

LEADING THROUGH CRISIS

Learnings and actionable steps through recovery from executive women across the travel and hospitality industry



EDITOR'S NOTE

For some reason, at the last moment, I snapped a photo. It was March 16, 2020, and I was headed out the door in professional attire, lugging the seven bags inescapable to the working mother. Talks of a lockdown abound, and I knew it was my last day at work. "We'll be back in a week or two," some said, but it was becoming clear this was once-in-a-lifetime big. I lifted my phone and included my son in a selfie to mark history before heading to the office for the last time.



We all had those moments, when we realized our day-to-day work and careers were to be forever altered by COVID-19. This report highlights how nine executive-level women in the travel and hospitality industry reacted initially to the pandemic, sustained their companies and teams over the last year-plus, and are now looking optimistically to the future. They come from a variety of sectors — airline, hotel, cruise, tourism — but what they have in common is that their courage and wit is synonymous. Interviewing them, one realizes that having both strength and flexibility is key when leading a team and oneself through a crisis.

In conducting our research for this report, we talked to Natalie Bowman, managing director, marketing and advertising, Alaska Airlines; Julia Vander Ploeg, senior vice president, global head of digital and technology, Hyatt; Isis Ruiz, chief marketing officer and senior vice president, Norwegian Cruise Line; among other exceptional travel and hospitality leaders.

We're more than one year into the pandemic and the challenges continue to mount for organizations in the hard-hit travel and hospitality industry. Therefore, the insights from innovative women leaders featured in this report should prove invaluable. The team at Women Leading Travel & Hospitality hopes you draw from this report not only inspiration, but clear, actionable items you can put to use as we forge on. Specifically, the report identifies the steps companies are taking as they plan for recovery; analyzes what changes in consumer behavior are likely temporary vs. permanent; addresses what external resources and data points are the most useful in building a plan for the future; and much more.

Isn't it wild there are already people, such as my son, who won't remember a pre-pandemic time? He'll just see this photo, as well as the leaders and businesses still standing strong. I look forward to the women and companies featured here being among them.

SALLY HOLTGRIEVE

Senior Editor

Women Leading Travel & Hospitality



I. IMMEDIATE REACTION TO AN UNPRECEDENTED SITUATION

"It goes without saying that the COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for the entire travel and tourism industry," Becky Ploeger, Hilton's global head of reservations and customer care, notes. "Even across Hilton's 101-year history, we've never encountered anything like the current situation."

Hilton was the first in the industry to offer a no-penalty, fully refundable policy, Ploeger said. The hotel chain simultaneously doubled down on additional safety measures and enhanced experiences, such as contactless check in/check out, mobile room selection, and digital key technology through the Hilton Honors app.

Consider that 41 percent of global transactions are being carried out via contactless technology, according to Tourism Economics. Furthermore, nearly three-quarters of Americans (74 percent) said they plan to continue using contactless technologies even after the pandemic is over.

"As the attention towards hotel cleanliness changed, so did our programs," recalls Ploeger. "We launched Hilton CleanStay in collaboration with RB, the makers of Lysol, and Mayo Clinic, creating a new brand standard for Hilton properties around the world."



BECKY PLOEGER

Global Head of Reservations and Customer Care

Hilton

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In addition, Hilton launched EventReady (for meetings and events), WorkSpaces by Hilton (for a safe, clean space to work or study), and Hybrid Meetings & Events (a combination of in-person and virtual meetings) to address the changing nature of meetings and the workplace.

Knowing this was a situation that impacted Hilton team members as well as guests, immediate action was taken to close offices globally and quickly transition to a work-from-home model.

"Right away, we knew flexibility for our team members would be crucial as they navigated their new schedules and working environment," says Ploeger. "To support our reservations and customer care group, my team launched SuperFlex, our most flexible scheduling program ever, allowing these employees to choose their own working hours, whether it's eight hour blocks of time or split-shifts throughout the week."

The response to COVID-19 was an effort truly driven by teams across the company, Ploeger recalls. As a global organization, the group saw the early effects of the pandemic on properties in APAC and launched various response teams, monitoring the impact to the business and adapting to new guest standards.

