

Talking about the 'new normal'

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When will COVID-19 recede to a background threat? **3**

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When will COVID-19 be seen as a background threat, clearing the way for travel's takeoff? 'Transformation 2021' outlines key indicators

by Kathryn Folliott

TORONTO — When consumers get to the point that they can treat COVID-19 as a background threat, that's when recovery in the airline and travel industry will take off in earnest.

That's how Jay Sorensen, a veteran of the airline industry and President of consulting firm IdeaWorksCompany, sees the end game for the pandemic's negative impact on travel.

In recent years Sorensen's company has become well-known in the industry for its airline ancillary reports, produced in conjunction with CarTrawler, charting the meteoric year-over-year rise in revenue from the airlines' profitable ancillary fee structures.

With COVID-19, IdeaWorksCompany is also focusing on trends and strategies as the industry navigates the pandemic.

There won't be a magic moment when COVID-19 just goes away, and in fact, it could be with us for years to come. Public confidence in how COVID-19 is handled by companies and governments, and, of course, mass vaccinations, will make all the difference for travel getting back on track, says Sorensen.

"It's a long list of objectives to meet, but the world is determined to end this plague and return to the business and joy of travel."

IdeaWorksCompany and CarTrawler's just-released report, 'Transformation 2021: How Airlines and Travelers Will Adapt as the Pandemic Recedes', part of the Transformation 2021 series, notes that there are plenty of other threats to human health and safety in the world.

But human nature being what it is, we get on with daily life and keep those risks in perspective. COVID-19, on the other hand, is a new and immediate



concern, and it's demanding all of our attention.

What will it take for COVID-19 to be demoted to a background threat? For starters, when the public accepts and understands key COVID-19 statistics, and most importantly, when the rates of infection and death take steep decreases, says Sorensen.

"Countries will no longer rely upon travel restrictions to provide immediate protection from viral spread," he says. "Vaccines will be given to members of the general population and COVID-19 treatments will deliver predictably positive results for most. Dining out at the destination will be welcomed as an experience to be savoured. It's a long list of objectives to meet, but the world is determined to end this plague and return to the business and joy of travel."

In the report Sorensen tackles two of the bigger logistical hurdles facing the industry amid the pandemic: COVID testing, and 'health passports' like IATA Travel Pass, and CommonPass.

COVID-19 TESTING

In the early days and weeks of the pandemic, cities, regions and countries almost immediately put in place travel restrictions, in the form of testing requirements, to deal with COVID-19. The top priority was to prevent viral spread, as Sorensen notes, adding that the impact on the travel and tourism industry was very far down the list of concerns. "A global community that once welcomed tourists and their cash now embraces barriers to entry," says Sorensen.

Canada's quarantine measures and warning against all non-essential travel aside, COVID testing has been the most tangible measure that most countries around the world have taken to navigate the pandemic in an age of global travel. As travel agents well know, Canada also requires travellers to not only do a 72-hour PCR test in destination before departure, but also another PCR test upon arrival in Canada.

While testing was embraced as an early indicator of safe travel, and will

likely endure until the threat is eliminated, says Sorensen, the problem is the chaos that comes with any new undertaking, with so many players jostling for position, and no real coordination. The fact that it's on a global scale makes it that much more daunting.

