

Navigating a New Corporate Travel Landscape in Preparation for a Much-Awaited Return

By [Kimberly Wilson](#), Senior Vice President, Global Sales - Corporate , Preferred Hotel Group | September 19, 2021



Well, it didn't happen this quarter - again. Any hopes the industry had for a late summer surge in corporate travel bookings have been long dashed, as domestic markets across the industry recorded only marginal increases in August, and forecasts are painting a similar picture for the coming months (if not through the end of 2021).

Many variables play into the delay, starting with the slower than expected recovery. Among these are the rise of the Delta variant, declining vaccine take-up, the ever-changing status of domestic and international travel restrictions have also played a part, and the reality that nearly every company across every sector in every market is still trying to get a grasp on how to establish employee travel policies that protect everyone involved.

Smaller, follow-on factors are those related to work-life integration such as home schooling or caring for vulnerable family members. Further, beyond trying to figure out how their employees can once again hit the road to do business, many corporate offices across the country remain closed or partially open with tentative plans to begin bringing back teams in early 2022 (and let's hope that does not get pushed back even further).

Recognizing that corporate travel was always going to return at a slower pace than leisure travel – and the reality that domestic hotel inquiries will significantly outpace international ones for the foreseeable future – the setbacks of the past 18 months have provided opportunities to embrace new ways of doing business. As they say, change creates opportunity. Individuals are more empowered, processes have been simplified, and new revenue prospects explored.

Our sales teams across all segments – group, leisure, and corporate – are now back on the road (thankfully), and more attuned than ever to the evolving needs of our respective travelers. As we gradually return to face-to-face meetings, in-person events, and even large-scale conferences, we should continue to seek out efficiencies and alternative approaches in preparation for the months ahead that extend beyond video conferencing and truly support road warriors as they navigate the new landscape.



L'Oscar London in the U.K. is a popular destination for corporate travelers seeking unprecedented levels of service, unique dining experiences, and intriguing interior decor.

Event Safety is King

Outside of the effective rollout of vaccines globally, we all need to keep doing our part and, in many cases, ramp up efforts to promote confidence within the corporate travel sector. Robust safety guidelines and elevated operational standards will remain the hallmark of in-person events and gatherings for them to be successful, safe, and outbreak-free. Clients have much higher expectations and anticipate strict management of attendance, obligatory pre-testing, hybrid options for larger gatherings, and creative F&B solutions.

In recent months, buyers have expressed some frustration with a lack of clear, consistent standards and practices among some service providers and are including safety and security measures in their corporate RFPs. While it is understood that international arrivals to the United States must be fully vaccinated, domestic travelers will also need to show proof of vaccination in lieu of a negative test for industry events and many private group meetings. Airlines and hospitality brands are among the first to take this step, alongside popular destinations like New York City and Hawaii, with others set to follow. With all of the ongoing changes, attendees will be reassured by clear communications on health and safety policies and any test or vaccination requirements.



One Farrer Hotel in Singapore showcases its creative F&B solutions that wow corporate travelers and group guests alike.

Meet Smarter

Before 2020, volume was key. Corporate travelers were assigned far and wide to network with as many contacts as possible, and often on individual trips. Today, it is important for hotel sales teams and businesses with travel programs to hone in on productivity, assessing the viability of a lead before arranging an in-person meeting. A general rule to go by is video meetings for new or warm leads and face-to-face meetings for hot leads or as a final step to closing an agreement.

This is a time when sales leaders should be connecting directly with decision makers; businesses can rely on their expertise and strategic support to confirm contracts in two rounds or less instead of several more over a longer time period. Similarly, companies working with streamlined teams should look for opportunities to better share workload by collaborating on business trip decisions. Every trip or conference sign-up has to be heavily scrutinized at the planning stage. As an example, a round trip with two to three leaders can be more effective and safety-conscious than multiple individual trips that are often handled by various team members.



The recently opened Riggs Washington DC features the appropriately named Riggs Suite, which is perfect for intimate client gatherings, featuring a full dining room, bar, fireplace, and enough space to accommodate up to 25 guests for entertaining.

Keep Your Friends Close

It seems obvious to say that we should be focusing on our biggest customers for the immediate future. Expanding outreach to new leads can be revisited in the new year, but are the majority of available resources being used? If you still count your biggest accounts as long-term partners, chances are you are already working on this, but it can be difficult to arrange meetings to explore new opportunities when buyers are still hesitant to make bookings or restart travel programs.

