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SALES&MARKETING MANAGEMENT

SPECIAL REPORT:

The Great Reset

Rethinking onboarding, sales forecasting, marketing and everything else

How COVID-19 could reshape sales

BY LIZ PULICE

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused sales organizations to adapt overnight to a new world of social distancing and digital-only collaboration. The comfortable confines of the corporate office are off limits; customer calls are virtual-only; and plans for sales kickoffs, trade shows and other in-person events have shifted to a virtual model (or been cancelled altogether).

And yet, as is so often the case, with disruption comes opportunity. The pandemic is forcing companies to question conventional wisdom and engage in experimentation to adapt to the "stay-at-home" world. This type of experiment would never happen during normal times because of the risk of derailing the sales organization. But when the world already has been disrupted, experimenting becomes the most effective way to navigate to a better place. Franklin D. Roosevelt said it well when making his famous speech about the Great Depression: "...the country demands bold, persistent experimentation."

The questions being asked

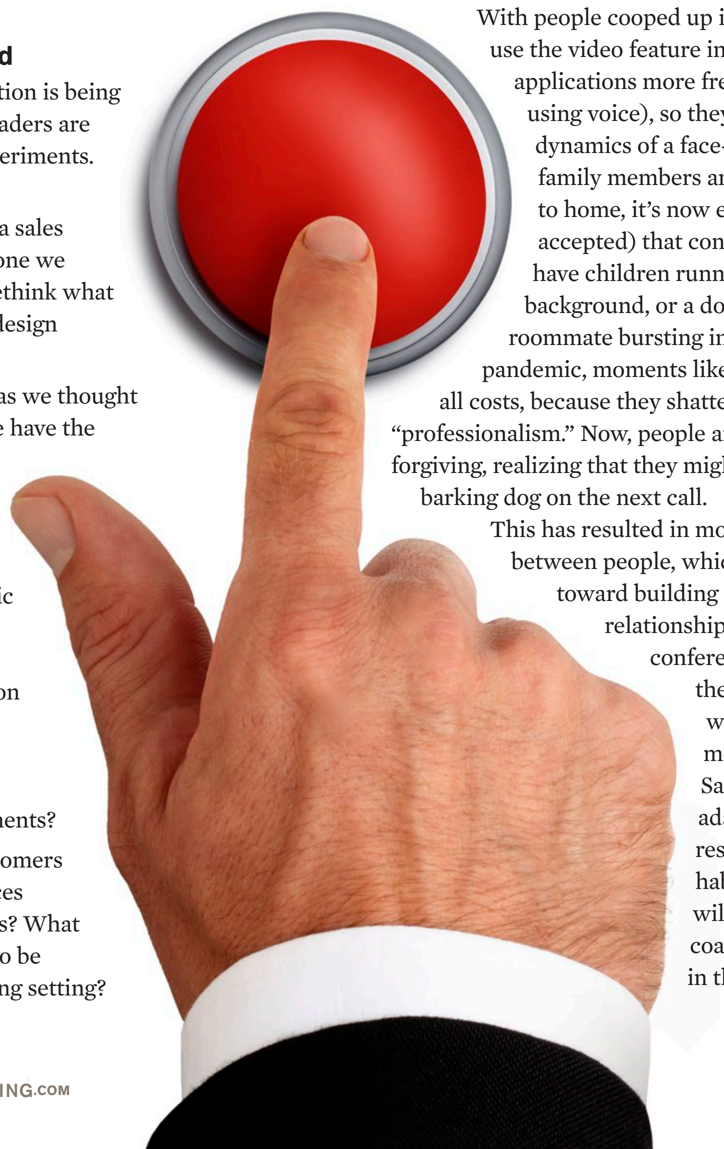
The post-COVID sales organization is being formed by the questions sales leaders are asking today as part of their experiments. These include:

- Do we really need to pay for a sales office? If so, do we need the one we already have, or should we rethink what "office work" looks like and design accordingly?
- Were we as remote-friendly as we thought before the pandemic? Did we have the systems and processes in place to truly enable a remote sales force?
- Should we consider transitioning to digital-centric onboarding processes? Is it possible to generate results similar to traditional in-person onboarding? Are there opportunities to improve on in-person onboarding by incorporating digital components?
- How are our people and customers responding to web conferences instead of in-person meetings? What skills do my sales reps need to be effective in a web conferencing setting?
- Do we still need expensive internal sales meetings (e.g. quarterly business reviews), or can we move some of the proceedings into a digital learning environment and invest the rest of the budget into other methods of morale-building and social interaction?

