

How SMEs are leading the way in business travel in a post-Covid world

Small-and-medium enterprises (SMEs) are leading the way in an ever-fluctuating post-Covid world. In travel, they are also hitting the road much faster than their larger, corporate counterparts.

What makes these small businesses less risk-averse when it comes to business travel? According to Oz Desai, GM Corporate Traveller, there are a number of reasons SMEs are taking the lead in terms of business travel, chief among them? They need to.



Source: Atoms via [Unsplash](#)

"It was United CEO, Scott Kirby who said: 'Business travel is about relationships; it is not about transactions,'" says Desai, "And he's 100% correct. SMEs are travelling because they can't afford not to. There is no financial buffer or rainy-day fund. They need to get back to normal. A business's competitive edge depends on building relationships through face-to-face meetings, negotiating deals, and exploring opportunities – all of which is very difficult over Zoom."

Desai says that of course, it helps that smaller companies are a lot nimbler and less hamstrung by travel policies, company-wide travel bans, pre-trip approvals or debate around what constitutes 'essential travel'.

Danny Lau, managing director Kam Pin Industrial (Hong Kong) Limited, speaking at a CAPA Live event on 9 June, said that: "SMEs will start to travel before the large corporates because corporates will have a more sophisticated plan, they have to get approvals and they like to play it safer than SMEs. SMEs are more flexible – and they're ahead of the curve to go and visit overseas clients if the location opens up for travel."

Desai also believes that despite Covid, there is a very real appetite for travel: "For many, corporate travel remains a perk of the job. People enjoy travelling, exploring destinations and meeting new people. In fact, once travellers have their first 'post-lockdown' business trip under their belt, they realise how safe it actually is, and anxiety around business travel begins to disappear."

How TMCs can help

For Desai though, this is where travel experts and TMCs can prove their worth. "While SMEs are getting back on the road, increasingly, they're doing it with the support of a travel advisor. The team at Corporate Traveller predicts that unmanaged travel could become a thing of the past for SMEs – as we're seeing a significant shift from unmanaged, DIY travel to using the services of an experienced TMC."

This is because, worldwide, the post-Covid travel landscape remains fluid. According to Desai, TMCs can help travellers select the best routes; book the best fares; source safe, vetted accommodation; and identify areas in which to make savings.

TMCs can help by:

- Putting a travel policy in place

All SMEs, no matter how small, can benefit from having a simple travel policy in place. A policy helps eliminate leakage (when staff go off-piste to self-book flights or hotels), making it easier to control costs. A TMC will help an SME design and implement a policy (incl. which fares and accommodation to book) which suits their individual needs.

- Delivering savings

Another benefit of a TMC? Impressive buying power which helps secure the best available rates and exclusive deals – generally out of reach for SMEs with an unmanaged travel programme. TMCs can also identify areas for savings, be it using serviced apartments instead of hotels, travelling at off-peak times, or identifying loyalty schemes with airlines, hotels and restaurants.

- Prioritising duty-of-care

Although SMEs are more flexible in terms of decision-making and the ability to get up and go, this does not mean that staff wellbeing and duty of care is not important.

"SMEs care just as much about the safety of their staff as larger multi-nationals," says Desai, "Business travellers are entering a dynamic, ever-changing environment. As different destinations ease or reintroduce lockdown measures, regulations and requirements change. A travel expert can provide you with up-to-the-minute information and advice – as well as track your travellers to ensure they can be brought home quickly if need be."

Of course, duty of care extends far beyond Covid-19, adds Desai. "The greatest responsibility of a travel agent is to bring their clients home safely and this includes vetting all travel service providers (airlines, shuttles, accommodation and more); evaluating the risks a traveller might face; alerting travellers to any threats, civil unrest, strikes or adverse weather events; and liaising with local embassies or consulates on the ground. A TMC can help SMEs prepare pre-trip, support travellers

on-trip, and learn what worked (and what needs to be changed) post-trip."

- Bringing experience and 24-hour support to the table

By partnering with a TMC, SMEs will also have access to the latest tech. According to Desai, new-generation, AI-enhanced online booking tools are quick and intuitive, meaning travel bookers can search and book a huge range of inventory in a matter of minutes – saving SMEs valuable time and money.

In South Africa, domestic business travel has already reached 30% of pre-Covid volumes with South African SMEs leading the way. It's now up to airlines, hotels, TMCs and other travel suppliers to support them with the product – and pricing – to meet their business travel needs.

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