

Open letter to suppliers from Advantage Travel Partnership chief executive Julia Lo Bue-Said

We are all in an unprecedented situation at the moment and the complexities within our industry continue to provide different challenges for us all. We must unite to not only survive but also to regain consumers' trust across all sectors of our industry. Both our members and the full team within the Advantage group are fully committed to supporting our supplier partners through this and we are seeing positive results in terms of rebooking customers and also explaining Refund Credit Notes. This, as we all know, is vital if we are to preserve the industry.

In order to maximise our members' ability to support you, I am writing this open letter to ask that you show the same support in return. There are some issues that are causing more work and also making it difficult to retain customers. By resolving these, I believe that we can support you further and continue to increase the rebooking ratios and more importantly rebuild consumer trust; helping us to help our customers. I have outlined these below:

- Make sure that your RCNs follow ABTA guidance – the majority of our partners are already doing this but there are some examples from our membership where the RCN being offered does not follow the guidance being given by ABTA. While we wait for an update from the government on the PTRs, we need to minimise consumer concern by following a clear process.
- Pricing – Our members continue to focus on rebooking as many customers as possible – which is in everyone's best interest and in most cases our customers preferred option. In order to help them do this, we need some commitment in terms of pricing. I am hearing many reports of agents not being able to get close to the current price when looking at moving bookings. We have all lost business but we need to work together in order to build our businesses back up and a price hike will not help in the long term.
- Communication – we understand the need to furlough team members but there needs to be a clear way that our members can communicate with you. Waiting on hold for hours at a time when they are also working with reduced teams is adding to the challenging environment in which we are all operating. I would ask that you all provide clear guidance on how our members can reach you and where possible offer an online solution. This saves time for us all and ultimately allows us to all service all of our customers to a better level.
- Chargeback support – these are clearly a concern and nobody wants to see a large increase in chargebacks. We are working closely with both providers and members and giving clear guidance on how they can challenge these. Where this is not possible and the chargeback has been filed as a direct result of a lack of a refund, I ask that you commit to reimbursing the agent for any fees incurred as they act as an agent on your behalf. We hope that this will be a short term issue with the potential change in the PTRs alleviating this risk.
- Balance Due Dates – we understand that cashflow is key at the moment but for a consumer, the guidance does not currently provide any clarity on future travel plans. It is clearly challenging to collect a full balance for a holiday that is unlikely to happen. To then tell a customer that if they don't pay their full balance, they will lose their deposit is not in any of our interests. The trust in our sector continues to be a concern and this is only adding to the negativity. I would urge you to consider reducing your balance due date. In a recent survey to our members, almost 70% of them started this as being what they needed the most.

These are exceptionally challenging times for us all and whilst every business considers what it needs to do in order to survive I ask you to consider the impact your business decisions are having on the agent community and their customers. Once we come through the other side our businesses will without question be different. Decisions we make now will influence partnerships that we will forge as we come through the other side.

We are all having to make difficult decisions and I plead with you to work with us for the greater good of our travel agent community.

Julia