Most sales leaders are learning the answers to these questions in real time. (Nothing shows how ready a company is for a remote workforce like work-from-home mandates.) Some of the answers have been surprising. Here are a few areas where today's changes are already shaping the future:

Evolving relationships over video

One of the biggest surprises so far has been the impact of web conferencing on professional relationships. One would think that eliminating face-to-face meetings would make it more difficult to build strong relationships with co-workers and customers. It turns out, however, that it's not more difficult—it's just different.



With people cooped up in their homes, they tend to use the video feature in web conferencing applications more frequently (rather than just using voice), so they can imitate the social dynamics of a face-to-face meeting. And with family members and roommates also confined to home, it's now expected (and often accepted) that conference participants might have children running around in the background, or a dog barking off camera, or a roommate bursting into the room. Before the pandemic, moments like these were to be avoided at all costs, because they shatter the veneer of "professionalism." Now, people are more empathetic and forgiving, realizing that they might be the one with the barking dog on the next call.

This has resulted in more authentic interactions between people, which is actually a positive step toward building more enduring and enjoyable relationships. The increase in video conferencing will likely persist after the pandemic has passed, even when having a face-to-face meeting is once again possible. Sales organizations should adapt to this transition (and the resulting changes in work habits and processes), which will make effective training and coaching essential to succeeding in the post-COVID world.

Learning and coaching for the new world

Web and video conferencing are excellent examples of how learning and coaching will enable sales organizations to adapt to the post-COVID world. For example, video conferencing requires a different approach than typical conference calls. Dressing appropriately and avoiding multitasking are essential, and reps always need to have a backup plan should the conferencing application crash or deliver substandard performance. Reps also should be aware of tips for improving video conferencing performance – such as closing browser tabs, email and other bandwidth-consuming applications. For sales leaders and enablement pros, this means creating learning modules that address etiquette, technical how-to's and best practices for using the technology, and evaluating rep competencies on an ongoing basis.

Beyond the expanded use of video conferencing, there are other workplace changes that could become permanent after the COVID-19 pandemic that sales leaders will need to accommodate. The most prominent of these is how they will deliver learning and coaching in a world where traditional face-to-face meetings have given way to more frequent virtual interactions. It is critical in this world to have access to a tool for quickly creating, sharing and updating online learning content that can be used for both formal learning and peer-to-peer knowledge exchanges.

These are just a few areas to keep an eye on as sales organizations experiment with new approaches to solving an old problem: getting reps ready to achieve maximum productivity. Some of those experiments will yield results that change the status quo in sales learning, coaching and management. SMM

Liz Pulice is vice president of sales enablement at Brainshark, a leader in data-driven sales enablement and readiness solutions.

Are you digital-ready?

When implemented well, the changes in B2B sales required by a more digital sales environment will become opportunities to drive improvements in these key areas:

Remote rep management – If worker productivity remains steady or improves during work-at-home mandates, companies will see an opportunity to reduce costs on office space and improve employee morale by considering permanent, broad work-from-home policies. For sales leaders, this raises the challenge of managing reps in their homes in a way where reps attain peak productivity and their careers advance. Online learning, coaching and assessments will become the backbone of rep management in this new world. By keeping reps engaged and constantly learning (and having automated mechanisms to assess whether they're engaged), it's possible to achieve even greater productivity and career satisfaction with a remote workforce.

Digital onboarding – The COVID-19 crisis is causing the traditional "drink-from-the-firehose" style of in-person onboarding to give way to more individualized and personalized programs that provide new reps with incremental and ongoing training and coaching, in a largely digital format. This "agile onboarding" approach uses online content, eLearning, video and web conferencing to sequentially prepare new reps for various career milestones (first prospecting call, first discovery call, first presentation, etc.). Managers can also use assessments and scorecards to ensure new reps are achieving and maintaining mastery as they progress to full sales readiness and productivity. By bringing digital technologies to bear, sales enablement organizations can actually improve onboarding effectiveness.

Rep performance management – Today's online scorecarding technology enables sales managers to identify how individual reps compare to the rest of the pack, and to correct rep skills deficiencies before they impact quarterly revenue. Scorecards are also a valuable tool for the pre-boarding and onboarding process, providing valuable insight into each rep's journey from initial pre-boarding activity to full productivity.

