

Case Study: Managing business travel during a health-crisis: Covid-19

In January 2020, the Novel Coronavirus (henceforth known as Covid-19) triggered health concerns worldwide and the tourism industry took one of the first beatings during this crisis. The unexpected catastrophe affected segments of the tourism industry from hotels, airlines, F&B, leisure as well as business travel. Corporates started to activate their business continuity plans to reduce the spread of the virus and provide a safe environment for their employees.

During this period of travel constraints, FCM put together a pro-active and well-rehearsed approach towards the handling of the Covid-19 situation. Through intelligent gathering of information from official regional government health ministries and integrated risk management company WorldAware, who delivers necessary accurate intelligence, insights, technology and decision support, FCM became a key partner in helping corporates to monitor, respond and combat unanticipated situations during these challenging times.

How it all started

Outbreak of the respiratory disease Covid-19 was first detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China since December 2019. By 30th January 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern when community spread increased rapidly. Health organisations started to ramp up medical investigations, and corporates globally started to implement business continuity plans and business travel was either placed on restrictions or halted.

Accurate and timely updates

On 31st January, FCM issued a company-wide client communication, providing updates on measures which had been taken, support available from our account management team, and advisories on official news and health ministry sources for developments.

Bilingual e-direct emailers focusing on the latest and most accurate information from airline route changes, visa and immigration destination updates to health advisories were compiled and sent out daily to clients and travellers from mainland China and Hong Kong.



Examples of daily updates going on to clients

Omnichannel approach from the onset

FCM started to receive informational travel alerts about Covid-19 since December 2019. These alerts were made available to clients (who could choose to opt in) via a few ways - email, sms (for critical alerts only), FCM's mobile travel app Sam, and directly from their designated travel consultant team.

Regardless of time of day, each time a critical level travel alert was received, FCM's operations team would extract a company-wide pull of itineraries to identify affected travellers. Travel consultants would then follow-up promptly to begin a contact process and reach out to each and every traveller, informing them of the travel emergency and offer service support.

From the second day of the Lunar New Year on 26th January, the situation started to escalate and FCM's travel consultants began to reach out via email and phone to all travellers who had trips to Wuhan. They were informed of the critical travel alert and offered assistance in delaying, rebooking or cancellation of their trips.

Following that and in addition to travel assistance, FCM continued to update clients regarding visa and consulate information changes provided by in-house visa management teams in every country. FCM's visa officers delivered first-hand updates across the business so that travel consultants were able to offer clients timely and appropriate advice.

FCM also conducted regular client risk management discussions to refresh operational protocol on reasonable steps and delivered immediate assistance to customers. A series of crisis management webinars held jointly with WorldAware was also organised for clients of FCM, to educate them on best practices of risk management.

Throughout the period, FCM provided a wide range of training, education and consulting to clients with operations in the affected countries.

Clients with direct access to risk management tools via FCM's technology suite had 24/7 access and could manage travellers and any potential risks anytime. Tools include:

FCM HUB - online travel portal access for all customers

FCM Secure - online security alerts, traveller tracking and reporting platform

FCM's mobile Travel app Sam - relevant itinerary-based travel alerts that can be tracked or shared with users

The five-prong approach to 24/7 support of clients and travellers:

- **Active monitoring of travel risk assessments and advisories**
- **Conscientious tracking of all travel transactions**
- **Keeping an open channel with constant conversations with FCM's global risk management specialist partner - WorldAware**
- **Accurate communication of travel risks to all stakeholders (internal and external)**
- **Enabling technology for clients to access traveller locations, reservations & relevant travel alerts**

Finding a way, no matter the cost

The urgency of the Covid-19 situation that triggered internal communication within FCM Asia and its regional offices was followed up by client contact protocol shortly after FCM China began its crisis measures. FCM's travel consultant teams worldwide are located in-country and managed in small teams of no more than seven members per team. This size makes it ideal for optimum customer service as teams take responsibility and ownership of client relationships.

Within FCM, airline relationship managers effectively kept all operational team members informed of airline memos of penalty waivers so that travel consultants could readily effect changes and penalty waivers whilst minimising additional costs for clients.

Where tickets purchased were non-refundable or unchangeable, FCM travel consultants pro-actively offered to raise waiver and refund requests to airlines as exceptions.

In China, all FCM staff were functioning from home as part of the precautionary measures to contain the outbreak. Operations staff had complete online connection and were able to receive client phone calls via the web-based Avaya system. Its business continuity plan was exercised with calls redirected to other offices in the Asia region as a contingency. Through swift and effective technology efforts, FCM's services were not interrupted throughout the health crisis and every client continued to receive unwavering support from its dedicated account manager and travel consultants.



Bringing travellers to safety

- a true story from Beijing



“

On the third day of the Lunar New Year, FCM Beijing received a phone call from the HR manager of an MNC. The requests – to make departure arrangements out of China for more than 20 expatriate employees along with their family members; to ensure expatriate employees who were holidaying abroad were immediately evacuated to their home country without passing through Beijing. In addition, the client wanted FCM to find the most affordable flights with shortest transit times to complete all evacuations.

The severity of the Covid-19 situation was starting to manifest. Cancellations, amendments or request for immediate departures out of China were a daily occurrence. As it became an almost impossible task to be handled solely by the 24/7 emergency team, FCM activated their entire Beijing operations team to complete this urgent request for the client.

Phuket-US, Yangon-US, Siem Reap-Argentina, Nepal-London, Beijing-Norway - these were some of the global itinerary requests that started coming in. Every request included adults and children or infants, and further complexities such as request for immediate departure on the day itself or cancellation of flights as soon as the ticket was issued, heightened the challenge.

The situation escalated further over the next two days, as more and more airlines started to cancel flights and routes. The booking and ticketing situation were looking almost hopeless, as consultants had to manage specific travellers' requests, request for cheap tickets, as well as communicate multiple itinerary changes. Every available channel of communication from phone, WeChat, email and sms was concurrently activated by account managers and travel consultants before all flights were finally booked, confirmed and issued. One of the travellers with wife and child missed his flight as he remembered the departure date wrongly. But FCM's after-hours duty team managed to get him and his family on the next available flight to his destination minutes before the plane took off.

To the FCM consultants, their job does not end after the tickets are issued. They continue to track the location of all travellers and is at ease only when everyone arrives safely at their final destination. Their extensive experience and training prepare them to expect unexpected emergencies at the most unpredictable of timings.

“We'd like to say thank you to our account manager, travel manager Tina and team of Beijing travel consultants for your great support and professional assistance to complete all air ticket bookings for our expats and families during this special holiday period.

Over the past several days, Tina was stepping up and working from home to help with many requests from our company, she booked and issued over 20 international tickets with various airlines and routes. Both of you are very helpful and have responded timely and in an effective manner.

Your hard work and great efforts are very much appreciated. With your help, we believe that we can overcome the current difficulties successfully.”

”

With or without Covid-19, providing and monitoring regular travel alerts as part of an enhanced duty of care programme is an ongoing necessity to all FCM clients. Pre-emptive precautionary measures, regular education and trainings, reliable client support systems, relevant and insightful intelligence delivered by FCM's technology, ensures a comprehensive duty of care sustenance to all travellers.