The Hilton team played a vital role in making sure decisions were always informed by the guest experience. Even when responding to the changing environments around the world, teams continuously analyzed, evaluated and implemented new policies, processes and programs to reflect constantly evolving guest expectations.



Travel spending in the U.S. totaled \$679 billion in 2020, an unprecedented 42 percent annual decline (nearly \$500 billion loss) from 2019, according to Tourism Economics.

“There were no timelines; this was an extraordinary and quickly changing situation. Agility was, and continues to be, key,” notes Ploeger. “As we begin to look at the future state of the business and our evolution into recovery, we’re again looking to our guests to learn and adapt to their new travel needs.”

While listening to customers and team members has always been a part of Hilton’s culture, even greater emphasis was made due to the uncertainty and disruption caused by the pandemic. Maintaining empathy also continues to be a crucial part of Hilton’s success, says Ploeger.

“Understanding what our guests, team members and owners are experiencing allows us to meet their needs while building trust, strengthening our connections, and helping them manage new situations,” she explains.

Agility allowed Hilton to adapt to the ever-changing environment, whether it was instituting new cancellation and refund policies or shifting marketing programs to address the new leisure traveler looking for drivable destinations. This agility inspired it to launch new programs, such as allowing Hilton Honors members to donate points to organizations fighting the spread of COVID-19, and led to partnership with organizations like American Express to offer free room nights to first responders.

Customers’ evolving needs were met in every way — in person, over the phone or digitally, says Ploeger. Every decision, policy change, program and product was informed by the feedback received from customers and strengthened by the courage of the leadership to do what’s right for guests, team members and owners. “In return, we’ve seen their loyalty intensify,” Ploeger notes. “That will drive Hilton’s continued success in the years ahead.”



QIANA SPAIN

*Executive Vice President and
Chief Human Resource Officer*

Amtrak

“We communicated frequently with employees regarding increases in cleaning procedures, social distancing requirements, and mask policies in our offices, maintenance yards, on trains and in stations.”

The transportation industry faced similar problems at the outset of the pandemic. For example, Amtrak immediately prioritized messaging strategies to reassure employees, customers and key stakeholders in Congress that it was taking the necessary CDC-recommended safety precautions to keep everyone safe on-board trains and in stations, as well as reduce risks of COVID among employees, says Qiana Spain, Amtrak’s executive vice president and chief human resource officer.

“We communicated frequently with employees regarding increases in cleaning procedures, social distancing requirements, and mask policies in our offices, maintenance yards, on trains and in stations,” Spain says. “Like others, we



encouraged working remotely in an effort to help slow the spread of the virus, which was a difficult choice mostly because we needed our front-line employees to remain safely engaged in operations.”

To help employees as they transitioned from the office environment to working remotely, Amtrak had to increase employee familiarity with network technologies, such as VPN connections, secure Wi-Fi utilization, technology appropriateness, and more.

Once it was able to address some of the immediate COVID concerns, the railroad service shifted to short- and long-term recovery areas to consider.

“We assembled cross-functional groups to tackle what our ‘next normal’ would look like,” Spain recalls. “At that time, we didn’t think it would be over a year to get there, but we’re still thinking along these same lines.”

“We still have a long road to recovery,
but the resiliency of the organization is amazing.”

— Qiana Spain, Executive Vice President and Chief Human Resource Officer, Amtrak

The team examined future worksite and workforce challenges as well as future operations and product attributes. They also looked at how they could sustain some of the new standards implemented, such as critical supply management and personal protective equipment and procedures.

“One of our values at Amtrak is ‘Do the Right Thing,’ and we tried to do that with every business decision,” says Spain. “We relied heavily on our emergency management team, medical director, public health and safety team, and outside partnership with the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health.”

Amtrak was the first transportation organization to achieve the Emergency Management Accreditation Program, according to Spain. Having the benefit of validated emergency operations and crisis communications plans coupled with seasoned executive and senior leadership teams helped the company mobilize quickly.

“This and a strong partnership with our board of directors allowed us to assemble a dedicated COVID-19 task force,” Spain explains. “This group established a cadence for collaboration, communicating with our stakeholders, providing guidance to our employees, and strategically placing preventative tools and products in our workplace, on our trains and in stations.”