Sales kickoffs – It is impossible to replicate the social aspects of sales kickoff meetings in a digital-only world. However, it is possible to implement the learning, coaching and certification processes that are typically part of the kickoffs.

When removing the artificial construct of a beginning and end of a physical meeting, the focus changes from "What should we teach them over three days?" to "What do they need to know to do their jobs?" This frees organizations from "death-by-PowerPoint" sessions, so they can instead adopt more engaging and incremental learning activities that enable reps to gain a deeper understanding of sales strategy, as well as the new knowledge and skills they will need to execute on that strategy.

Physical sales kickoff meetings will not disappear after the crisis passes, but they will likely evolve from point-in-time gatherings to longer-term initiatives where online learning and coaching begins before the meeting and continues afterwards. This will help organizations save money and open opportunities to reallocate budgets away from non-value-add physical meeting expenses to online continuous sales readiness initiatives that deliver greater direct benefits to sales force performance.

– Liz Pulice

The right kind of help is not what you think

How the best sellers help their customers thrive during and beyond COVID-19

BY MARIA BOULDEN,
EXECUTIVE PARTNER IN GARTNER'S
SALES PRACTICE

After a series of delays to critical upgrades, the world has blue-screened and is now in the process of painfully rebooting. We don't know how long the process will take, nor which point we are at within it.

Beyond the headlines, sales professionals all over the world are leading with humanity, humility and compassion as they work to lift customers out of turmoil and onto a recovery path, however long it may be. This is occurring with intense internal financial pressures to stop the bleeding.

A Gartner poll in April of chief sales officers (CSOs) across all regions and industry verticals shows that, on average, full-year revenue projections have dropped by an average of 15%. This same survey indicates that, on average, selling expense budgets are getting cut by 18% and, worse, as part of this, 35% of CSOs either have or will execute a reduction of force. The pressure is mounting on sales reps to deliver in the face of impossible conditions ranging from no demand to no supply and less resources to support them.

Ironically, the best sales professionals today are leading the way by avoiding one of the most common, most compassionate questions we hear in the COVID-19 crisis: "How can I help?" Not because they are opportunistic, myopic, selfish and/or conniving, but because of the relative uncertainty in customer ecosystems today. The only certainty in customer's minds right now is expense management.

If the ultimate open-ended question is the wrong one to ask, what's the right discussion choreography? How do we actually help customers not just survive this crisis but thrive as we emerge from it?

Lead with insight

The best sales professionals don't lead with a 40-page chart deck describing their company's history, product portfolio, features or benefits — especially now. The best sales professionals lead with commercial insight focused on making their customer better. They understand their customer's business deeply. They understand their ecosystem, their strategy, how they make money, how they beat their competitors, how they grow profitably and, of most importance, their mission and motivation to do it. Ultimately, they don't lead with their own company at all. The best sales professionals lead to it.

Make sense of the world around us

Most buyers are overwhelmed despite the best of intentions by thought leaders everywhere, who have hit every production metric associated with pumping out new content. A 2019 Gartner study that revealed this also showed that sellers were 80% more likely to drive decision confidence and low-regret deals by helping their customers make sense of this bombardment.

Develop scenario plans to ensure recovery readiness

One progressive CSO explained how his team is using a hypothesis-led customer engagement framework to have a more productive discussion with customers. The process establishes common beliefs on how the customer's business would likely be impacted by the current challenges. It also explores likely economic ramifications, and actions that can be taken to address the impacts. This is particularly helpful given that the black swan event that is the COVID-19 pandemic has rendered nearly all predictive models useless. Thus, this hypothesis-led discussion enables a seller to lead with insight, make sense of the information bombarding their customer and support a different type of scenario planning rooted in partnership now, through and beyond the crisis.

The world has hit the reset button and the new definition of world class is the seller who helps. Specifically, the seller who leverages these techniques to help by driving customer confidence and success — in a way uniquely linked to the company that sales professional represents. smm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6 steps to adapt effectively

To thrive in the next normal, B2B companies will need to continue adapting to the new economic reality. A survey of B2B sales operations by McKinsey & Company shows the pandemic has accelerated previous trends—omnichannel selling, inside sales, tech-enabled selling and e-commerce. Nearly eight in 10 (79%) B2B companies say they are very likely or somewhat likely to sustain these shifts for 12+ months post-COVID.

