Unpredictable travel data? Challenge accepted

By Euan McNeil   19 Jan 2018

"Letting inexperienced individuals work with data is like giving a child a bazooka" - an analogy that was recently shared at the Smart Travel Data Summit in the US, and one that certainly applies in the travel management environment in South Africa.

Euan McNeil, GM South Africa, FCM Travel Solutions

Data management and interpretation have become a key skill in the travel management environment as the amount of data that is generated about travel increases exponentially and the power that proper data interpretation can have in driving savings and achieving company goals becomes increasingly clear.

> " *The starting point for effective travel data management is not to ignore it...* "

With every booking action and passenger movement or action tracked, data-based insights and resulting travel management enhancements ensure a more seamless, safer and pleasant experience for the corporate traveller, as well as delivering cost savings and efficiencies for corporates. In the wrong hands, however, data can be misinterpreted and have the complete opposite effect.

The data gathered through travel management can be unpredictable and from disparate sources. Political instability, weather irregularities, inconsistent traveller behaviour and diverse technology all have an impact on the way in which data is delivered and its quality and relevance.

Collecting data remains a challenge and turning it into relevant and useful insights is a greater challenge still. We see this as a unique opportunity for the professional travel management company (TMC) to deliver true value by helping companies

collect and interpret the travel data at their disposal, and isolate exceptions that are critical to the success of that company's travel programme, and indeed, their end business goals.

Use data to cut costs

A core focus for many companies in 2018, as travel management evolves, will be to interpret data in such a way that it gives them a clear overview of the company's travel spend, highlighting exceptions and opportunities for improvements.

Technology's role in this is absolutely key, which is why FCM Travel Solutions recently launched a platform called FCM Connect, a next-generation suite of interconnected business travel tools. Among the functions offered within this innovative platform is data analysis, empowering travel managers to use the data at their disposal to manage their travel programmes strategically. FCM Connect offers customised reports with access to key metrics in real time. This means reports blend historical travel and expense data with up-to-date data dashboards to provide immediate visibility of the organisation's travel spend. You can't manage what you can't see, and with FCM Connect, your corporate travel eyes are literally opened.

Incorporating third-party data sources, these analytics give travel managers strategic insights that help them benchmark their travel programmes and run forecasts to improve their travel programmes, policies and compliance.

Use data to ensure traveller safety

In a world where destinations that were once bastions of safety can no longer claim to be such, duty of care has become a critical component of any travel management programme. It is the obligation of any company to ensure that their staff are kept safe while travelling for business. Using data to track travellers' movements accurately and timeously, and proactively informing these travellers of potential disruptions or safety risks assist in fulfilling a corporate's duty of care obligations and provide a level of comfort for travellers while on the road.

Data derived from monthly reports allow managers to evaluate the impact of travel emergencies on their company's travel, plan for the future, refine risk management policies and develop traveller preparedness.

Use data for personalised travel experiences

> *Artificial intelligence and travel bots are still in their infancy, but they are definitely evolving and you can expect them to be more pervasive in your business travel experience in future.*

In the not-too-distant future, we can expect artificial intelligence to learn from the online behaviour of millions of people and mine data to meet the needs of travellers at every point in the travel experience. Artificial intelligence will inspire travellers to take trips by providing relevant and targeted messaging.

Today, chatbots are already helping travel agencies handle some of the simpler customer transactions (booking and issuing

boarding passes) so human agents can focus on more complex interactions. The travel bot can answer common queries, support the booking process and provide easy access for customers to their travel information.

FCM has its own travel bot called Sam, an itinerary management tool on steroids. Corporate travellers can book a car or a hotel and complete the booking without the help of a consultant. I strongly believe Sam will be how most business travellers interact with their travel programme in the future. But what drives Sam and his intelligence? Data, of course.

Artificial intelligence and travel bots are still in their infancy, but they are definitely evolving and you can expect them to be more pervasive in your business travel experience in future. Imagine a bot that can interpret travel behaviour data and pre-empt travel selection based on the traveller's experience. Your favourite Italian pasts in New York, a hotel with your preferred gym equipment, you favourite airplane seat booked – the options are endless.

The starting point for effective travel data management is not to ignore it. If all you do currently is collect data with a view to interpreting it in future, it's at least one step in the right direction. Better yet, trust a professional TMC to help you decipher the valuable insights your travel data is just waiting to yield.

ABOUT EUAN MCNEIL

Euan McNeil is the GM South Africa at FCM Travel Solutions, a global brand operating out of 82 countries which forms part of the Flight Centre Travel Group. He is responsible for the overall strategic direction and results of the brand.
▪ Corporate travel: Managing risk and traveller friction - 24 May 2018
▪ TMCs: When global isn't truly global - 11 May 2018
▪ #BizTrends2018: Unpredictable travel data? Challenge accepted - 19 Jan 2018

View my profile and articles...

For more, visit: https://www.bizcommunity.com