Amtrak had to make quick decisions, but also consider its long-term outlook. Spain says the timeline was challenging because, unlike other crises, it couldn’t plan for the unknown and so much was out of its control.

The team examined fiscal year impacts, but also followed and studied the trends in the industry and customer behavior, Spain recalls, adding they listened to employees’ concerns and launched several employee services to provide information about return-to-worksite guidance, vaccines, and feedback mechanisms for employees and state partners to weigh in on the COVID response. Spain notes her change management and process experience helped her the most in dealing with the crisis on an immediate basis.



"I've worked in environments where mergers and acquisitions are common, which comes with the pressure of staffing, and, unfortunately, I've also worked large-scale employee reductions," she says. "What you learn from those experiences is the focus on process and change management are critical to success. As leaders, we're making difficult decisions for the business and for our employees. As the leader responsible for the people strategy, processes and policies, it was important that we were empathetic in our communication of these decisions, we could communicate the reason for the decisions, and then could explain the impact of the decision at the lowest level possible."

Spain is also proud that when people travel on Amtrak trains and walk through its stations, they can experience the passion and commitment Amtrak's employees have for its products, services, customers and each other.

The front-line workers stood in the trenches to provide an essential service for the country in the wake of a pandemic that forever changed the world, the country, and the company, says Spain, adding Amtrak's back-office workforce provided support to keep operations running while also facing unique circumstances of working remotely.

"Through all those things, we never lost sight of our mission," she says proudly. "We still have a long road to recovery, but the resiliency of the organization is amazing."

II. SILVER LININGS: OPERATING IN THE 'NEW NORMAL'

Despite the challenges the pandemic has brought, it has also ushered in some positive change that will likely remain permanent in the travel and hospitality industry, at least according to leaders we interviewed for this report.

Instead of focusing on bringing visitors into its city, for example, the pandemic forced Visit Seattle to step back and focus its local marketing efforts.



ALI DANIELS
Chief Marketing Officer
Visit Seattle

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"During the pandemic, we were determined to help Seattleites fall back in love with their city and to foster an affinity for local tourism," says Ali Daniels, chief marketing officer of Visit Seattle. "We launched education campaigns around the idea of introducing local tourism as a shared value."

Daniels notes the campaign created an incredible sense of community and buy-in among Seattleites that won't go away post-pandemic. "Building up local tourism will be a permanent priority for us," she adds.

Wyndham Hotels & Resorts has used the past year to focus on its guests' confidence in the brand — and its health and safety protocols in particular. "We turned our corporate Count On Me service culture outwards and launched



Count On Us, an initiative designed to build guest confidence while further elevating health and safety protocols,” says Jessica Davidson, senior vice president, digital and brand marketing at Wyndham Hotels & Resorts. “Through this, we fortified our standards to include more frequent cleaning of common areas and high-touch surfaces, the use of EPA-approved disinfectants, the distribution of hand sanitizers, and more.”

This dedicated focus on health and safety will continue in the travel and hospitality industry in the months and years ahead — another silver lining to emerge from what has been a very challenging time for so many.

“Flyers will benefit from enhanced cleaning standards long after the pandemic ends,” Natalie Bowman, managing director, marketing and advertising at Alaska Airlines, tells Women Leading Travel & Hospitality. “These changes are positive outcomes of a very difficult time.”

Another change with staying power according to Davidson is the rapid pace of digital adoption that took place at Wyndham during the pandemic. While the hotel chain already had a mobile-first mindset, the pandemic further reinforced its focus. Last fall, for example, Wyndham launched a new, fully reimagined mobile app that delivers streamlined, low-contact experiences that have become critical among today’s travelers.

“This work was underway before the pandemic hit, but we recognize that now, more than ever, guests want to interact with brands on their terms,” Davidson notes. “Our app puts features like mobile check-in and checkout, texting, and account management in the hands of everyday travelers in a whole new way, with more features on the road map.”

BWH Hotel Group, parent company of Best Western Hotels & Resorts, also focused on its digital road map during the pandemic.

