

# Back to Business – But Not Business as Usual

BY STACEY SUTHERLAND



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**S**ocial distancing, mobile check-ins, touchless payments, electronic signatures, sanitization stations, distanced temperature checks, face masks — the high-touch world we were accustomed to is as “distant” as ever.

As we plan and strategize our way to recovery, not only are we faced with a lack of consumer confidence and lower travel demand — but our timeshare sales teams also must now embrace the shift from a customary handshake to a new form of relationship-building, sealed with an elbow bump, foot tap, or a nod. They must pivot from traditional face-to-face, high-touch sales presentations to break through real physical barriers such as Plexiglas and 6-foot distances in order to gain trust and practice the art of selling.

As governments and countries loosen their restrictions, *it's back to business, but not really business as usual.* Around the world, the landscape looks different living in a pandemic. There are evolving rules about reopening as states, counties, cities, and entire countries take different approaches.

Unfortunately, there are inconsistencies and guidance that differ by sector, which can be confusing for consumers. Restaurants are reopening with outdoor-only dining and, in some locations, inside tables 6 feet apart; mask requirements and capacity limits vary from business to business; and mobile check-ins are being encouraged at hotels and resorts. With all of these protocols facing businesses today, we must adjust our mindset and welcome social change in what economists are now calling the “low-touch economy.”

Consumer confidence surveys are indicating businesses must determine their own degree of risk-based social distancing, and both communicate and practice the highest levels of hygiene possible. Those

who do it well will reap the benefits from concerned consumers. (Visit [bit.ly/3di3x6q](https://bit.ly/3di3x6q) to see ARDA's reopening guidelines.)

These changed circumstances are here for the foreseeable future. Whether we're in business to sell timeshare or accommodate arrivals, we need to communicate safety protocols well in advance — demonstrating respect for doing the right thing — if our resorts are ever going to gain the trust of consumers living in fear of the risks associated with a pandemic.

Fortunately, the industry's villa-style accommodations allow families room to spread out, and to distance themselves from other owners and guests. Perhaps partly as a result, resort-stay bookings are consistently increasing each week. The advantage of spacious, distanced accommodations will be an important perk to drive home during the sales process. Developers who already have embraced technology such as electronic signatures and paperless contracts will benefit from these forms of “low-touch” processes.

Can we see the day where online, technology-driven presentations surpass face-to-face relationship sales practices even during normal times? Probably not anytime soon, but we might benefit from enhancing our package sales with videoconferencing tools and digital presentations. What is important — and what feels normal to our society and consumers — is shifting rapidly. It starts with our ability to demonstrate safe environments.

The upcoming stretch will no doubt be challenging for our industry. No matter what degree of risk-based social distancing and hygiene your resort practices, communicating what to expect ahead of time, and deploying low-contact methods while remaining true to your sales process, will help our industry be in a stronger position as consumer confidence is regained over time. ■