McKinsey & Company offers these steps for B2B sellers to pivot effectively.

1 **FOCUS** on delivering the three things buyers value most—speed, transparency and expertise—from all of your sales channels.

2 **OPTIMIZE** your e-commerce channel to give buyers ease and convenience, and make sure all your sales channels are integrated and incented to collaborate with each other.

3 **FIX** top buyer frustrations with B2B company websites: long ordering process, difficulty finding products, and technical glitches when ordering.

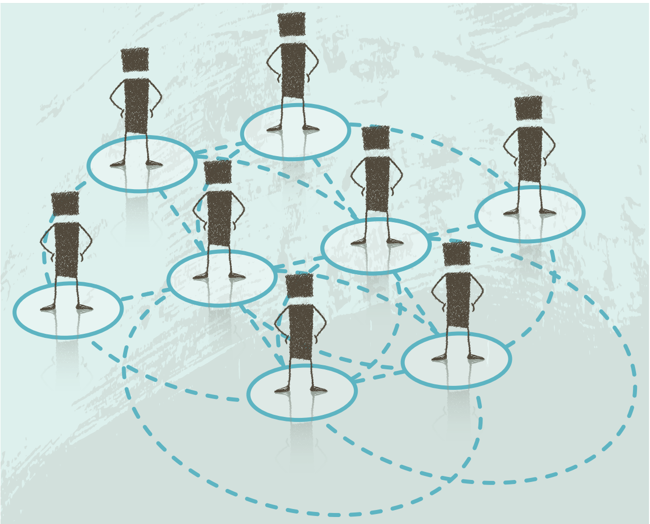
4 **OFFER** the human touch whenever customers need it with your sales team — whether through inside sales or field sales.

5 **CREATE** a pod of digital-enablement experts to help reps migrate face-to-face sellers to digital channels and help sellers use new tools.

6 **RE-MAP** your customer decision journey to capture changes in the new normal, and use these insights to inform GTM model adjustments.

Read the full report, "How B2B decision makers are responding to the coronavirus crisis."

How to sell to leads during and after COVID-19



BY RYAN SHAPIRO

Let's face it: The novel coronavirus upended life in a lot of different ways. Economies nosedived, entire cities shut down overnight and most employees have been forced to work remotely until further notice. But humans adapt quickly. People are already journeying down the road to recovery.

Even still, everything has changed. That's why you can't return to business as usual if you're in B2B sales. Prospects need you to acknowledge their new realities; don't glaze over the facts. By understanding how your buyers have been affected, you'll be better positioned to sell in mid- and post-pandemic eras.

Reset your sales approach

Your prospects' buying patterns and priorities have changed, so previously compelling offers may seem irrelevant and insensitive. All of your potential buyers will be impacted differently, which changes the way your offering can fit into their companies' frameworks. Now is the time to pivot and express empathy for their situations. Concentrate on building relationships, humanizing your approach and helping consumers through hardships.

This may require more probing than what's typical for your sales process, but it's vital to establish rapport. Use sales calls to learn about what their foreseeable futures look like. By taking the time to find out how things changed, you'll better understand how your product or service aligns with prospects' needs.

Just don't become too pushy. It's difficult for people to make decisions in times of uncertainty. Even when things are definitively bad, the plan of action is clearer. Right now, no one knows how long these circumstances will last. Try to draw certainty into the environment your customer is in by talking through what's happening and offering applicable solutions.

Remember that people aren't thinking two or three years down the road anymore. They're fixated on surviving the next 90 days. As a sales leader, you must remain sensitive to that fact. Every change in your prospects' behaviors should inform and guide your selling considerations, from their remote communication preferences to the amount they can spend.

Selling to leads

Here are three strategies for remaining relevant and attracting prospects:

1. **Magnify your communication efforts.** Whatever you're doing, double the frequency and intensity. Increase prospecting, improve outreach and communicate like never before. Now is the time to do things you wouldn't normally try.

   Start by looking at your output. What information are you sending prospects? How often are you reaching out? You want to position yourself as a resource. If you're worried about overcommunicating, consider making your social media and website one-stop shops for news, updates and tips.

2. **Become a connector.** By forming a deeper connection with prospective clients, you'll be able to see how your products or services can benefit them. Find areas to provide extra value by tapping into your personal network. You know people, companies and solutions that your prospects don't. Even before a company decides to sign with you, offer to make an introduction.