“The pandemic has sparked an even greater shift to digital ‘ecosystem’ marketing,” says Dorothy Dowling, senior vice president and chief marketing officer for BWH Hotel Group. “While this approach isn’t new, the availability and shift in the media marketplace will be permanent, as will our ability to buy audiences and implement omnichannel digital marketing plans.”

Another positive change Dowling mentioned is the launch of a new category of travel “bleisure” trips — when travelers add leisure trips to business travel. “Customers will be seeking ways to rekindle their love of travel, and bleisure provides the perfect opportunity,” adds Dowling.



NATALIE BOWMAN

Managing Director, Marketing and Advertising

Alaska Airlines



JESSICA DAVIDSON

Senior Vice President, Digital and Brand Marketing

Wyndham Hotels & Resorts

“We turned our corporate Count On Me service culture outwards and launched Count On Us, an initiative designed to build guest confidence while further elevating health and safety protocols.”



Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Dowling shares that the evolution of human brands will continue to accelerate due to the pandemic.

“Now, more than ever, businesses and individuals are leading from a place of caring and empathy,” she says. “I believe this will be a long-term impact of COVID, fueling relationships, personal growth, and driving extraordinary results both personally and professionally.”

CHANGING ROLES

All the leaders interviewed also shared that their roles have evolved in a positive way during the pandemic.

“In my role and throughout our organization, we’ve increased our engagement with teammates and hoteliers to ensure alignment and remain connected despite the distance,” notes Dowling. “As we recover from the pandemic, many of these communication tools will continue to be used in our day-to-day activities.”

While Wyndham’s Davidson said her role hasn’t fundamentally changed, it has shifted through deeper cross-disciplinary communication and partnership.

“Priorities and goals are more holistic and shared across the organization now,” Davidson says. “There’s a greater appreciation for the total value and benefits of the efforts in which we choose to invest, and definitely more frequent communication. This will not change.”



DOROTHY DOWLING

*Senior Vice President and
Chief Marketing Officer*

BWH Hotel Group

“Now, more than ever, businesses and individuals are leading from a place of caring and empathy.”

Isis Ruiz, chief marketing officer and senior vice president at Norwegian Cruise Line, shared a similar sentiment.

“My role evolved to foster collaboration beyond the core marketing group and across the entire organization to ensure that at every point we’re communicating clearly and efficiently with our guests, team members and partners,” notes Ruiz.

MOTIVATING TEAMS

Keeping employees motivated during a difficult time was a challenge for most of the leaders we interviewed. However, all found ways to keep their teams in high spirits with regular communication, empathy, and some fun.

“As creative people, we need moments of togetherness,” notes Visit Seattle’s Daniels. “We have two team video meetings a week, where we catch up outside of the day-to-day and share stories from our weekends, hear about home improvement projects, see each other eye-to-eye, etc.”

In a similar fashion, Norwegian Cruise Line’s Ruiz focused specifically on three areas when motivating her team during the pandemic: compassion, transparency and resilience.



“We’ve been very transparent on all our communications from early on and made sure that our team members knew their health and safety were our top priority,” Ruiz says. “We learned how to execute virtual trivia, wedding celebrations, baby showers, and to acknowledge important moments for our team members through Zoom calls. We ran innovation competitions and challenged ourselves to be more connected than ever.”

Furthermore, Davidson offered the following five-prong approach that she has used to motivate her team at Wyndham during the pandemic:

- **Pay attention to what team members need in the moment.** It’s important to embrace (and encourage) cats and dogs jumping on laps in the middle of meetings, or the kids who want to be held. This pandemic has humanized us all, and sharing (and appreciating) the whole person goes a long way.
- **Celebrate accomplishments and key moments.** While we can’t host in-person baby showers or birthdays these days, we can update our video backgrounds with balloons and create moments of joy. Take the time to highlight projects at their start and ends.



ISIS RUIZ

*Chief Marketing Officer and
Senior Vice President*

Norwegian Cruise Line

“We’ve been very transparent on all our communications from early on and made sure that our team members knew their health and safety were our top priority.”

