

Duff on Hospitality Law

OTA & Travel Distribution Update: IATA criticized by travel agencies for its airline refund procedures; Chinese online travel platforms ramp up post-COVID-19 efforts; major distributors roll out traveler-friendly cancellation programs

By Greg Duff on 4.3.20 | Posted in OTA Update

In this week's Update, we've included a greater number of stories than usual given the quantity and variety of available stories pertaining to COVID-19.

Stay safe and healthy. Together, we will get through this.

Travel Intermediaries Accused of Leaving Travel Agents Hanging

("Travel Agency MisterFly Slams Airlines for Delayed or Denied Refunds," Skift Travel News on Mar 27, 2020)

Over the past few weeks, much has been written about the questionable cancellation practices of several European airlines. Notwithstanding EU regulations requiring airlines to refund travelers for canceled flights, many cash-starved airlines are only issuing credit "notes" for future travel. Travel agents and tour operators, facing demands for refunds by their clients, are now caught in the middle and demanding intermediaries (International Air Transport Association (IATA)) to do something about it.

Chinese Online Travel Platforms Ramping Up Post-COVID-19 Efforts

("Chinese travel platforms ready to boost business," People's Daily Online on Mar 27, 2020)

Several of China's major distribution platforms have begun preparing for life after COVID-19. [Trip.com](#) (formerly, Ctrip) and Tunio have launched training courses for thousands of travel professionals to better prepare them for the return of the domestic travel industry. These same platforms as well as Fliggy (Alibaba's tourism platform) have begun distributing to potential travelers audio guides about scenic spots, many of which are now being asked to re-open. As these platforms ramp up their pre-sell campaigns, several have partnered with Chinese cities, tourism departments and attractions to boost future travel to the destinations. As China begins its efforts to recover from COVID-19 (and particularly, re-start its travel industry), the entire

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world will be watching.

Major Distributors Roll Out Traveler-Friendly Cancellation Programs

(“Expedia will refund hotel guests during COVID-19 outbreak regardless of existing booking policy,” Phocus Wire on Mar 23, 2020)

By now, you all should have received word from Booking Holdings and Expedia Group (or one or more of their many online travel companies) that they are unilaterally instituting traveler-friendly cancellation policies and programs for all properties on their platforms. While Expedia’s program – the Global Cancellation Waiver Program – is labeled as “voluntary” (unlike [Booking.com](#)’s program), properties that timely opt out of the program will suffer adverse sort order and/or display consequences when compared to properties that do participate. Smaller, independent properties are most likely to feel the adverse effects of these policy changes. While these programs contradict the terms and conditions associated with most advanced purchased, non-refundable rate plans, the programs are fairly consistent with many of the COVID-19 cancellation policies recently instituted by the bigger brands and operators. If you have questions about these programs or how they might affect your properties, please let us know.

Other news:

OTA Market Share Likely to Increase Due to Coronavirus Pandemic

Verdict - All News on Mar 26, 2020

Subject to social distancing and self-isolation measures, venturing into an in-store travel agency will no longer be an option for customers over the next few months. Therefore, the appeal of an online travel agency (OTA) may gather greater traction.

Google Travel Search Is Unrecognizable as Advertising Dries Up

Hospitality Net - Latest Industry News on Mar 26, 2020

Free links from travel companies are now appearing dramatically higher in Google Search on desktop and mobile — but it isn’t because regulators have clamped down on the search engine or Google has reformed its advertising-tilted business practices.

New Platform Helps Hoteliers Offer Beds for Coronavirus-Related Needs

Phocus Wire on Mar 24, 2020

Hotel technology company [Cloudbeds](#) has created an online portal to connect hotels with health care providers and local governments.

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Hoteliers Accuse OTAs of 'Behaving Appallingly' Over Changes to Terms and Conditions - The Caterer

Hotel News Resource on Mar 24, 2020

Hoteliers have accused OTAs of 'behaving appallingly' by changing terms and conditions so bookings – including those that were non-refundable – are reimbursed, without cancellation charges.