

Winning Back Consumer Trust in Travel and Hospitality



By Geoff Hudson-Searle

Trust is the most important factor for organisational sustainability because it is essential for overcoming uncertainty and alleviating risks and anxiety when in crisis; it is also essential in normal times when service is disrupted. In addition, trust plays an important mediating role in maintaining long-term relationships between customers and service organisations. As such, the perceived risk can be very high because customers make decisions about purchasing or using the service before experiencing the service, so service trust is essential in the service industry.

Business leaders know trust is a critical element of the Human Experience that shapes relationships with customers and employees. Metrics and surveys that gauge trust are easy to find.

What's missing from all that conventional wisdom is the most important piece: What can you do about it? This is an especially pressing question for organisations in the travel and hospitality industry, including airlines, hotels, rental cars, and more.

If brands that sell computers or financial services or packaged goods rely so heavily on trust based on human experience, how much more important must it be to brands that sell... well, human experiences? For travel and hospitality brands, experience is the product, and trust is paramount. What's just as critical, but less obvious, is the role trust plays in the experience these companies offer their employees.

Trust drives behaviours that lead to business results for travel and hospitality companies. Deloitte has developed a new perspective on trust that unpacks the components that influence it and identifies the levers that can steer it. HX TrustID™ maps a direct path from understanding to action, based on extensive research and analysis using data from more than 7,500 United States customers and employees of real-world businesses. The trust mapping found that there are four signals: Humanity, Transparency, Capability, and Reliability, when brought together in predictable ways can determine the level of trust an organisation enjoys.

Travel and hospitality brands have an almost “meta” or double relationship with human experience: Like all industries, they offer the experience of doing business with them or working for them. Unlike most other industries, they also deliver experience as the product itself. That’s why the trust that underpins the human experience, which is so important in the industry.

There’s little doubt that the industry is going to need to work hard to earn back the trust of travellers.

A customer-first approach is sure to get 2024 off to a good start, putting the focus on safe and sustainable travel. It’s going to be a tough road back, but not an impossible one. Communicating, listening and engaging with your customers holds the key to understanding what travellers want and placing them at the heart of the experience you offer.

Some important themes to move forward in building trust:

Focus on elevating human experiences for all humans in the ecosystem. For customers and employees, certainly, but also for franchise owners, supply chain partners, or real estate partners. Remember that travel companies tend to have strong Humanity signals compared to other industries—but that just means expectations are already high, there’s little tolerance for failing to get it right, and the bar is higher for efforts to stand out.

Understand unique customer and employee needs. What do people expect from a brand? Start by asking whom you’re dealing with. Each category in the sector should observe nuances among its diverse relationships: frequent business vs. leisure, loyalty member vs. first-timer, corporate owner vs. franchised, or employee vs. third-party. Digging deeper into the journey of each cohort is a step you must take before deciding the best course of action.

Embrace learnings from adjacent industries. While the dynamics and forces that influence airlines or hotels can be quite different, the customer point of view often lumps all these industries into one cohesive travel experience. That means it’s worth your while to understand brand experiences and expectations outside your direct industry and competition. When customers think about the brands they most trust, they often think across industries—so consider using the best in class of each signal as your benchmark.

Travel is a human need and for humans to experience. Travel and hospitality are at a unique point in history where there is an opportunity to reboot with a new mindset, and now the technology to execute real growth. The speed at which that happens will determine both loyalty and the future success of the industry.

About Geoff Hudson-Searle

Geoff Hudson-Searle is a CEO of **IBEM**, serial business advisor, C-Suite Executive and Non-Executive Director to growth-phase tech companies. Geoff holds a Master’s degree in Business Administration and has over 30 years of experience in the international business management arena. He is a fellow of the Institute of Directors, an associate of The Business Institute of Management, a co-founder and board member of the Neustar International Security Council (NISC) and a distinguished member of the Advisory Council for The Global Cyber Academy.

Rated by *Agilience* as a Top 250 Harvard Business School authority on Strategic Management and Management Consulting, Geoff lectures at business forums, conferences and universities, and has been the focus of TEDx and RT Europe’s business documentary across various thought leadership topics.

*Geoff’s latest book (in co-authorship with Mark Herbert), **The Trust Paradigm**, is available to order via Waterstones, WHSmith and Amazon.*

He is also the author of:

- Freedom After the Sharks
- Meaningful Conversations
- Journeys to Success – Volume 9
- God in Business
- Purposeful Discussions