

TITLE OF THE CASE STUDY:

How travel agencies handled the pandemic situation?

Name of the organisation:

RIVAS TOUR Ltd.

Country and sector of the organisation:

BULGARIA, travel agency

Type of organisation:

- Private organization

Size of the organisation:

- small

Brief description of the organisation:

RIVAS TOUR is a small travel agency based in Sofia, Bulgaria. It has been established in 2004. The company organizes excursions, study visits and intercultural exchange programs. RIVAS TOUR has more than 15 years of experience in travel organization and hospitality. The company organizes : business trips, cultural tourism, rural tourism, mountain holidays, hunting weekends and others.

Short description of the case study (500 characters)

The World Travel & Tourism Council's (WTTC) annual research shows that the Travel & Tourism sector accounts for over 10% of global GDP but for one in ten jobs on the planet, and one in four new jobs created globally in the last five years. COVID-19 has dramatically changed our life and the Travel & Tourism sector is uniquely exposed..

On 13th of March, the Bulgarian government announces an emergency situation due to COVID-19. Many restrictions were accepted not only in Bulgaria, but all over the world. While people were advised to stay at home, the touristic sector was more than afraid in this situation. This case study will examine how a small travel agency has managed its staff and its activities during hard times of pandemic.

Travel agencies were one of the most impacted by the restrictions as travelling for pleasure was not permitted. It was more than necessary to save employees' motivation and to find new ways and techniques to implement in order to survive the crisis.

Key words:

Travel agency, crisis, new techniques, health, restrictions, international, local

BEST PRACTICE PROFILE

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

At the beginning, challenges were many as the travel agency had to : make cancellations, refunding and re-booking, in many cases for little or no compensations. Some employees were afraid that they could lose their job, but in fact Travel & Tourism sector has survived many crisis and people will always travel so the manager of RIVAS TOUR knew it was a matter of time to go back to normal. And the comeback will be even stronger, as after the lockdown everybody is impatient to travel and get out of his home/city/ country.

The main strategy of RIVAS TOUR was to keep connected to their customers and to promote new ways of tourism. Of course, the necessary measures as : working from home, avoid face to face meetings, provide sufficient hygiene products as masks, gloves and disinfectants were taken immediately.

The company focused on giving the essential information to their clients as :

- what safety measures are most important to travelers and give them enough confidence to book
- the measures travel suppliers are taking to make travel safe
- what are the first travel opportunities that are emerging as borders are now re-opening and countries are starting to welcome again foreigners

Many clients were more open to the idea of booking a flight if they know that there is a hand sanitizer at baggage points, social distancing policies on the plane, temperature checks both at the airport entrance, and before boarding and fully refundable tickets in case of a positive PCR test. The same is with hotel bookings. Contactless check-in and check-outs were one of the measures with proven success in hospitality and accommodation sector.

Overall, travelers want as many safety measures in place as possible, with most of the proposed cleaning and hygiene measures seen as important factors in restoring confidence.

RIVAS TOUR took into consideration these motives and tried to be as helpful as possible to their clients.

RATIONALE

The main motives behind these measures were to restore traveller confidence and provide reassurance. By communicating about health and safety measures, people were less stressed about their travel. RIVAS TOUR provided a complete service by organizing post COVID-19 travels. They started promoting more actively local tourist attractions and found new opportunities for national and regional tourism.

GOALS

- ✓ Stay connected with clients
- ✓ Digitalize services and ways of reservations
- ✓ Provide a package with PCR tests if required, face masks and other important information/documents needed for the trip
- ✓ Health insurance
- ✓ Regularly inform their customers about changes and opportunities for travelling
- ✓ Engage customers to stay top of mind
- ✓ Re-evaluate and popularize local landscapes and Bulgarian nature
- ✓ Offer flexible conditions of travelling

IMPACT

The COVID-19 crisis has not only negative impact. In tourism, for example a new niche for Bulgaria is now increasing its development : rural tourism. As people were closed at home for so long, without the permission to go on a vacation or simply to have a walk in the park, they are currently more than ever attracted to nature and new ways of tourism. Schools and kindergartens were closed and children felt immediately the lack of social contact with other kids. It is a very complicated moment for both children and parents. Families are now searching for alternatives of going on a vacation. Some of the people are afraid of getting the virus, so they prefer rural tourism as farm houses are more safe than big hotels in touristic cities.

Another positive effect of the pandemic was the sense of responsibility that the staff cultivated. It doesn't mean that they didn't have it prior to the pandemic but the travel agents are now more careful about their clients' health condition.

A certain fact is that consumers are anxious about travelling again and they are now looking for professional travel advisors. This is a positive effect for RIVAS TOUR as they can provide information on what is safe, what is open, which hotels have implemented enhanced hygiene measures, so clients can be less stressed and worried about what could happen during or after their trip.

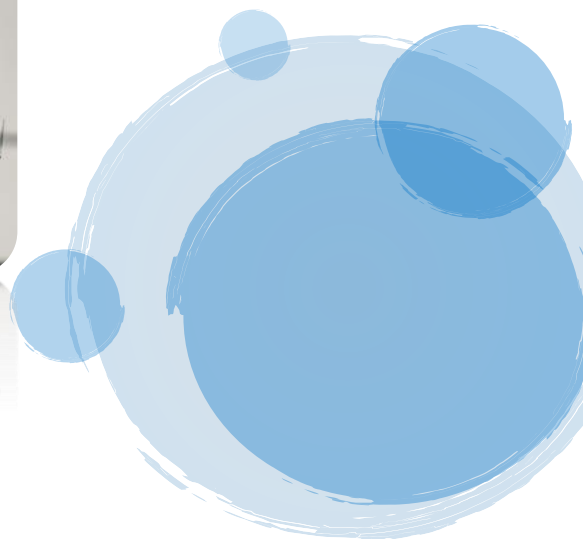
The General Manager of RIVAS TOUR says that : “We can feel that there is a need for information and trusted guidance. Clients prefer to have their trip planned by a travel agent as this will minimize the risks for unplanned circumstances. We are now not only travel agents, but also transforming into consultants.”

Another positive attitude is emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic : the environmental aspect of local tourism. There are a couple of elements driving this view. First, as people have had more time to assess their values, we are seeing a change in how they invest their time and money. Many used their time in lockdown as an opportunity to rediscover old (and socially distant) hobbies such as hiking, cycling, etc. and many want to continue this as part of their vacation/travel plans. So RIVAS TOUR is now offering packages with different sport activities.

LESSONS LEARNED

Since the beginning of the crisis, travel agencies have played a key role in acting as trusted advisors in a rapidly changing situation. They developed consultant skills by providing updated policy information and facilitating journey changes and cancellations. And now that people are willing to travel again, the priority for agencies is to assure travellers that it is safe to travel. They are doing this by providing information on the supplier safety and hygiene measures that travellers confirm are key to influencing bookings. RIVAS TOUR learned that it is very important to invest in personal development for staff, including training. They believe this will make it will be easier for their businesses to get back up and running, and improve the operational efficiency. They are also looking for ways to automate processes throughout their workflow, to support transactions requiring fewer or no human interaction : contactless processes.

MATERIAL





REFERENCES

Interview with the General Manager of RIVAS TOUR

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