

MOVING FORWARD

We're all in this together, as we slowly open for business.

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Consider this a palate cleanser. Blue sky brainstorming. A lift. Taking a break from the immediate crisis management to ponder what's next. As the future remains uncertain, what does your operation need to do—or continue to do—to be prepared?

When states and localities began to “reopen” in May, it allowed for some semblance of summer operations at ski areas. Resorts have since been working around varying degrees of restrictions as they’ve started to open, and will continue to do so as they face the reality of a future resurgence of COVID-19.

Your customers remain nervous, cautious, concerned—but also relieved, as they begin to venture back out. What does this mean for your operations—your recreational offerings, the supporting guest services, and your brand? There’s a lot to consider.

THE SHAPE OF REOPENING

As states have begun to relax restrictions over the past two months, the shape of “reopening” has come better into focus. Some operational and planning considerations for resorts include:

- Continued social distancing (retail and restaurants opening with drastically reduced occupancy), limits on gatherings, and continued quarantining of the medically compromised;
- Travel with local/regional focus;
- Mask wearing as a new social practice, if not a requirement;
- Lockdowns that go back into place when there are flare ups;
- Changes in who comes to your mountain, with visitors skewing younger;
- The reality that you’re dealing with

a broad range of consumer response, from complete lack of concern to visibly nervous—and the renewed importance of empathy.

Though many changes have been implemented, it’s important to continue to think and plan ahead. How management reacts to this period may separate resorts that steam ahead from those that stumble.

OUT IS THE NEW IN

The stay-at-home orders created a huge pent-up demand for outdoor recreation, and as orders started to relax, people began to head outside. Ski areas proved

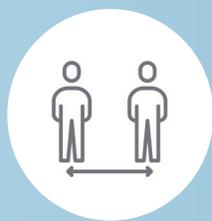
the perfect venues for these early ventures—big parking lots, wide open base areas, and in many cases, miles and miles of trails. The effect of this demand on ski areas—and the opportunities it has created—has varied greatly depending on the type of resort. Urban day-use areas have been poised to become another “city park,” regional areas the destination for the “first road trip,” and destination resorts the first overnight venture.

This all rings true to Barb Green, president of Pennsylvania’s Blue Mountain, who had concerns about managing demand prior to reopening. Green



Signage from Jay Peak, Vt., above, and the New Zealand government, at right, helps patrons practice safe social distancing.





said in May that sales of the resort's mountain biking season pass had more than doubled over last year. Concerned about managing demand, Blue Mountain opened for passholders and offered only a limited number of day tickets, which had to be purchased in advance online. "We wouldn't be able to accommodate the required distancing if anyone else showed up," she said.

"Out is the New In" has also created new market opportunities for resorts. Some have found a fair number of first timers on their hands—families that, instead of taking a city break or a trip to Europe, choose to drive to a local mountain resort. This has implications from how you market and raise brand awareness, to your website and storytelling, and signage and wayfinding at your property. Do it right, and there is a nice opportunity to convert those first timers into regulars.

GREEN MEANS GO

To some extent, what mountain resorts can offer has been dictated by the degree of "alert" in their local area. For recreational offerings, this has translated into simply being open to receive visitors that can use your trails and base area, to varying degrees of whatever curated or high-touch summer experiences your resort offers.

In May, Loon Mountain, N.H., general manager Jay Scambio said he and his team were considering opening Loon's summer offerings in steps, starting with lift served mountain biking and scenic sky rides because they are "activities that we can execute fairly easily and efficiently," he said, rather than focusing on harness-type activities in smaller settings.

At press time, Loon was planning to open July 3 with mountain biking, sky rides, and disc golf, but no zip line or aerial adventure activities. "The hope is that those activities can come along later as C-19 conditions change and state guidelines evolve," said Scambio. "I believe weddings and other social gatherings will be our last stage of opening."

THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Following what we've seen as the "new world order" at the grocery store, think in terms of one-way trail systems with spacing requirements, spread out lines or mazes for lifts, cafeteria, rentals, snowsports school, etc., limits to chairlift capacity, and groups limited to household members. Though regulatory bodies will tell us what we can and cannot do, there will be opportunities to rise above the bland list of requirements.

"We've been very focused on figuring out how we can get things done," said Katie Ertl, senior VP of mountain operations for Aspen Skiing Company. When it came to considering how to open the Lost Forest attractions at Snowmass, for example, she said, "Instead of shutting it down, we thought about how we could run it in a new way that would still offer our guests a unique and memorable experience."

At press time, all Lost Forest attractions, except the canopy tour, were set to open June 21 with capacity limits, social distancing protocols, facial coverings, and reservations required.

Resorts have started to think of safety as a new service opportunity—and a chance to differentiate. The reality is, you've probably needed to put more staff out there to keep an eye on things and help guests navigate new patterns. This offers a great opportunity to inject your brand voice, but it takes intention and training.

"We have a chance to deliver more on expectations, be empathetic to the situation, and to offer the guest something of relevance," said Ertl. "We've been thinking the distancing restrictions could open up a new world of creating new adventures for family units. What can we do to help a family have a journey through an adventure, and how can we support it?"

THE NEW GUEST SERVICE

Guests will have to come inside at some point. And guest services, by definition, will remain the human touch-point between a resort and its visitors. So how do

we make guests feel welcome from six feet away or from behind a sheet of plexi glass? And how does resort management communicate that it has guests' best interests at heart?

It starts online. First impressions count, and in today's world, it starts online. Many resorts have already started the vital process of updating their website and social media. Let customers know what you are offering, and what to expect. This will be particularly important if you require advance online ticket purchases and/or shift to a timed-entry system. Digital sales allow you to control your message, provide a low-contact experience, and, even more importantly, gauge and limit capacity.

Think of "arrival" as including pre-arrival, which encompasses all the communications that take place prior to the guest driving into your parking lot, whether it's in pre-sale marketing or once the guest has made a reservation. Clear communication will allow your guest service team to do their jobs, and help people know how to behave.

The arrival experience. Upon arrival, what does a customer see? Provide welcome banners and lots of wayfinding. Train your staff on the art of smiling without relying on an actual smile. Brand your ambassadors, outfit them with signature masks. Hand out the same as souvenirs. Your guest service team should greet guests with the resort's protocols, beginning with parking and parking etiquette. If temperature and mask checks are required, make the experience orderly, warm, and as fun and engaging as possible.

For these interactions, think of Southwest Airlines, and the way it's been able to turn its version of the FAA's safety announcements into a statement of who the company is—and at the same time get passengers to pay more attention to the announcement, because they're being entertained.

Waiting in line is never fun. With distancing between individuals and the

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appearance of a long process, overcoming this challenge has never been more important. Disney has perfected the art of making the line part of the entertainment, and you can too. Hand out a welcome bag filled with sanitizers, a funny mask, and lip balm. Offer guests a welcome beverage. Provide an Instagram photo moment—and brand it. Develop protocols that are unique to your location and your demographic.

In all you do, maintain a sense of humor, and humility. Things may not be 100 percent smooth (they never are), but if there was any time to say to customers, “We’re figuring this out, I’m sorry if it’s confusing,” now is the time, because they know that we’re all in this together.

COME CLEAN

On a SAM Huddle this spring, Jay Peak’s Steve Wright made a spectacular point about guest service. It starts not only with your “front line” employees, but also your employees behind the scenes. Wright suggested additional recognition and visibility—and perhaps paying them more, if possible.

This goes for your resort’s clean-up crew, as sanitization is now top of mind. Highlight the efforts your team is making to clean and stay as safe as possible. It’s a reciprocal message: Caring for your employees directly communicates your compassion and recognition of community—if you are taking care of your employees, you undoubtedly care about the health and well-being of your guests. In late May, Jay Peak unveiled its EverClean Program, which hits all these points.

