

Tourism in an Uncertain World

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When tourism and travel historians decide to write the history of the industry's first decades they may well call upon classical author's such as Charles Dickens. In Dicken's wrote about a different time and era, yet in his classic work a Tale of Two Cities (1859), his opening lines seem to describe much of the current state of tourism. Dicken's wrote: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only".*

Dicken's words seem to describe much of twenty-first century travel and tourism. In no period of human history has travel been relatively cheaper and open to more people, yet the public continues to complain about poor service, personnel rudeness and a desire to stay home. Thus we are faced with the irony that travel and tourism have perhaps never been more democratic and available, and ironically it appears that we have returned to an age of darkness in which the public see travel not as a joy but rather as an obligation or undesired necessity. This mixed feeling toward travel has produced the "staycation" in which individual choose to stay at home rather than put up with travel costs or hassles.

Travel and tourism are clearly not separated from the world in which they exist. Travel and tourism professionals have had to deal with a world wide economic crisis, multiple mini-wars, acts of terrorism, local governments seeking tourism as an easy way to obtain money from non-voters, potential pandemics, and industry consolidation that has challenged and called into question what is left of customer loyalty. For example, the front page of the BBC's website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/>) for February 13, 2012

provides its reader with the following pieces of news: Riots in Athens as the Greek parliament accepts new austerity measures, bomb threat at Amsterdam airport, Syria rejects new peace plan, and Japan's economy worse than forecasted. All of these news items mean that tourism professionals must face a world of uncertainty and crisis.

Despite all of these events, one item dominated world travel: the world's economy. Travel and tourism for the most part is a leisure-oriented industry that depends on the travel's disposable income. The one great exception to this rule would appear to be the business traveler, but during difficult economic times, businesses too have a tendency to cut back on travel. While after several years of a downward spiral, business travel appears to be on the increase, however this recovery is fragile and another economic downturn can impact this important travel and tourism component. Smart tourism and travel professionals will need to find ways to allow business travelers to create the combined business-and-leisure travel experience.

This reliance means that when the economy coughs tourism is likely to catch pneumonia. If 2011 was a challenging year, 2012 may provide the industry with even greater challenges. Despite governments' abilities to demonstrate statistical creativity both unemployment and under-employment continue at record levels. Because governments tend not to count the unemployed or those who have simply dropped out of the workforce, the challenge to a disposal income dependent industry is far greater than governments would ask us to believe. To further add challenges to the tourism professional's life food and fuel prices continued to soar. Added to this level of economy malaise, family incomes decreased and consumer confidence continued to be low. While the Obama administration continues to put a happy face on suffering, seeking buy off the electorate by means of faux-income redistribution, the situation in Europe appears to be even worse. Despite all of these economic challenges the tourism and travel picture is not as dismal as we might at first expect. For example, around the world nations are developing travelers' bills-of-rights. These bills of rights provide extra legal protection to weary travelers. Tourism companies have come to understand that they must serve and protect their visitors or face potential law suites and police departments around the world

are establishing TOPPS (Tourism Oriented Policing/Protection Services) units in which the safety and security of travelers is a top priority. With a world ever more dangerous, tourism officials will need to make security and safety their number one priority. From cruise travel to hotel security, from protecting iconic sites to assuring a safe food and water supply traveler safety and security will present new challenges to the tourism industry.

Here is a quick synopsis of some of the industry's major components.

-Airlines. The airline industry continued to see consolidation and cutbacks in both service and frequency of flights. Both European and US carriers are now famous for poor service, higher prices, and more fees. On the brighter side, first class travel especially on Asian airlines has increased and is now better than ever. Furthermore airport officials are beginning to hear the public and coming to realize that they must decrease the hassle travel security factor while still providing state-of-the-art travel protection.

-Rental cars. This has been a bright spot within the travel industry and the rental car industry has become a viable alternative to air travel. For example in both Europe and the US rental car companies have decreased significantly the paperwork and hassle factor, they have improved customer service and in many places have created off-site rental agencies that help travelers to avoid the expensive cost of parking at an airport and paying airport usage fees.

-Hotels and Restaurants. These two industries along with the travel industry are the Customers continue to express greater satisfaction with many hotels and despite the rise in restaurant prices, seem to be satisfied with out of home dining opportunities. Hotels have, for the most part, found ways to contain costs, and increase customer service. An increasing number of hotels have found ways to work with travelers' schedules so that travelers no longer have to deal with the challenges of late check-ins and early check-outs One major problem for both restaurants and hotels is the need free business travel

services such as “wi-fi” access. This is especially true as business travelers switch from laptop computers to electronic tablets.

There are a number of ways that the travel and tourism industry can face any potential challenge or threat. Among these are:

- Good customer service goes a long way in solving many problems. Travel professionals may not be able to change the world, but how they chose to deal with the world impacts bottom lines. The industry dare not forget that it must promote customer service, let people know that the industry and find ways to use the smile as a major marketing tool. Travel professionals need to get the message through to all front line personnel that the traveler is the customer and not the enemy!
- Keep prices as low as possible. No one has to take a vacation, provide travelers with good value and they will return. No one expects something for nothing, but no one wants to be taken advantage of either. Value for dollar (or value for euro, yen etc) is especially important when the world’s economy is far from stable
- Create travel bundles or packages. Often a travel package is less expensive and provides local businesses with an economic boost. Creative bundling may be one of the new building blocks of tourism,
- Go beyond marketing. Too many travel and tourism professionals see themselves as nothing more than another form of marketers. Hospitality is a lot more than mere marketing. If you see a problem fix it rather than try to explain it away. Brilliant results come about when we show others that travel and tourism is all about creating positive memories that will last a lifetime.
- Return to the basic three building blocks of tourism: create satisfaction by providing good security, good service and a clean and hospitable environment.

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