Meeting the expectations of digital travellers this summer

By Kate Mollett

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With the summer holiday period around the corner, consumers are turning to technology to book their trips, but what happens if online service are unavailable?

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Technology has filtered into all facets of travel with people interacting using different platforms to book flights and accommodation, perform online check-ins, upgrade their seats, and write reviews. In fact, the travel industry in South Africa is quickly catching up to international developments and moving from the traditional office space and travel agent to a more evolved DIY-style experience.

Digital transformation

This digital traveller experience lets consumers take full control over all aspects of their holidays. Much of this digital transformation is driven by the consumer's desire to make bookings around the clock from anywhere in the world, rather than be limited by the opening hours of an office-based travel agency, and the subsequent cost savings of cutting out a 'middleman' that took a commission for selling you the trip.

While the travel industry is arguably ahead of the curve right now, for how long will it remain in front? According to Statistics South Africa's annual Tourism Satellite Account for South Africa report, the tourism sector directly contributes 2.9% to the country's gross domestic product (GDP). The economic impact of not staying up to date with the latest technologies can, therefore, be considerable.

Instant gratification

Today, the customer's expectation is all about instant gratification. Business hours are not just 9-to-5, but rather when the consumer wants it to be. This means the travel agency is now a 24-hour operation that needs to be available to serve customers at 1am as effectively as they do at 10am.

So, just imagine the impact if a service is inaccessible or unavailable. For example, not only will travellers risk not finding the accommodation they need, but they won't be able to check in online before arriving at the airport, resulting in the whole process becoming a lengthier affair once more. With so many competitors in the travel sector, chances are good that the customer will simply move on to the next travel service that offers the same kind of value for money and is available to take an online booking. Therefore, it stands to reason that to truly embrace digital transformation, those involved in travel need to implement a hyper-available approach to data and digital services as the foundation for their digital offerings to customers.

The digital world requires an intelligent data management strategy for organisations to unlock the value hidden in their data. Customers expect intuitive, super-fast transactions driven by data. Whether it is online accommodation, banking or shopping, services must be readily available and responsive to more exacting client demands.

For some, if a website doesn't load in the blink of an eye, is it even worth doing business with? Whether or not you subscribe to this thought, it is clear that if you offer digital services or plan to, hyper-availability is an essential business requirement.

What can a travel agency or tour operator do?

A focus needs to be placed on how customers are engaging and using their platforms, what kind of data is stored, and how that is used to create a more integrated user experience. As mentioned, consumers want to be in charge of their own travel experience. Empowering them with the tools to do so must be the primary goal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Mollett is the regional manager for South Africa at Veeam.

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