



What you ought to know-The most important job of a destination is to manage COVID-19, for both today and tomorrow.

Reduced capacities and altered travel habits have upended tourist economies' reliance on consumer spending, employment and local tax collections. But it's how well a destination manages COVID-19 that is emerging as the essential key to pandemic-era success.

While there has been much focus on visitation to many mountain destinations this past summer as visitors sought open spaces — raising hopes that some level of normalcy might return to pre-pandemic levels — what it means for the peak winter months is less clear as ski resorts face mandated reduced capacities.

As it relates to tourism research conducted by RRC & Associates, a marketing research firm with experience and expertise in the tourism and recreation industry, as part of the tourism economy think tank The Insights Collective, 70% of those surveyed indicated that health and safety measures being implemented by the destination were the kind of information that would increase the likelihood of travel to a destination. Additionally, in the same RRC study, 82% indicate an interest in travel once conditions are safe.

“The data is pretty clear that potential visitors are very interested in health and safety issues”, according to Chris Cares, managing director of RRC & Associates and an Insight Collective member.

The world renown business strategy consulting firm McKinsey and Company concluded recently that “the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 and its associated health risks has caused many individuals, households and businesses to opt out of normal activity-even if no formal restrictions are in place.”

ALIGNMENT AMONG DESTINATIONS, BUSINESSES, RESIDENTS AND VISITORS IS CRITICAL

The challenge has often been a mishmash of rules, mandates, and ordinances that can vary state-to-state and destination-to-destination. Even at the local level, there is inconsistency in regulations regarding masks and social distancing, with some destinations having no enforcement and leaving it to local businesses.

This issue has caused significant concern among residents who, in some cases, have pushed back in a variety of ways. The City of South Lake Tahoe has mandated masks or you will be fined. They took this step because of significant pushback from residents.

“We have really seen local residents get much more involved politically on behalf of political safety,” added Carl Ribaldo, president and chief strategist of SMG Consulting and an Insights Collective member.

What does this mean for tourism destinations? Simply, job one is getting the entire destination in alignment with COVID-19 management practices. That means restaurants, retail stores, hotels, and attractions combined have to reassure visitors that the situation is under control, and their safety is assured.

“Even if you want to strengthen your economy over the long term, it's critical to implement firm and proven management practices, otherwise potential visitors’ safety concerns will not be met,” Cares said.

This issue is shaping up to be one of destination competitiveness: destinations now need to compete on consumer safety and the implementation of COVID-19 best practices. Those destinations that have best practices with COVID-19 management will have a more defined and competitive position among potential visitors in a very challenging marketplace.

How can this best happen?

1. **It takes a community**, not just the tourism industry. To date, COVID-19 management policies have not been developed by the tourism industry. Instead, federal, state or local agencies have developed policies, while the tourism industry has reacted to these policies. As such, it's essential for destination marketing organizations to take a leadership role for the industry in implementing best practices and, at the same time, work cooperatively with government agencies.
2. All businesses, small and large, have to participate for the **greater good and sustainability** of the community.
3. Messaging must come from the municipality, not just the tourism industry. It's important to realize that messaging cannot just come from the destination marketing organization; they can help, but the **local municipality must have a strong voice** in communicating what the guidelines are, what the expectations are, and what the penalties will be if they are not enforced.
4. **Residents matter**. Another critical aspect of COVID-19 management is communicating to residents how the tourism industry is working to implement management practices that will keep them, as well as visitors, safe.

“For decades, destinations worked to get consumer attention and visitation through a variety of marketing messages, special events, activities, dining experiences and more. But the pandemic has changed all that,” said Jesse True, a resort marketing specialist and Insights Collective member. “Those destinations that adapt quickly and execute best management practices will not only set themselves apart, but also create a competitive advantage for the destination.”

The message is simple: Control the virus, and the local economy will sustain itself over the longer-term. Discard management practices for short-term gain in a tourism season and risk losing the market that is not prepared to travel until COVID management practices are implemented.

Insights Collective founder Ralf Garrison put the situation in perspective: “It's important to remember Charles Darwin's reminds, ‘it's not the strongest that survive but the most adaptable.’ Those that adapt the best will be well positioned in the recovery.”

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The Insights Collective is a Tourism Industry Think Tank composed of tourism industry experts from across the country with a combined 150 years of experience. For more information on the Insights Collective <https://www.theinsightscollective.com/>

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