

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

How Four Seasons used technology to navigate COVID and elevate travel

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The Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia opened in August 2019. Image credit: Four Seasons

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Hospitality group Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts has continued to offer elevated, high-touch service throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by relying on technology to promote safety and enhance personalization.

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Since introducing its Lead with Care program in the early months of the pandemic ([see story](#)), Four Seasons has used mobile technology to adapt to the challenging travel climate. Four Seasons has also relied on technology to learn more about its guests and help its staff deliver high-quality service despite limited face time.

"That's where AI or technology can help us it makes the experience a lot more personal," said Cornelia Samara, general manager for [Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia at Comcast Center](#). "It leads to what luxury is all about: it's very personal to who you are as a person."

In this Q&A, Ms. Samara who joined the Philadelphia property from the Four Seasons Hotel at The Surf Club in Florida discusses how travel experiences have evolved during the pandemic. Here is the dialogue:



Cornelia Samara is the general manager at Four Seasons Philadelphia. Image credit: Four Seasons

Having worked in both Miami and Philadelphia during the pandemic, what differences did you see in travel and COVID restrictions?

Well, obviously, Florida has been just a lot more open in general with COVID, so the restrictions there were not as stringent as they were here [in Philadelphia].

However, with Four Seasons, we were following Lead with Care, we started our protocols and how to handle COVID to ensure that our guests and our staff are safe. So, throughout the company, no matter what the restrictions were within the city, we also follow the Lead with Care guidelines.

In those terms, that was very similar, because it was really very important for us to make sure that our guests, no matter what was happening in the city, feel safe. In Miami at The Surf Club, we were still following really strong protocols, even though Miami was a lot more open.

Our staff are wearing masks, we're following social distancing guidelines, all the amenities with masks and your hand sanitizers.



Four Seasons launched the Lead with Care initiative with Johns Hopkins Medicine International in summer 2020. Image credit: Four Seasons

I would say in Miami, guests wanted to come back and have an experience after the [initial] three months [of lockdown], so they really wanted to come back. We experienced the high demand much earlier than happening here.

I feel like that's where we are kind of now here in the northeast. It's starting to come back and it's going to come back stronger.

Then it comes back with like gusto because people tired of staying home. They're tired from working from home, they want to experience, they want to go out to restaurants, they want to have a good time.

Did you have any challenges with local and state governments having their own mandates and regulations?

It was a bit of a challenge to lead because there was no mask mandate in Florida. We all Lead with Care because we really want to make sure that our staff and guests are safe.

So, we still mandated our staff to wear masks. Some of our guests that were a lot more sensitive [to the pandemic] than others, so that was really interesting to experience.

I would say here in Philadelphia, some of the mandates were helpful, some were more restrictive. Some were just the city of Philadelphia versus the outskirts, so it would have been helpful to be a lot more consistent.

How did you prepare or empower the staff to be able to deal with guests who were less receptive to pandemic restrictions?

We have monthly calls with the Lead with Care committee. We get educated on COVID, on where we are in the phase of COVID.

We then, internally, within Four Seasons, have the phasing approach so green, yellow, red, and under every phase, there are different protocols that you follow. Our staff got really educated on that, so that we can comfortably converse with our guests on those protocols and why we're doing this.

I would say those protocols, the Lead with Care, was really helpful to help us navigate through that and make our

guests and staff feel safe.

And I would say that's why we've been successful through this. There was this feeling of okay, you can come to a Four Seasons and you're in a safe environment.

How have you been able to keep that high-touch service through the social distancing era?

Technology has been super helpful. We have the Four Seasons chat feature, which has been so popular that guests can chat and make any other requests.

Even before they arrive, they can chat with us and make reservations at restaurants, they can request for certain items in the room, they can let us know when they're arriving. Through the stay, they can make requests or order in-room dining.



Guests can make restaurant reservations through the Four Seasons app. Image credit: Four Seasons

It's still a very personal touch. It's live people that are answering within 60 seconds, to any anything that you need. Our staff were still very engaged.

Technology is helpful as a tool to improve, and it allows your team to be a lot more present. For example, ordering in-room dining through your iPad and you don't have to necessarily pick up the phone.

The service in-person becomes even greater because you can save on that part. That's what we're finding with AI and technology is, how can we get technology to help us personalize for the guests even more?

We want to know even more about you: What are your preferences? What can we prepare for you in advance? How can we update your profile so that we know that we can personalize your amenities? Or when you sit down with us, so we're already aware that those are your preferences?

Have you seen a difference in the types of guests or the types of requests you receive from guests during the pandemic?

Our corporate business travelers, not to say that they're not traveling, but they're working while combining their work, travel and experiences.

We created this great program called Work at Leisure. If you are working, you can request various items that make it more comfortable for you to work from your room or anywhere around the property.

You do see children more than you normally would too.



Jean-Georges Philadelphia recently introduced a six-course tasting menu for its reopening. Image credit: Four Seasons

I would say in general people travel for the same reasons of having experiences. Four Seasons Philadelphia is perfect for that because we describe it a little bit of an urban resort: you can come here and you can stay and visit the spa, you can have all of these restaurant experiences, which means Jean-Georges, JG SkyHigh or Vernick Fish.

I would say experiences are big. That's why we try to curate for you.

During the pandemic, more people are traveling domestically and rediscovering different cities. What does Philadelphia have to offer?

I mean, it's the creation of America, right? So much has happened here. Between the history, the architecture, the museums, and the food scene is just amazing.

It's such a welcoming community in general. Besides exploring the city of Philadelphia, there are the outskirts so you can go hiking and get away.

There's just so much to do, from the Barnes Foundation, the Museum of Art and historical sites of the city. Longwood Gardens is also very popular.

Do you have any predictions for the next phase of the luxury hospitality recovery?

I think we've been at the forefront, even through COVID, to provide luxury service. At Four Seasons, we don't stop delivering all the luxury amenities that guests expect, and I think that will continue.

People want to be taken care of. They want to be pampered. They want personal experiences. You know, time is precious. And I think COVID taught us live life the big, right?

They want all that and it has to be personal. I can't emphasize that enough, that it's about authentic connections. It's about really knowing who they are, who are they traveling with, what their needs are.

There were questions about, are things going to go away? You know, there was conversations about in-room dining, how it's not even necessary, but no, I would say in-room dining was so popular.

If anything, you make it even better because in-room dining experience is actually a very luxurious experience.

While other brands maybe kind of cutting back on this, we said no, we want to elevate it because people want special experiences. They want memorable, everlasting experiences and that's what we do at Four Seasons.