

# Is CRM dead in the travel industry?

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How can the idea of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) still be relevant in travel when today's consumers are in the driving seat and 'manage' how and when they wish to engage with us?



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In the past, companies implemented CRM systems without effort and a relationship culture in the organisation, hoping that their CRM would create loyal and happy customers magically. They didn't realise that CRM is, and always was, about managing the relationship, not managing the customer.

Does that mean the CRM system is dead and should be abandoned entirely? I would argue not. Rather, it should be refocused to deliver on its original goal – improve the trust relationship with the customer. We all 'manage' our interpersonal relationships. If you haven't seen a friend for some time, you arrange dinner. If you've upset someone, you apologise. Managing relationships is natural, but it relies on the information you glean from every interpersonal interaction. In this context, 'manage' does not imply control.

## Managing relationships with your customers

In the same way, companies should use the information they glean from each interaction to manage their relationship with their customers, not manage their customers. Each time you engage with a customer (or plan an engagement), ask yourself: how will what I am planning to do improve my relationship of trust with this customer? Think of a good waiter. They are not those that pop around and interrupt your meal occasionally to ask if everything is fine. They are the ones who can clearly see that everything is fine and are waiting on the sidelines to help as soon as something isn't. They build trust.

In general, CRM systems that 'pop' in uninvited achieve the exact opposite of what a CRM should do – they break down trust between a business and the customer, and in the travel industry, CRM is even more relevant because online booking engines and services can out-perform any human in terms of speed of service and providing information.

The biggest advantage for travel companies is the personal relationship they can build with their customer base. That trust should be built between the company and customer, not one individual, otherwise, your client would simply leave when that staff member moves on.

## **How to refocus travel CRM so that it builds trust**

Firstly, don't throw out your CRM system. It is a good platform to gather and store all your customer information in one central place. To add real value, however, your CRM needs to be tightly integrated with the delivery systems within your travel company, i.e. what you promise, you must deliver.

Secondly, take back the CRM system from the marketing division – it's not a tool for them to drive sales. From pre-sales, through to the sales process and then the delivery process, you need to focus on nurturing the relationship with the customer so they learn to trust you. And customers who trust will return, refer and more importantly forgive when you make that inevitable mistake.

Refocusing your CRM also means enforcing a culture within your organisation of recording every interaction with your customer in your CRM and using this information not only when reaching out to customers, but also when responding to customer queries and comments.

Each engagement is an opportunity to build trust and nurture your relationship with your customer. If anything, instead of canning your travel CRM altogether, you should simply can the acronym CRM and replace it with CRN – Customer Relationship Nurturing. After all, isn't that why CRM was invented in the first place?

## **ABOUT CRAIG BYREN**

An experienced and talented problemsolver in the business and technical arena, Craig Byren is the MD of ViaData, which develops custom business systems to meet accurately defined business requirements and specialises in travel CRM. Byren's strengths are in systems design and data modelling, then turning abstract requirements into practical implementations. He has extensive experience in gathering business requirements, both hands-on by reviewing existing systems and databases, as well as through facilitated workshops.

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