

Moving FORWARD

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- David Green

STA Travel is optimising the digital space and exploring new markets with a refreshing take on customer service.

Images by Estelle Judah Photography

Over the past few years, STA Travel Australia has re-examined and refreshed its customer and product strategy, investing in new technologies and strategic initiatives to ensure it retains its prominent place in the Australian market.

David Green, Managing Director of STA Travel Australia, sparked this transformation three years ago when he took the reins of this iconic company. He recently spoke to *The CEO Magazine* about how STA Travel has evolved in Australia with its customers and the marketplace.

***The CEO Magazine:* Since becoming MD of STA Travel Australia, how have you transformed its operations and refocused on customer strategy?**

David: We’ve broken it down into three key areas. One is looking at our team and what we do. A big focus is on service and how we attract and retain a team that is genuinely passionate about travel; second, ensuring we keep things

simple while being willing to evolve with change. The other area is a real focus on the relationships we have with our suppliers and how we tie that into what our customers are looking for.

It’s our thirty-fifth anniversary this year. Over the past three years, we’ve been working really hard on our brand proposition and re-establishing what we’re famous for, which is the student and youth market. We’ve also worked to broaden the brand and appeal to more people, particularly young professionals. Globally, we’ve relaunched our brand around the tagline of ‘Start the adventure’, which again broadens who we are, what we do, and what we stand for, particularly in the adventure travel space.

With STA Travel celebrating its thirty-fifth anniversary, what do you think have been the core strengths that have contributed to its success and longevity?

I think we have a well-established brand. We’ve been operating for a long time, and students in particular have always seen us as a

place to come to book their first long-haul trip away from home. We’re renowned for being a responsible travel company. We take a lot of pride in ensuring that we vet our products and optimise our customers’ travel experience, giving them good value for money. We want them to get as much out of the experience as they can, and our travel experts make it their mission to send their customers off on a trip to remember.

The company has long been linked with the student and youth market. Is this where the STA story ends?

No, not at all. In fact, it’s for this very reason that you will find the majority of our stores in shopping centres and not on university campuses. We have some amazing exclusive fares for students and youth up to the age of 30, and we have a price-beat guarantee that allows us to be competitive across all ages. I think a measure of our own success is that some people see us as the place to go if you are a student, but we also have some great products and air fares that go well beyond the student >



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and youth market. We've launched an exclusive lay-by product that our customers love, as it secures the deal with minimum commitment, allows people to pay later, and ensures customers get the best price early in their booking inquiry.

How have you invested in technology to improve STA Travel's operations and processes?

We are constantly evolving, and that means investing in technology. Our customers can shop with us instore, online, or on their mobile; and recently we've started to roll out iPads into stores, free wi-fi for customers, and digital screens, which has meant investing in increased bandwidth. We've also just launched our free monthly publication, *Roam*, which is available in print and also as an iPad app so that it can be read on the go. We think it's a great way to speak to our customers and will provide inspiration and information for their travels.

How have you collaborated with suppliers and strategic partners over the years?

We have transformed ourselves from a traditional travel retailer to an omnichannel travel provider. That has required us to work very closely with our partners to ensure that our customer journey is seamless. I believe the key to a successful supplier relationship is having good lines of communication, understanding each other's goals, and working together to achieve them. I'm lucky that I work with some pretty amazing partners who are always open to new ideas.

How have you brought your employees along with you on this journey as the company has evolved?

The first thing that I introduced three years ago was an improved internal communications process, and took a good look at what changes we needed to make. All our store teams have daily meetings, we have a monthly



internal newsletter, and we have regular upwards communication through our regional Communication Champions.

I also conduct '12 @ 12s' every other month, which is basically taking 12 people at random out of the business for lunch. I spend a couple of hours listening to what's really happening in the business and making sure that we take that information and constantly evolve our strategy around not just what our customers are telling us but what our people are too.

More recently, we've just taken all our managers and some of our key suppliers to Hamilton Island for three nights as part of our 2014 strategic planning sessions. It was a really good combination of setting us up for a successful year, and also allowing our managers and suppliers to have the opportunity to work and have fun together in an informal setting. The feedback I got was fantastic. I was delighted with the output from our team, but especially from many of our suppliers who commented on the transformation within the business and just how good the managers are.

What do you think has been the most notable transformation for STA Travel?

Three years ago, we really had to look at the strategy and where we were heading. When you come into a business, you do have to make some tough decisions, and we did

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that. But I think our managers can see that those decisions were the right ones. The business is going from success to success, and our suppliers are seeing that through their own sales numbers.

I genuinely believe that we have a team now who are really working together. They understand where we're heading, they fully support our customer and product strategy, and I think when you have that combination it makes it a lot easier.

Where do you see the industry and STA Travel Australia going in coming years?

Without a doubt, particularly in the Australian market, we can see that there are many new online travel operators coming into the market. It's a competitive space now, and that's only going to intensify. I think more and more consumers will feel comfortable buying and reviewing online, so we need to be mindful of that.

We have a very successful online business, and have had it for many years, so investing in that space is very important. I think there will always be space in the market for the traditional travel agent; but to be fresh and relevant, it will mean constantly evolving with the customer. Customers want to get maximum value, and it's not just about the airfare; it's about what else they can do on their trip. At STA Travel, I'm confident we will stand up to the challenges ahead. For us, it's about maintaining our brand integrity and customer service proposition. We want to be seen as the place to go for service, product, and price. •