

# COVID-19 & Travel: 5 Actions to Take Now By Andy Lark

CRISIS CONSULTANT AND FOUNDER OF GROUPLARK

PURE's webinar series kicked off with a thorough, exhilarating deep-dive into weathering the COVID-19 crisis as a travel company, courtesy of veteran crisis manager and MATTER-mainstay Andy Lark. Brimming with actionable advice delivered in his signature zero-bulls\*\*t style, PUREists left with the tools they need to begin approaching recovery, one careful step at a time. "How you go is how the crisis will go," warned Lark. "When s\*\*t gets real, humans have an unbelievable ability to respond – but travel probably won't look the same for 24-36 months, and the consequences may stay with us for decades." For those who missed out, you can skim the key takeaways, including critical macro questions to consider, below.

## 1. DO A SAFETY CHECK: PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND FINANCIAL

Starting with the obvious (you've likely already done this to an extent) but a thorough safety check is the foundation for any effective recovery plan. Begin with your teams. Are they physically safe and staying mentally healthy – and how can you ensure this remains the case for the duration of the crisis? Extend this to your vendors, suppliers and other stakeholders – don't disappear, but check in regularly. On the financial side, "remember that cash = gravity," Lark reminded PUREists. Whether you're a DMC, consultant or provider, preserving every cent, penny and dollar – as well as key assets – should be everyone's #1 priority right now.

As an aside, Lark advised larger-scale brands or conglomerates to 'lean in' to tourism boards, governments and healthcare authorities – both for unbiased scientific advice and for cues that recovery is afoot in the industry.

## 2. BUILD YOUR OWN SCENARIO MAP

Your business's response to COVID-19 will look very different depending on the context: whether you're a DMC, consultant or provider; your geographical location; the state of your cash flow; and the makeup of your customer and client base (i.e. luxury or mass-market). As a general guide to help PUREists scenario plan, Lark offered predictions for the near future of each market segment.

**DMCs:** Little recovery for 8-12 months, but potential for some return in the luxury segment in 4 months' time. Some domestic rebound, particularly in business travel, is possible too.

**CONSULTANTS:** Some domestic recovery in 3-6 months, with business travel (such as company retreats) rebounding first. Again, luxury looks likely to lead the way.

**PROVIDERS:** Very gentle recovery in 4 months' time, with potential for a lift 4 months later. New operational frameworks and new consumer expectations (see point 3, below) will be critical for a successful future plan.

## 3. PRIORITISE CUSTOMER CENTRICITY

"The crisis isn't the crisis," Lark warned PUREists – the real crisis (one of many he outlined) will be the complete loss of consumer trust in travel. This is why a customer-centric approach is the only route worth pursuing. For Lark, it comes in the form of the STP acronym – segment your audience, target each segment and position your offerings accordingly. For HNW clients, this looks like reaching out with a personalised video message, letting them know you're here for them and what they can look forward to in the future. The second part is pivoting your communications and business strategy to prepare for new customer behaviours – more on this below.



## 4. PREPARE FOR NEW CUSTOMER VALUE PROPOSITIONS

"This is the time to zero-in on your customer and worry about where their mindset will be," Lark told PUREists. It's inevitable that the key drivers for most consumers have been irrevocably changed by COVID-19. When the time does eventually come to travel again, these concerns will shape how your customers engage with you, so it's critical to anticipate and respond to them now.



### CURRENT CONSUMER DRIVERS

1. Safety: Physical, mental and financial
2. Family – keeping in touch, desire to visit once safe to do so
3. Imagining and researching future travel plans

### POST-COVID-19 CONSUMER DRIVERS

1. Proof of high health and safety standards and zone-based travel, finding 'safe harbours' or 'safe zones' to travel to
2. Re-evaluation of relationship with cities – seeking nature and remote places to continue self-isolation and safe solitude
3. Regional regulations (i.e. border controls)
4. Industry regulations (digital passports or mandatory negative checks)
5. Insurance

## 5. RESET YOUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT AND ACCELERATE DIGITAL CHANNELS

Now is the time to put considerable energy into your social and digital platforms – but not to use them as direct sales tools. "Be courageous about your content – consumers want relief right now," Lark says. "Give them a sense of place and engagement." Use this downtime to pick up 2-3 digital projects – your social media presence, your CRM database, your website copy – and use them to start positioning your key post-COVID value propositions.

## Macro and micro: 5 questions to ask yourself now

1. What are the critical covid-driven vulnerabilities, uncertainties and adaptation requirements facing your organisation, your customers and your stakeholders?
2. What near-term opportunities exist to get assistance from government, suppliers and customers, and what can you do to adapt if your business model is being undermined?
3. Moving from the "macro" to the "micro", how do the scenarios and assumptions that underlie your strategy need to change, and what options do you have available?
4. What signals will you rely on to determine when decisions are required, and what systems do you need to ensure signals are available?
5. What organisational arrangements do you need to manage your immediate adaptation priorities, longer term strategy refinement and "business-as-usual" operations?