

*ASTA's Mark Meader, Senior Vice President of Industry Affairs & Education recently spent some time talking with airline industry innovator, Bob Somers, Senior Vice President of Global Sales at Delta Airlines. Enjoy the full conversation below.*

**Mark Meader:** Congratulations to Delta Air Lines on your 2022 Green Partner in Travel Award from ASTA! There is a lot going on in the airline distribution space of late, especially as it relates to managed travel in the corporate travel arena and the New Distribution Capability (or NDC) that is being adopted by many carriers.

Delta's strategy for NDC implementation seems to have a more intentional flow than others. What is your NDC strategy and how do you envision it will benefit the traveler and the travel agencies that book their air?

**Bob Somers:** It is very intentional. Our approach to NDC is "evolutionary," not "revolutionary." Delta is investing in NDC along with other technology designed to create customer value and deliver a seamless travel experience. Once the ecosystem is ready, we will deliver NDC through the GDSs so customers can have a one-stop shop for their needs. When that time comes, we will not remove content or levy surcharges. We've applied our Listen. Act. Listen. approach to NDC and sought feedback from our corporate and agency customers, and that's informed our strategy. Here's what our customers tell us is most important: Respecting their travel programs, understanding that servicing in the corporate space is critical, and delivering innovation through the GDS. It is important to not only have transparent display and booking capabilities, but also the necessary servicing capabilities required to deliver a seamless traveler experience. As the landscape continues to evolve, Delta stands with our industry partners. Our customers can be assured that our actions will be guided by their best interests and their input. We are working with all stakeholders within the travel ecosystem (corporates, agencies and GDSs) to build the right capabilities and we will roll out NDC when the technology is mature enough to be successful in the marketplace.

**Mark Meader:** What is Delta's NDC plan in terms of timing as it relates to industry readiness?

**Bob Somers:** Simply put, Delta is committed to collaborative innovation that improves the customer experience and elevates the entire corporate travel ecosystem. And we do not believe that the ecosystem is ready today, and our timeline is entirely driven by that readiness. In the meantime, our customers and partners can rest assured that our actions will be guided by their best interests.

**Mark Meader:** Talk to us about the importance to Delta of the managed corporate travel space.

**Bob Somers:** Absolutely! This is the heart of what we do - connecting business to potential. Whether it's helping a company close a deal or secure a new opportunity, we help all corporate travelers take their business to the next level. We do this by partnering with our customers to understand their priorities, and then working relentlessly to deliver and innovate for our B2B customers and their travelers.

**Mark Meader:** How about the importance of the leisure traveler and those travel advisors that book them?

**Bob Somers:** Post Covid, we've seen a significant increase in high value leisure travel. Travelers who are looking for a premium experience, both in the brands they travel with and the travel advisors they book through. Travel advisors play a critical role in helping these customers find the right Delta experience on

board, whether that's Comfort+, Delta Premium Select or Delta One. We partner with agencies to give our mutual customers the most value possible with our suite of Delta Business benefits, services, and amenities. That includes providing additional flexibility to our agency partners to re-accommodate customers when the unexpected occurs.

**Mark Meader:** Delta and others supporting direct and indirect air distribution continue to develop and prepare to adopt NDC standards. Will all Delta fares remain available through traditional channels, e.g., the GDSs as you migrate to NDC?

**Bob Somers:** Yes, as Delta continues on its NDC journey, we want to ensure that all of our content remains available and without any surcharges attached. And when Delta delivers NDC content, it will be through the GDS, so customers can use that one-stop shop for their needs. NDC is important to Delta's future in introducing new products and ensuring consistency across channels. When the technology is mature and industry partners are ready, we'll leverage NDC to introduce new products that the legacy systems cannot support.

**Mark Meader:** Today, GDSs, most travel agencies, and at least one significant mid-office supplier, among others, are not technically ready to fully support NDC. Given the lack of readiness among several of the key players, how do you envision the airlines' role in constructively fostering NDC adoption while at the same time minimizing the disruption associated with that lack of readiness?

**Bob Somers:** We agree with the viewpoint that there is a lack of readiness by all partners in the travel industry. Delta's message back to stakeholders has been one of partnership and to not force immature technology on the industry. As Delta continues its NDC journey, we will continue collaborating with GDSs, TMCs, and OBTs to ensure they are ready to not only display these products, but to ensure smooth servicing for NDC content as well.

**Mark Meader:** Duty of Care for both corporate and leisure travelers is important. For a corporation or loved ones to know that their travelers are safe is paramount especially when there are unexpected safety or security issues at a particular destination. Do you think airlines have an obligation to ensure that they don't undermine the TMCs', and by extension their corporate clients', ability to fulfill that duty? How so?

**Bob Somers:** Duty of care continues to be one of the most important themes with our customers. As discussed earlier, we rely on our TMC partners to support our customers with servicing – which includes sending travel itineraries to duty of care partners.

**Mark Meader:** Talk to us about the value Delta Air Lines places on the corporate and leisure traveler.

**Bob Somers:** More than 90,000 Delta people work every day to deliver world-class experiences so that our travelers arrive at their destination safely, on time and with their bags. We are the airline of choice for corporate and leisure travelers, and as such, they are extremely valuable to our organization here in Sales and throughout the entire company.

**Mark Meader:** And the value Delta places on the TMC?

**Bob Somers:** Our TMCs are our partners, and we collaborate closely with them to serve our mutual customers. That means, providing our TMCs with a dedicated sales account executive committed to meeting their goals, furnishing them award-winning 24/7/365 support via phone and email, and supporting them with flexible policies and cutting-edge tools – including powerful self-service capabilities, that empower them to deliver a great experience to travelers.

**Mark Meader:** What parting words do you have for the travel agency, TMC, and traveler community?

**Bob Somers:** Thank you for your incredible partnership. Delta Business will always have your back, and we're honored to be your partner in business travel.

**Mark Meader:** Thank you for your time and for sharing your candid views with me today, Bob and for your and Delta Airlines' ongoing partnership and support of ASTA and our members.