

Using digital marketing to secure the survival of SA's travel industry

As South Africa settles into lockdown level 2, many businesses in the hospitality and travel sectors are struggling to differentiate themselves as they compete for the limited spend of a still wary public. Incubeta specialists look at practical digital tips to help local venues attract customers.



Marvin Meyer via [Unsplash](#)

"We have been working closely with our travel clients like Club Med, Bookings.com and Air France/KLM throughout the lockdown year. The Covid-19 pandemic has really hit the tourism and travel sector very hard and getting back up to speed will be a challenge. In a vertical as competitive and global as the travel industry, making sure your messaging is truly relevant, targeted, personalised and timeous is the competitive advantage that every company is striving for," says Roan Mackintosh, managing director at Incubeta Group, MEA.

"Based on our work in South Africa we can see local companies are facing exactly the same challenges as the larger, global operations, but often without the cushion of a secure balance sheet. We believe that with some basic digital efforts our travel and tourism sector can beat the Covid shock."

Search has plummeted

Market [research conducted](#) by GlobalWebIndex shows that just a third of UK vacationers have not had to change or cancel plans as a result of the virus. This is even worse for the US traveler, where just 8% have been unaffected by the pandemic as the country continues to struggle to contain the virus.

Most countries went into lockdown ahead of their traditional vacation time, crippling many travel companies. But the effects of the pandemic have even taken their toll on travel-related search.

"Travel related search traffic has dropped by as much as 80 percent over the past few months for our clients in the travel industry. That's huge. This gives us a very graphic proof point of just what travel companies are up against as they fight to get customers back through their doors. And, because of the low search numbers, we are also seeing a significant drop in the ad inventory which is something to factor into the mix when embarking on a digital campaign," explains Tich Savanhu, Head of Digital Strategy at Incubeta.

Pressure placed on shaky revenue streams also means that businesses will need to be as smart as possible with how and where they spend their money and efforts.

"The fact remains that traditional marketing and advertising avenues can be expensive and may not offer the immediate results that are needed. Digital marketing can deliver measurable returns and there are tools available to assist with digital marketing, even for business owners who are still familiarising themselves with the medium," says Johan Walters, lead tech solutions consultant at Incubeta.

User behaviour is the first step

The best place to start a digital marketing strategy is to determine exactly what people are searching. Understanding what people are looking for means that you can shift your own messaging and advertising search terms to make sure you are capturing the target market.

Savanhu says that when tracking user behaviour, tools like Google Trends is a great place to start. Users can segment the results by region so they can have a provincial and city view. According to Savanhu, segmentation is particularly useful when looking for break out search terms as well as which terms have worked historically.

User behaviour has changed over time and that change has been exacerbated over the past few pandemic months. Google recognises this and now refers to the user decision making process as messy. To help make sense of it, the company has produced a useful insight piece describing the "messy middle" of purchase behaviour.

Flexibility and safety are key right now

Walters points out that Google research has shown that safety is top of mind for potential travels right now.

"It's all about enticing people. The pandemic is far from over and if local destinations hope to get customers through the door, they must ensure their patrons feel safe. Ensure that your company clearly shows what safety precautions are in place. The new, more skittish traveller also wants flexibility. We may end up going back into lockdown if there are hotspot outbreaks, or the customer themselves may get sick and have to go into isolation. Things can change in a heartbeat, so come up with content and messaging that give customers the comfort of a safe and flexible offering," says Walters.

Your past is your biggest asset

"Right now owners should be looking at the low-hanging fruit. Look at your existing database and target these customers – people who have supported you before and know your brand and offering. By quickly re-engaging your already loyal

customers you can get revenues flowing faster and this will help secure your future,” Savanhu advises.

Take the gap and use it to your advantage

“Covid has changed the competitor landscape drastically from a paid media perspective. Some companies took the decision to pull or reduce paid media budgets significantly. The reduced competition has resulted in gaps in the competitor landscape that can now be taken advantage of and, in many instances, the cost per click has reduced which means companies can afford to be a bit more aggressive while still staying in line with their KPIs is a big help for companies right now,” Savanhu explains.

In a similar vein, Walters quotes a recent ThinkWithGoogle [insights article](#), saying that watching search patterns for affiliated industries such as movies, gyms and other entertainment in your area can help you better manage your staff and stock as you gear up to welcome patrons. In this regard Google also has free and useful [Community Mobility Reports](#) which show physical movement of people to parks, malls and other destinations. This could also spur on partnerships within your ecosystem. Creating packages between AirBnBs and local restaurants for instance, is an option to attract customers.

In closing, while South African companies work quickly to secure the local customer, they should not forget the long-term play.

"Putting together digital strategies for 2021 and even 2022 is a really good idea. Things will change once we have a vaccine and even effective Covid treatments. Start now by defining your audiences as well as their motivations and then reach out to them. While the tourists may only touch down in 12 months, securing their euro- or dollar-based deposits for a 2021 vacation can really help your business right now," concludes Savanhu.

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