3. **Control your sales process.** Examine your sales procedures from beginning to end and look for ways to take the initiative. Prospects have enough on their plates right now without needing to schedule follow-ups. Make it easier for them to participate and engage with your company by taking the lead. Inform prospects of next steps, offer dates to follow up, and clarify their buying processes.

By staying on top of things, you'll put your prospects at ease and give them one less task to worry about. Just make sure you follow through on whatever you promise. Consistency is the key to earning loyalty.

The coronavirus pandemic has changed business, but it hasn't changed people's basic needs. Display your empathy, transparency, and confidence, and you'll see a positive response from prospects. smm

Ryan Shapiro is the national director of sales at Sapper Consulting, a provider of B2B lead generation and customer acquisition services.

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Firing up the revenue engine post-crisis

BY STEVEN KELLAM

While government and business leaders around the globe debate when and how the economy will turn back on, waiting for the proverbial green light will be too late and your organization will immediately be at a competitive disadvantage. Being well-prepared and truly understanding how to get your people, your operations and your sales back and running at full bore will be essential for survival.

As organizations emerge from the pandemic crisis and fire up their sales engines, it's clear that the channel must adapt—shifting and aligning priorities (support), implementing new, more impactful channel strategies (enable) and leveraging the right solutions (engage).

Reinforce channel support

Begin with straightforward conversations about new priorities and expectations, as well as shifts in budgets and the resulting goals. Success can only be achieved if brands, partners and vendors are aligned in a post-coronavirus world.

Invest in partner success programs—providing them with resources, knowledge and tools to achieve those established objectives. Also, redefine your value proposition and adapt your sales strategy to the current B2B landscape. Invite your partners to virtual strategy sessions where you jointly share your perspective and identify options for how to optimize performance in this new environment.

Enablement must look, feel and perform differently

Surveys indicate that nearly six in 10 vendors are either maintaining their existing budgets or increasing marketing spending despite the COVID-19 disruptions. The budgets may be there, but traditional tactics previously used in a pre-pandemic world are either no longer available or will no longer work. It's time to put those budgets to work in new ways to move your enablement efforts forward. Before you do anything, ask your partners what they really need from you in terms of offers and support. Then consider the following:

- **Invest in automation –** Now is the time to accelerate digital transformation efforts with the time and existing budgets that are available from non-existent events. Channel leaders have the unprecedented opportunity to invest in and improve channel automation systems, including sales incentive platforms, partner portals, digital training programs and through-channel marketing.
- **Amp up digital marketing efforts –** From social media engagement and content syndication, to support for virtual events, the right mix of multi-touch digital marketing programs enable partners to attract buyers and build digital relationships with them.
- **Deliver regular cadence –** Regularly delivering information and valuable content to channel partners is paramount. The days of blasting out evergreen messages only when brands want something are over. Effective communication now requires tactics that focus on attracting and maintaining mindshare and engagement.

Leverage the right engagement tools to drive sales

When it comes to channel engagement, the right mix of sales incentive tools is still the most effective and impactful.

- **Spiffs and volume incentive rebates –** Post-pandemic spiffs and VIR are an effective way to incent the right behavior that drives not just immediate sales, but sustainable sales growth. We have to think past the initial uptick and measure true effectiveness.
- **Consumer rebates –** Use rebates to drive sales, capture market share and keep the pulse of the customer. Monitoring purchase behavior is critical during this time period, but not just that they purchased, but why and how.
- **Sales allowances –** Keep close track of the price points where consumers are engaging, as it will likely be different from a pre-COVID world.
- **Automated incentive platform –** Leveraging a sales incentive platform can help channel leaders manage multiple programs at once, have visibility into what's working and what's not and provide actionable insights that will improve business decisions.

Smart leaders that understand the boundless opportunities that await, if proper planning is done now, will reap the benefits tenfold when it's all said and done. smm

Steven Kellam is senior vice president of alliances and marketing at 360insights, which provides a software as a service (SaaS) platform for measuring and managing incentive programs.

Group travel is down, but not out

According to an April survey by the Incentive Research Foundation, the top concern about participating in work or reward-related travel was the threat of an epidemic/pandemic at 33%, followed closely by severe weather at 29%. This begs the question, what's up with the weather scaredy-cats?

