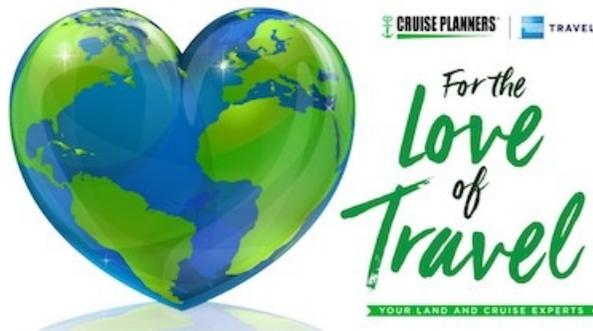


Travel Franchises Market to Daydreamers During COVID-19

By Callie Evergreen | April 20, 2020



As third-party online travel agencies are scrambling to handle an unprecedented amount of calls and requests to cancel due to COVID-19, many customers are experiencing problems with hours of wait time and delayed or no refunds. For independent travel agents and franchises such as Dream Vacations and Cruise Planners, now is their time to shine as they're showing personalized customer

service and offering creative solutions for travelers.

Dream Vacations, a travel franchise specializing in selling cruise trip packages, has started taking a more sensitive approach to their marketing technique during the pandemic. Instead of pushing for customers to reschedule their travel packages right away, they launched a virtual travel guide to educate customers on the changing travel landscape while they're at home. They can also use their agent's website to think about where they want to travel next in the future.

"We're taking more of a daydreaming approach about their next vacation," said Drew Daly, senior vice president and general manager at Dream Vacations. "Our social media posts are interactive and inspirational about your next big adventure."

The planning process, while not the same as experiencing travel itself, still creates those anticipatory feelings of having something to look forward to—something Daly thinks is critical for those feeling hopeless.

"Anyone that's been in their homes for a couple of weeks or months will want to get away and just do something different than being at home," Daly said. "People want to be safe and healthy, but at some point, (travel bans are) going to lift."

Many cruise lines are offering guests a future cruise credit (FCC) of up to 125 percent of the original cruise fare they paid. They can then use this FCC to rebook through December 31, 2022.

Michelle Fee, founder of Cruise Planners, is also shifting their brand's marketing focus to heartfelt messages. Their travel agents, who were already home-based, have been sending e-cards and virtual hugs to their customers.

“We can’t be as salesy as we once were,” Fee said. “A lot of people went completely dark, but we’ve built really cool messaging for our agents where they can send personal e-cards and just say, ‘hey, how are you?’”

Cruise Planners also launched a 30-day social media campaign called “For the Love of Travel,” where they’ve asked customers to share their favorite travel photos and stories to help remind people of those fond memories and their passion for travelling.

“They’re sitting home and going through old photos of travel, and it reminds them of how great it was to be able to travel,” Fee said. “Hopefully, by sharing those memories, they can’t wait to be an explorer again.”

Fee and her business partner have foregone their salaries, and both Daly and Fee have waived or deferred monthly fees for franchisees. Both businesses are also shifting to hosting virtual meetings, events and conferences.

“We’re still building a community and trying to replicate whatever we’ve done in person to make it virtual,” Daly said. “Our biggest priority is our customer, which is our franchisee, and the ways we can help them by providing tools to get them ready for the return of the travel space, because when it does come back, we’ll see a spike.”

Fee is already seeing a spike in bookings for 2021. The industry as a whole is seeing a nine percent uptick in business for 2021, Fee said, and Cruise Planners is actually seeing a 15 percent increase in booking.

“Our home-based agents are used to working from home and owning their own franchise, so they’re all very concerned in trying to rebook,” Fee said. “If you call a lot of online call centers for other sites, you can’t get anybody to help you.”



Fee has one travel agent who had a collection of sand from different beaches around the world, and sent out little bags of sand and shells with cards to her customers that said, ‘seeing as you can’t travel, I’m bringing travel to you.’ Other franchisees have been sending out e-cards like Daly’s agents, some with recipes or other personal touches.

“Our marketing team is stockpiling methods,” Fee. “We’re holding off for now, but we’re all ready to go. So we’re going to have a foot and leg up against anybody else...If they lift the stay-at-home orders, you’ll start to see us be a little more aggressive in our marketing.”

Fee founded Cruise Planners in 1994 and has worked in the travel industry for more than 25 years. Going through other difficult periods such as the recession in 2007 has made Fee optimistic about the travel industry as a whole.

“Travel is resilient,” Fee said. “In 2008 when the stock market fell off a cliff and the housing market crashed, the last thing people gave up was travel. They might give up a movie, expensive dinners, and wines, but the last thing they gave up was a trip.”