Instead, arrange lunches, dinners, and socially distanced activities to personally thank clients for their continued partnership throughout the pandemic, and use the face-to-face time to re-establish trust and deepen relationships. At this stage of the recovery, teams should have arranged for top clients to meet the company CEO or president, and they should have easy access to the most senior salesperson. If these meetings are on the 'to-do' list, be sure to kick start 2022 relationships with thoughtful gestures around the holidays.



Sophy Hyde Park is an ideal destination for entertaining clients in the Chicago area thanks to its beautiful and socially distanced dining spaces.

Stay Empathetic and Supportive

Empathy, along with a renewed appreciation for how travel can inspire the most consequential connections, professionally and personally, have played a big part of supporting our industry through this crisis. While the majority of companies and organizations with an international presence have implemented policies that support employees through any turbulence or challenges brought on by the pandemic, some small- and medium-sized businesses trying to maintain productivity are pressing sales teams to schedule appointments at home and abroad. Not all team members are ready to travel, so it is important to consider the many reasons why and remain patient.

Business travelers need to feel confident that a meaningful resumption of their work does not mean a significant increase to safety concerns for them, their families, and communities when they return home. Companies of all sizes should continue to make provisions that enable their employees to continue to work effectively from home and ensure that salespeople who are happily back on the road are fully supported and do so only when it can drive positive outcomes.

Make Shrewd Budgeting Decisions

Despite 2020's shortfalls in revenue and fixed-cost losses, many businesses were able to make cost savings, stay comfortably afloat, and even thrive in some areas. This is also true of recent months, with budgets set aside to host and attend events and conferences largely intact due to cancellations and virtual alternatives. Where has this money been diverted to? Many hotel and hospitality companies have wisely invested in retention and development of their talent, as well as technological solutions that inspire guest confidence, such as contactless check-in and check-out processes via mobile, onsite rapid testing, and hybrid meeting capabilities.

Others have launched regional travel promotions targeting business travelers with extended stay and work-from-hotel options. Not all businesses are in a position to invest in new talent or amenities, but many of the most practical and effective ideas are not driven by big budgets. Revenue from bookings is returning and this will continue on a bigger scale as more restrictions are lifted.

LET TRAVEL TAKE YOU FORWARD.

WHERE NEXT?



In Summer 2021, Preferred launched WHERE NEXT? Buyouts, ideal for clients seeking exclusive-use lodging across various countries, group sizes, and budgets.

Provide Flexibility Throughout the Customer Experience

From here on out, selling and servicing corporate travelers will require continued flexibility and a willingness to provide reassurances and adjustments to individual client. Force majeure clauses, attrition, cutoff dates, and cancellation terms are driving negotiations for events, and sales teams are starting to incorporate nuanced safeguards into client agreements in a way that they never would have before. Along with flexibility around cancellations, flexibility in both pricing and the offering are also increasingly important.

Since the beginning of the year, we have worked with member hotels globally to create more adaptable pricing structures, including fixed and static rates, that appeal to corporate travel-buyers and meet their cost savings objectives. Earlier this summer, we also launched a hotel buyout offer as part of our WHERE NEXT? global merchandising campaign to meet a growing demand for exclusive-use lodging options for different group sizes and budgets. These initiatives have been beneficial for many of our city properties, which have experienced compounded revenue losses due to repeated temporary closures and waves of case surges among local populations.

Adapting and contributing to new and evolving business travel practices and operational standards as a result of the pandemic can be overwhelming. However, with the full recovery still to come, sales leaders and their teams should embrace the cautious return to the road and the opportunities available along the way to develop valuable relationships, host or attend in-person gatherings – socially distanced, of course – and secure key business.

Human nature leans towards in-person connections, so we should get prepared and be confident that the delay is not for much longer. Stay optimistic, this too shall pass.



Ms. Wilson

Kimberly Wilson serves as Senior Vice President of Global Sales - Corporate for Preferred Hotel Group, overseeing the strategic global corporate sales efforts for the Preferred Hotels & Resorts and Beyond Green brands, while increasing corporate bookings for member hotels globally. As the primary corporate account liaison for member hotels, she consults with property leadership to identify strategic Consortia and Corporate RFP bid opportunities and help create winning proposals that drive impactful revenue and lasting relationships. Since joining the company in 2008, Ms. Wilson has become an industry leader in executing and delivering project initiatives and has been instrumental in developing vital partnerships with several corporate travel affiliate agencies. In 2014, she led efforts to create the Preferred Hotels & Resorts Corporate Rate Chain Agreement program, designed to help independent hotels offer competitive best available

rates for corporate accounts, which, to date, has generated more than \$25 million in revenue for participating hotels. Ms. Wilson can be contacted at +1 713-781-2007 or kwilson@preferredhotels.com **Extended Biography**

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