- **Give specific recognition and provide opportunities for team members to present their work,** both to their team and to senior leaders.
- **Focus on the work that’s meaningful.** Provide team members with opportunities to take on projects that have a strong impact to the business or that align to a personal passion point. We all get excited around delivering great work.
- **Be transparent.** I appreciate hearing from the straight shooters — those team members who you can count on to tell it like it is. Encouraging this input gives everyone a voice and demonstrates that you care. Act on what you hear and use it to be better.



GETTY IMAGES / SPACE_CAT



III. PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Having assessed both the immediate and long-term impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the travel and hospitality industry, it's time to turn our attention to what's coming next — and how companies can begin preparing. To start, companies should be tracking how consumer attitudes and behaviors toward travel are trending, both for the remainder of 2021 as well as into future years.

And there's reason to be cautiously optimistic, particularly for leisure travel. Consider the following data points from a March 2021 survey from Destination Analysts, a firm that provides tourism and travel market research:

- With nearly two-thirds both in a ready-to-travel mindset and highly open to travel inspiration, a 2021 record-high 73.8 percent of American travelers did some travel planning and dreaming in the last week. Nearly 16 percent said they made a travel reservation in the last week.
- In each of the months from May through October, over 20 percent of American travelers report having at least tentative trip plans.
- Nearly 40 percent (38.3 percent) of those who have received or are expecting a stimulus check say they're likely to spend some portion of it on leisure travel.

Furthermore, almost half of the respondents to Expedia Group's [2021 Travel Trends Report](#) said they're more likely to travel when a COVID-19 vaccine is widely available, and 44 percent said they will take more trips in 2021 than 2020, with younger generations wanting to travel the most overall.



STACEY SYMONDS

Senior Director, Customer and Journey Insights

Expedia Group

“For our lodging and airline partners, we’re providing them with traveler insights and tools to help them navigate new traveler concerns and improve traveler confidence.”

While business travel will likely be slower to recover than leisure travel, there are promising signs that we're headed in the right direction, particularly with the rollout of multiple vaccines. However, a [recent study by S&P](#) reveals that business travel may not fully recover to 2019 levels until 2024. This information was ahead of the positive vaccine news, however, it has merit in that 2021 is likely to have a 46 percent to 60 percent return on business travel over 2019, according to the report.

So, how are travel and hospitality companies planning for the uncertain future of the industry? To start, they're being transparent with customers at the time of booking their trips, including offering resources to help them make well-informed decisions. Easing anxieties of potential travelers will be critical to future bookings.

For example, Expedia has launched a [COVID-19 traveler hub](#) to help prepare travelers with useful tips and links to government and travel sites with the most up-to-date information.



“For our customers, we know there’s a lot of information out there and ever-changing restrictions, so we’ve enhanced our on-site messaging that lets them quickly access any travel restrictions in place for a destination and provide relevant travel tips and content that helps them make informed decisions,” says Stacey Symonds, senior director, customer and journey insights, Expedia Group. “For our lodging and airline partners, we’re providing them with traveler insights and tools to help them navigate new traveler concerns and improve traveler confidence.”

In addition, travel and hospitality companies are doubling-down on safety protocols and processes to ensure the well-being of their guests and customers. For example, Hyatt introduced several new contactless experiences for guests at its properties worldwide.

“Throughout 2020, Hyatt rolled out enhanced digital amenities through Hyatt.com and the World of Hyatt app that give guests more control over their experiences with us,” notes Julia Vander Ploeg, senior vice president, global head of digital and technology, Hyatt. “Digital Key capabilities are available at more than 600 Hyatt properties worldwide, giving our World of Hyatt members the opportunity to bypass the front desk and access their guest room and other public spaces directly from their smartphone. Many Hyatt properties are also finding great success with on-property digital mobile ordering experiences. Our Digital team has worked quickly to ensure our hotels can seamlessly adopt QR code technology, making it easy for food-and-beverage teams to support mobile menus and payment for restaurant order pick-up or knock-and-go room service. This agile approach to product development made a significant impact on our guests’ and colleagues’ experiences.”



JULIA VANDER PLOEG

Senior Vice President, Global Head of Digital and Technology

Hyatt

“Throughout 2020, Hyatt rolled out enhanced digital amenities through Hyatt.com and the World of Hyatt app that give guests more control over their experiences with us.”

