

Virtual but vivacious

This is a special feature from PAX Tech's [October 2020 digital edition](#).

FTE Founder and Chief Executive Officer Daniel Coleman on what to expect at the FTE APEX Virtual Expo

Future Travel Experience ([FTE](#)) and the Airline Passenger Experience Association ([APEX](#)) [announced](#) the [FTE APEX Virtual Expo](#) in mid-July, but the pandemic has continued to control every aspect of travel since. Fortunately, much has developed in a positive direction for the event since *PAX* spoke with FTE Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Founder Daniel Coleman and APEX CEO Joe Leader in the summer.

Coleman tells *PAX Tech* that the event now has thousands of registered attendees, more than 120 of which are representatives from airlines. More than 50 exhibitors have confirmed, including Airbus, SATS and Monty's Bakehouse, an airport that will show off its robotic capabilities along with developments from other airlines, airports and suppliers.

"It's the right product for the times we're living in and people have really got behind it," he says. "Due to the postponement of major physical shows in the first half of 2021, the event is starting to broaden out even further to cover many aspects of air transport."

The December 8 and 9 live event, themed 'Transforming air transport post-COVID-19,' can be accessed for no cost around the clock and revisited for a month after. The content will be tailored to three regions: Asia-Pacific, Europe, Middle East and Africa and the Americas. It will also be co-located with the IFSA *Onboard Hospitality* Virtual Expo.



Daniel Coleman, Founder and CEO, FTE (left), Joe Leader, CEO, APEX/IFSA

FTE and APEX are working with a Dubai-based company called [vFairs](#) which specializes in online events and conferences. During the two-day live event, participants will be able to talk with exhibitors through real time messaging and video calls. They can schedule time at a company's virtual stand to view products and services. And, the virtual expo is accessible any time, making it ideal for all time zones. The virtual exhibition will include online halls dedicated to airport and inflight products, services and solutions, and, what organizers call a dedicated Startup Zone. Attendees can navigate

around the networking arena, with table interactions limited to six participants at a time to help keep conversations manageable and clear.

"To me this event was always about creating meaningful engagement, so I want to champion our Premium Attendee Virtual Networking Sessions," Coleman says. The sessions will run on a number of occasions on the show days and work to deliver an authentic human experience that makes the approach to virtual networking feel as "natural and fun" as possible, he explains.

The speaker lineup includes CEOs from Delta Air Lines, Alaska Airlines, Avianca, Los Angeles World Airport and other executives. The event will host an exclusive think tank focused on business model transformation post-COVID-19. The think tank is made up by senior executives at Virgin Atlantic, easyJet, Pittsburgh Airport, AirAsia and Bangalore Airport.



"That's a really exciting initiative that I'm delighted that we've been able to get people behind to start sharing some original ideas and thoughts on how we can drive recovery," Coleman says.

It also offers offer a 'trail blazer' innovation showcase, a biometrics summit, and a tech-enhanced digital workshop delivered by content creation company [Neutral Digital](#), which will focus on digital technology such as AR, VR and Mixed Reality. And, broadcasted live will be the APEX/IFSA ([International Flight Services Association](#)) Board of Governors meeting.

Plus, the Expo offers a 60-hour innovation show called the *Aviation vs. COVID-19 Initiative*. The goal of the show is to bring experts together in the virtual setting to collaborate on ideas to reimagine the future of air travel and the air travel experience in its entirety, Coleman explains. The top three winning teams of *Aviation vs. COVID-19 Initiative* will be invited to present their ideas at the Virtual Expo.

IFSA and the [Airline Catering Association](#) (ACA), both strategic partners to the FTE APEX Virtual Expo, ₂

are meeting weekly to develop a ‘Shared Global Guidance Response’ to the pandemic. The response will be shared exclusively via the Expo.

In a mid-October interview, Leader told *PAX* one of the triumphs of APEX and IFSA working together was the “government action initiative” earlier this year that resulted in US\$3 billion in funding from the initial CARES Act for related industries. A similar initiative was stalled in Congress in early October, which calls for funding in the area of US\$28 billion, with US\$3 billion set aside for caterers and suppliers. If approved, the funding would be a lifeline, carrying the industry through to the end of next March.

“We want to see governments helping support an industry that they have stopped from moving for far too long,” Leader says. “We need to get back to more normal travel. It is through no fault of their own that these airlines have been stopped on the vast majority of their routes.”

With some mixed emotions about the how far virtual events can go, Coleman says he is confident the FTE APEX Virtual Expo allows for networking and product showcasing similar, if not superior, to in-person gatherings.

“I smile when I read comments from these ‘King Canute’-style characters who say virtual events can’t work and you can’t effectively showcase products or network at these events. But I can assure you that you can absolutely can,” he says, adding that it allows attendees and exhibitors to achieve a lot more at a fraction of the cost. For example, numerous members of the company can attend for free, allowing for more networking and sharing of insights and ideas. “The world has changed and everybody must change the way do things to survive.”

When physical events return in the next couple of years, Coleman says they will be hybridized virtual expos with digital showcasing and engagement a massive component going forward.

“The industry is hurting right now, so the recovery is going to be a lot slower than we all expected due to, in my opinion, governments not putting enough priority on supporting aviation and ways to change these quarantines,” Coleman says. “The truth is, physical events or client visit will not return with any great conviction until the second half of 2021 at the earliest. The industry needs new ways to connect, in the meantime continuing to meet en masse – and digital is the answer to that.”