Fortunately, we’ve been able to take a page from other hospitality businesses that opened first, i.e., the hotel industry, which published its protocols in terms of cleaning, sanitizing, and leaving time between occupancies. Resorts can also look to other industries for how to handle things like day lockers, bathrooms, and shared rental equipment. (For progress on the last of those, see p. 49.)

One thing to keep in mind is that whatever cleaning you do, there will always be risk of transmission. One of your best defenses will be to encourage and enable guests to do their bit through rigorous hand-washing, sneezing and coughing etiquette, and use of hand sanitizer.

FOOD AND BEVERAGE

Food and beverage locations are, obviously, a point of high contact, and thus a big area of concern. Ski areas have been creatively working around the early questions of how to deal with seating and limiting capacity. (For more, see p. 52.)

At Taos Ski Valley, David Norden reported that the area’s doing everything possible to take things outside, including food and beverage. Outdoor terraces and decks provide open-air settings to put “pop-up” cafes, and open spaces previously without tables and chairs can be transformed. Anecdotal reports from the restaurant industry suggest larger tabs in relaxed, outdoor settings, plus generous tipping. Rather than grab and go, branded on-mountain picnics provide another alternative for spreading out your guests and providing a true, mountain experience.

In the winter, the outdoor concept will be tougher to pull off, especially on the East Coast, where resorts are often faced with frigid temperatures. But it can be done. Enclose outdoor decks with plastic curtains and add a few heaters. Add a wedding tent or perhaps individual dining tents around a central fire—the modern-day equivalent of the old west chuck wagon. Create glass windbreaks where you can.

The après-ski vibe will also need to change, particularly given the notoriety of Ischgl in Austria as a source of a “super spreader” event. Many bars remain closed or have stringent social distancing rules that ban at-bar seating. Still, the keys are the same: over-communicate, set expectations well in advance, and find a way to make it fun.

For indoor restaurants, the F&B industry has had to thread the needle between creating the right social distance while maintaining a sense of intimacy and character. Simply taking out tables and chairs and leaving an empty room is not conducive of a great guest experience. Good design and fresh thinking will make for a more compelling offering.

CREATING BRAND RELEVANCE

Regardless of space limitations, or limitations on certain attractions, there remains an opportunity to deliver a digital experience that bonds your customers to you even when they can’t come to your property. This isn’t a replacement,

but is certainly a powerful tool in creating awareness and loyalty—and might turn into a revenue generator as well.

This involves creating what’s known as a lifestyle brand—or what we prefer to think of as an identity brand, where you become a part of your guests’ lives outside of the direct context of your property. During the lockdown, Rosewood, within the hospitality sector, used its digital presence to emphasize the company’s culture and core values instead of its physical venues, building both goodwill and an exclusivity factor. Building an identity brand isn’t, and shouldn’t be, a quick exercise, but as you prepare to navigate this brave new world, it’s definitely something to consider in your resiliency planning.

TAKEAWAYS

As the mountain resort industry moves forward, we suggest five key takeaways for consideration over the next year:

Watch and learn. We have some solid hypotheses about what the near-term future will be. We can start working from those. And there are an increasing number of examples to follow. Whether it’s Disney Shanghai, or the Four Seasons, or the Italian restaurant on the corner, there are some good signposts and smart experiments taking place out there.

Take the guest’s perspective. You’ve been through the same thing they’ve been through, so look at the entire guest experience through your eyes and make improvements accordingly. Think about this as a great brand and loyalty-building opportunity.

Build in flexibility and adaptation into everything you do. Maintain a learning and growth mindset. Follow the new rules, but do it your own way, with flair and authenticity.

Experiment. Try things that you’ve been afraid to try. Fix the things you’ve always wanted to fix. Remember that guests are expecting change: their worlds have changed, too. So be bold.

A global pandemic, by definition, affects everyone. We continue to see emerging examples and best practices from around the world. In the meantime, there has been so much to learn—it will be a shame if we can’t grow as a result of this crisis. ■