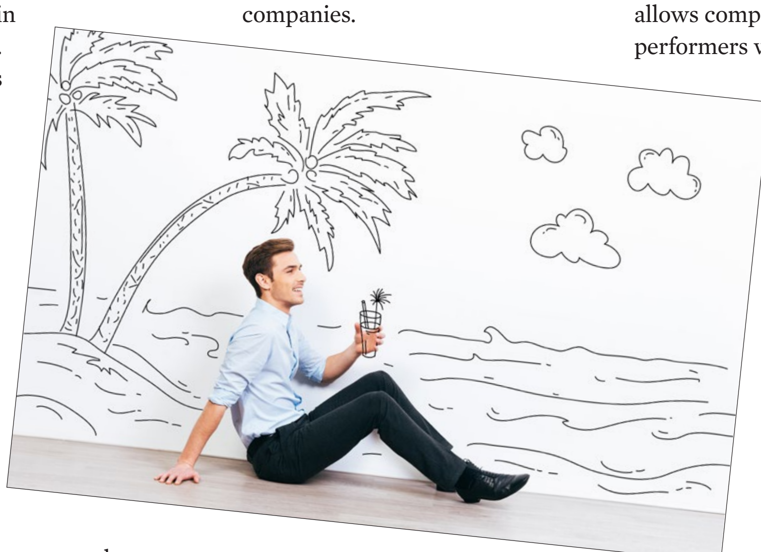
The classic President's Club event, in which top-performing salespeople gather with corporate executives in luxurious destinations (oh yeah, and bring a significant other!), is in an indefinite holding pattern. These trips are as old as sales itself, and they are a key component of companies' effort to drive performance and instill loyalty.

"Organizers of meetings and conferences can at least work around social distancing—respect [social distancing] rules, reduce capacities, eliminate buffets, etc.—but organizers of incentives are left with the sinking feeling that social distancing could suck all the energy and joy out of the incentive reward. Would it really be a motivational experience if I couldn't stand at the bar and celebrate freely with my fellow qualifiers?" asks Padraic Gilligan, co-founder of SoolNua, an Ireland-based consultant for corporate events and incentive travel suppliers.

Incentives interrupted

Many companies had launched their incentive travel campaign for 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Sales are still happening, but a group celebration isn't likely.

"2020 is done, and a there's a lot of hesitancy about the first half of 2021," says Philip Eidsvold, vice president of strategic alliances for One10, a provider of sales incentive programs and other performance improvement programs. Eidsvold says the company's incentive travel clients have either pushed planned group travel events to the second half of 2021 or pivoted to an online platform where salespeople earn points that can be redeemed for rewards of their choosing. Some companies have opted for cash bonuses, which Eidsvold (like many proponents of non-cash incentives) argues provides the littlest bang for the buck for sponsoring companies.



Inventive alternatives

Like many other business processes, celebrating success is transitioning to the virtual world, says Eidsvold. One10 is in the latter stages of negotiations with some clients to duplicate the group travel celebration virtually through an online day of celebration. The virtual event would include shipping multiple boxes with recognition items to participants' homes with directions not to open them until instructed to do so. The plan is to feature a motivational speaker and a musical performance by notable musicians streamed live. It may not match the experience that a couple hundred top performers can have when they gather together in Hawaii, but these are times for compromise.

Many incentive travel veterans say the pandemic presents an ideal opportunity to use individual incentive travel rewards, which allow recipients to pick a destination and travel at a time of their choosing. Marc Matthews, president and CEO of Pulse Experiential Travel, has been organizing group incentive travel events since 1979.

When the recession of 2008 hit, Matthews pivoted to providing "bucket list" experiences for individual reward recipients. His Just Rewards gift card allows companies to provide top-performers with 15 to 30 travel options in multiple price ranges. His packages can indulge foodies, wine enthusiasts or provide entry to a high-profile event such as the Kentucky Derby or Emmy Awards. Recipients have three years from the time of earning their award to travel, so there is time for travel to become enticing again.

"My individual travel programs were never meant to replace group travel," Matthews says. "Even though I compete with it, I can't diminish the importance of it. In group travel, you get the team-building aspect that is so important, and the relationship building. My product has always been meant to augment those programs."

Gilligan also is confident that although group incentive travel is on hold, it will return. "Covid-19 has no chance of killing incentive travel. It's integral to the core business model of so many organizations. When you give me an incentive travel reward, you give me an extraordinary travel experience (often) to share with a loved one...You also connect me with the company. You make me an ambassador for the company. You strengthen company culture." SMM