveller was sideswiped during the pandemic due to last-minute travel bans and restrictions on their freedom of movement. While this has made them intent on travelling again, they are more cautious now, requiring more flexibility and protection of their travel spend. Getaways with short lead times have become more popular as has meaningful travel — connecting with loved ones or immersive experiences where they can feel steeped in local culture, nature or a cause close to their hearts. Avoiding urban areas has led to an upsurge in remote and countryside destinations.

According to Deloitte, business travel budgets were slashed by as much as 90% in 2020. The pandemic forced the world to connect online, and companies had to find new ways of working. A host of new communication tools emerged. However, 'Zoom-fatigue' also set in, and the corporate customer now places high value on face-to-face client meetings, sales pitches and teambuilding events.

Meanwhile, remote- and hybrid working has not necessarily worked for every organisation. For some, it has made training and performance appraisals more difficult; created disengaged employees. Business trips have become longer and more frequent, as a result, to forge a reconnection with both staff and industry peers.

The good news

"There is a trend among both leisure and corporate customers of a return to travel agents, despite the increase of online tools," says De Vries. "This can be attributed to the disturbing proliferation of fake news during the pandemic, as well as information overload, making it difficult for customers to sift through it all themselves. In fact, the reliance on travel agents is higher now than before the pandemic."

Maximising the window of opportunity

The 21st Century Travel Agent Study has identified the following main opportunities for travel agents to maximise the small window of opportunity, as customers return to the fold:

- Deliver peace of mind — erase travel worries and make travel easy.
- Use collaboration to pave the way towards a cohesive and even stronger sector.
- Create products around family and FIT travel, which are driving the demand for leisure travel.
- Commit to change — sustainability is no longer an option but a responsibility and a customer requirement. Guide customers about 'greener' travel options.
- Focus on the whole customer journey, from inspiration phase through to booking. Ensure the journey is seamless and hyper-connected.
- Focus on risk management for corporate travellers. Travel management companies are perfectly equipped to outline any risks and advise how to counter them.
- Remove friction — the travel industry has always had its pain points, pre-Covid-19 as well, and these must continue to be addressed.
- Remain agile and nimble while meeting increasing demand.
- Sharpen travel policies and help companies navigate travel questions and compliance.
- Shape your business for the new normal — understand the new leisure and corporate customer so as to meet their needs effectively.
- Work on 'Real Skills' — emotional intelligence, stress management, problem-solving skills, and leadership to mention a

few.

"South Africa's travel and tourism sector has proved nothing if not resilient. And in this phase of recovery, our travel agents are key to promoting ease of travel, delivery of value and, most importantly, the human touch," concludes De Vries.

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