

Jason Nash, Travelport's global VP of marketing and product incubation interview: The new digital travel experience

February 12, 2016

Travelport's global VP of marketing and product incubation discusses the impact of the digital revolution on the travel sector, and how he's focusing on product innovation for marketing success

The travel industry is experiencing a major digital transformation, with technology firms like Travelport offering agencies and airlines innovative booking and payment capabilities to give end users a more seamless and integrated experience.

Behind the scenes, Travelport's VP of marketing and product incubation, Jason Nash, is also investing in new technology capabilities, digital offerings and a culture of innovation to help drive its more targeted customer agenda.

The 40-year-old, UK-based company provides commerce platforms and payment processes to major leisure and travel agencies, travel management companies, online agencies and corporations. Nash has over 20 years' experience in the tech and marketing space, both in the UK and the US, and is now tasked with leading both marketing strategy as well as product development.

Nash started at Travelport in 2009 as director of commerce portfolio, responsible for the company's point-of-sale (PoS) applications including desktop applications, ecommerce services and corporate solutions. In December 2010, his role expanded to include leading growing Travelport's Product Innovation Unit.

For Nash, the new digital travel experience all starts with truly understanding your customer segments.

"Some customer segments want to only communicate through certain channels. And with all the digital and social channels available today, marketing is not just a broadcasting mechanism anymore, but also a

listening mechanism as well,” he commented. “At Travelport, we cover the entire gamut of tourist sector and agencies, so it’s important we understand all our different customer groups that have quite different needs and requirements.”

With digital on top of the travel retail agenda, a lot of Travelport customers are talking about the need to be digital retailers, as opposed to travel agents, Nash said.

“This is no different to many businesses, as we’re all seeing retailers wanting to be better digital businesses,” he said. “But because we are at heart a software business already, we have a lot of assets already and we’re better able to be at the forefront of that digital progression.”

Nash cited a major trend around agents asking for help to better engage with customers. To do this, many in the travel industry are moving away from a ‘PNR’, or passenger name record view of the world, to more of a ‘trip and traveller’ view of the world.

“Traditional travel agents might ask you where are you travelling to, whereas a digital retail agent would start by asking you to identify who you are, so they can use that buying history to better target you with relevant offers,” he explained.

“And of course with modern technologies such as mobile and GPS, plus all of the payment capabilities now available, travel agencies can better monetise the trip from the moment the traveller leaves the house until they return.”

Keeping up with the times

Such technology change requires Travelport to keep systems updated and relevant, and Nash said the company recently selected Oracle Marketing Cloud as its preferred solution for marketing automation. The first phase of that is now live.

“We are making inroads to build a better digital fingerprint so our own marketing is better targeted to the travel industry and better segmented,” he said.

Travelport is also moving travel agent clients from traditional desktops to a more modern selling platform incorporating its Smartpoint application.

“One of our biggest challenges is getting our clients to recognise the value of those new platforms to provide a complete integrated solution for their end customers,” Nash said.

Building innovation is another one of Nash’s passions, and he has been instrumental in setting up the Travelport Labs team with ideation, acceleration and incubation in mind.

“We’ve been doing a lot of work around innovating new products and solutions, and I was also inspired by a book a few years ago called The Lean Startup,” Nash said. “We decided to take a number of those ideas, tools and techniques to give people at Travelport as a way of getting their good ideas recognised within the organisation.”

Travelport Labs allows anybody in the business to bring an idea and apply to run the classes, which are run every few months. The team looks at freeing up 60 per cent of the individual’s time from their day job to work on their new idea.

“We’ve been really successful in generating new ideas in the business through this new model,” Nash claimed. “We’ve even seen a couple of new products in the last year come through as a result of that new process.

“We’re also always looking for people who have travel startup ideas to apply to the program and work with us – whether they are marketing people, technology people, we’d love to hear from anyone with a great travel startup idea.”

Digitally-led product innovation is also ramping up. One of Travelport’s recent offerings was integrating ENett cashless payment technology in partnership with Mastercard to give users a one-time credit card number.

“This can be used to pay for travel transactions, which is available to airlines to clear payments between agents and themselves as well as some of the bigger and more established agencies,” Nash said. “Often when you’re travelling, you’re giving out a lot of personal details, and it only takes one person in that hotel or travel provider to take that number and copy it in some way and, of course, you’re open to all of the security and fraud risks that go along with that.”

The new technology also provides great third-level data, allowing agents or airlines using the system to offer much higher levels of data back to their various partner organisations, as well as much better traceability to better track expenditure and costs.

“It’s really a solution that has multiple benefits – revenue earning, fraud prevention and improving data flows around the whole payment space,” Nash added.