Hyatt is not only thinking about the leisure traveler as it introduces new safety-minded guest experiences. The hotel chain has implemented several measures to welcome back business travelers as well. For example, Hyatt is offering audio-visual technology that will help customers execute successful hybrid meetings, which use multiple locations — either spread out through one hotel or across several properties — to accommodate distancing as well as combine virtual and in-person experiences.

“One technology that assists in the hybrid meeting planning process is Social Tables, a digital meeting room diagramming tool available at full-service hotels globally,” Vander Ploeg says. “Our event planners can use it to illustrate various meeting room set-up options with social distancing, which in turn allows for optimal in-person and virtual attendee experiences. We believe hybrid meetings offer value to planners even once restrictions on in-person gatherings are lifted. We’re currently developing solutions that will allow planners to extend reach of meetings programming in the future.”



Even with all of the preparations that travel and hospitality companies are making to help their businesses thrive in a post-pandemic environment, the sobering reality is that this won't be the last crisis to befall the industry — or the world, for that matter. Therefore, companies need to be ready with a plan to help them navigate the next crisis successfully. Symonds and her team at Expedia have gotten a head start on that process by listening to its customers.

“Focus on listening to your customers and what they're telling you about their experience so you can make meaningful improvements as quickly as possible” advises Symonds. “We often have daily feedback reviews in order to make sure we're keeping a close pulse on evolving issues. Have strong cross-functional teams at the ready with processes that are standardized as much as possible. These teams can include service, brand, supply, PR/communications, and analytics, who can quickly work to solve problems together vs. in silos. We utilize a “swarm” model where we quickly assemble to assess the issues, meet daily to track progress, and resolve issues in real time.

“Our purpose — to care for people so they can be their best — is our North Star, and care has guided every aspect of our COVID-19 response.”

— Julia Vander Ploeg, Senior Vice President, Global Head of Digital and Technology, Hyatt

“Maximize self-service options and include flexibility in your products so that customers can adjust plans easily,” Symonds adds. “The better the experience is for customers during a difficult time, the more likely they will come back and do business with you in the future. Lastly, recognize the impact of a high-stress situation on your employees, and provide them flexibility as needed to take care of themselves and their families.”

Much like at Expedia, Hyatt is looking to its customers as the inspiration for its planning efforts, including future crises.

“Our purpose — to care for people so they can be their best — is our North Star, and care has guided every aspect of our COVID-19 response,” says Vander Ploeg. “All business decisions are made through the lens of our purpose, which informs how we have and will continue to support members of the Hyatt family, including our guests, colleagues, customers, and owners. Navigating challenging situations requires consistent communication and transparency. Keeping our guests, members and colleagues apprised of the steps we're taking to advance care through enhanced protocols and new programming is key. It's also important to be intensely flexible and agile so we can take meaningful action that makes a difference. One way Hyatt is doing this is by providing guest peace of mind with our extended flexible cancellation policy, with the ability to cancel reservations up to 24 hours prior to arrival with no penalty through July 31, 2021.”

The value of strong leadership has never been more apparent than during this pandemic. In order to position their businesses for future success, whatever that may look like, leaders have to be willing to listen, be compassionate and empathetic, flexible, and have a vision. This report shows the travel and hospitality industry is in good hands, and with a positive outlook on the horizon, better times are surely ahead of us.



WHO WE ARE



Women Leading Travel & Hospitality is a membership-based association that connects executive women across all sectors of the travel and hospitality industry. Its mission is to unite, inspire and empower its community of executive women leaders by providing unparalleled resources, support and motivation to achieve personal and professional growth. For more information, visit womenleadingtravelandhospitality.com.



Women in Retail Leadership Circle (WIRLC) is an exclusive community of women executives at leading retailers and brands. Its mission is to foster leadership development for its members by providing an unparalleled mix of events, content and elite connections. Focused on both business strategy and executive professional development, WIRLC offers women leaders the opportunity to network, discuss industry issues, and learn how to become better leaders. For more information, visit womeninretail.com.



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