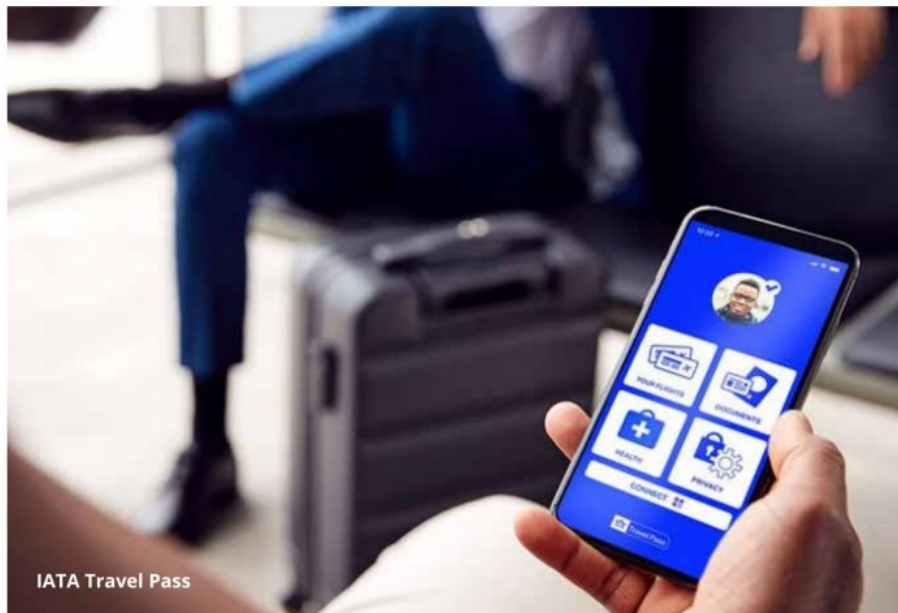
"The experience can frustrate the most intrepid of travellers. Too many will throw up their arms in frustration and choose the greater certainty offered by a vacation close to home that doesn't involve international borders," he says.

"Airlines and the travel industry should strive to embrace one or two key platforms to minimize complexity for consumers."

The answer? As Sorensen sees it, the best solution would be a combination of off-airport and in-airport testing. But there are caveats. He gives the example of 100% testing at a busy terminal like Heathrow's Terminal 5. About 2.5 hours would be needed to process pre-boarding tests for a planeload of international passengers, at an optimistic rate of 4 minutes per passenger.

With 15.4 million passengers departing the terminal every year (pre-COVID), his calculations estimate that just for Heathrow's Terminal 5, some 500 extra employees would be needed to process the pre-departure testing regimen. And that's just one terminal. "The numbers are overwhelming and convey the giant scale of the testing challenge," says Sorensen.

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HEALTH PASSPORTS

Sorensen also looks at 'health passports' like IATA's Travel Pass, and CommonPass, in the latest Transformation 2021 report.

There's a bit of a catch-22 happening right now with vaccinations. In the understandable rush to get people vaccinated and get life back to normal, proof of vaccination is mostly coming via paper certification. But that's going to create headaches down the line, at least for getting the travel industry back on track, with any attempt to coordinate vaccination stats and verification on a global level.

There was good news this week for IATA Travel Pass, a mobile app designed to help travellers securely manage their travel in line with any government requirements for COVID-19 testing or vaccine information.

Another major carrier - Air New Zealand - signed on to trial the new digital system. Other carriers that have signed on to use the IATA Travel Pass include Emirates, Etihad, Copa and Singapore Airlines.

Even better, IATA has indicated that the plan is for the app to go live in March 2021.

Meanwhile CommonPass had its first international test run last fall.

The key to adoption for any health passport system will be mass use. "It would be unfortunate if consumers are required to rely upon multiple mobile apps as they travel the world," says Sorensen. "Airlines and the travel industry should strive to embrace one or two key platforms to minimize complexity for consumers."

Ralph Hollister, Analyst, Travel & Tourism at GlobalData, offers his take: "IATA's Travel Pass is not the golden ticket to an instant recovery for the global travel sector, but it will no doubt help," he says.

He too points to the difficulties of coordinating such a system on a global scale, where some governments use paper documentation for proof of vaccination or negative test, and where app rollout could be difficult in developing nations with lower levels of smartphone ownership. "This could mean that the rollout is seen as something that increases global inequality in terms of which nations can and can't freely travel," says Hollister.

But ultimately, he says, "the rollout of a digital COVID Travel Pass will be beneficial to the global travel sector and will increase the likelihood of a meaningful start to recovery in 2021." **TW**

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