

# Guest Column: Does COVID-19 create emotional baggage?

This is a special feature from *PAX International's* December 2020 [FTE APEX Virtual Expo digital edition](#).

In this guest column, passenger engagement strategist, biometrics and neuroscience subject matter expert Dr. Stathis Kefallonitis examines the emotional effects of the pandemic that airlines must consider when rebuilding passenger confidence. Kefallonitis is Founder & President at [branding.aero LLC](#).



Dr. Stathis Kefallonitis, Founder & President, branding.aero

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot has been written about safety, security, and our collective response. Besides the obvious health impact of the virus, the emotional well-being and mental state of airline employees and passengers has been top-of-mind for airlines. Effective communication lessens these psychological and psychosocial effects by maintaining an informed public. It eliminates stress and increases the comfort level in flying.

Among top airlines that successfully handled information about the pandemic are North American carriers such as [Delta Air Lines](#) and [Air Canada](#). [Emirates](#) and [Qatar Airways](#) have also been adept in disseminating information to employees and passengers alike.

The COVID-19 pandemic is dictating a close cooperation and collaboration among airlines, airports, regulators and air transport organizations. Yet there has been very little evidence of collective actions. Leading airlines have shown a big interest in cooperation, while little real evidence of achieving this is absent. The threat of the disease may be global, but prevention and treatment are much of a personal matter for each passenger. Passengers' social behaviors will change after such global traumatic events. Fundamental hygiene rules, such as hand washing, and disinfecting are here to stay and will slowly fade away as we build more confidence in the systems in place.

Security and protection, love and feeling free and able to travel again become very important. Attention to detail is becoming increasingly important. Translating experience into hard and soft product features is something that will drive the industry over the next few years.



One airline that has stepped up to the challenges of COVID-19 is Delta Air Lines, which keeps the middle seat vacant

### **COVID-19 behaviors & fatigue**

Psychological effects of the pandemic include, but are not limited to anxiety, depression, loneliness, frustration, and fear of uncertainty. Symptoms may appear and increase gradually during the continued outbreak of COVID-19.

Other effects may include social isolation, boredom, and despair. Intense anxiety and exhaustion from worrying has led to "COVID fatigue." This fatigue does not only refer to the virus itself but also to the plethora of information about it. Communicating too much information (or unnecessary details) about the virus has the potential of reverse effects, such as terrifying people instead of informing them.

Passengers experience the constant need to change their normal behavior to stop the spread of the virus, see the economic impact of unemployment in a society without a strong social security network. They become weary, isolated, and just exhausted from it. The duration of the pandemic also plays a role in the passenger response. When enough time has passed, our brain must try to find a way to deal with this, and fatigue leads to cognitive dissonance.

### **Post-pandemic behavior**

After a period of denial (“it will not happen to me”, “I will not get sick”, etc.) and the obvious transmittable fears, relief and an attempt to forget and return to a 'normality' will be witnessed. New 'normality' will certainly not be the same because we are not going to be the same. Yet a large percentage of frequent fliers will have the tendency of restarting their flying habits. Traveling and spending money for travel generates positive emotions as travel is associated with freedom of movement, holidays and other enjoyments.

Airlines must develop new products and service bundles that will make flying even more fun and enjoyable. The bundles will correspond to a new set of passenger values to ensure sustainable business growth. Airport check-in procedures, onboard hospitality and travel experience need to be revisited.

### **New value proposition**

Can you imagine how much more painful our forced confinement would be if we did not have telecommunications that allow us to maintain our social relations? The introduction of every new technology in everyday life creates challenges. Adaptability is the ultimate sign of intelligence and the airline industry has the capabilities of adapting continuously. A fine example comes from [Singapore Airlines](#) that turned one of its A380s into a restaurant.

Addressing passengers' real needs and offering more (not fewer) options may be the key forward. Passengers are likely to be more selective, expect more for their loyalty and be more flexible with their travel plans. Airlines need to intensify their efforts to provide an elevated passenger experience, otherwise passenger numbers may not return as soon as anticipated.