

TRENDS · OCT 09, 2017

Skift Global Forum 2017: What We Learned at the “TED Talks of Travel”



The **Skift Global Forum** events are NOT, they insist, a trade fair. They are creative business gatherings for travel industry leaders, often unofficially referred to as “the TED Talks of travel”. They are discussion forums where the industry’s greatest minds – marketers, strategists, technologists, innovators – talk about changing trends and the future of travel. **This year’s event**, which took place in New York City on September 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>, was attended by nearly 1,200 people from over 40 countries, representing over 550 companies.

ArrivalGuides’ own Head of Sales, Federico Giusiano, attended, and we sat down with him to have a conversation about the conference, the current state of the travel industry, and what he expects of things to come.

**What was the general feeling at the conference regarding the current state of the travel industry? Are things looking good? Were speakers and participants optimistic?**

The general feeling at the conference was one of overwhelming optimism. The market keeps growing and there are more opportunities than ever as travel keeps getting more affordable and more accessible to ever more travelers. People, particularly younger generations, would rather invest in travel and experiences than on belongings, and with ever-growing middle classes in hugely populous countries like China and India, the number of people who can afford to travel is increasing with unprecedented speed.

**Which speakers did you find to be the most interesting/enlightening, and why?**

There were many fantastic speakers at the conference. Two that particularly struck me were Glenn Fogel (CEO of the Priceline Group) and René Redzepi (chef and owner of Noma). Fogel amazed me with his sharpness and insight, and Redzepi because of his tremendous honesty. He was transparent in his talk, speaking from the heart rather than a sales script.

I was also very impressed with Arne Sorenson, CEO of Marriott International. He was the only CEO of a big corporation that dared to give an honest opinion regarding the current political situation in the USA (specifically, the travel ban affecting several Muslim-majority countries) and its effects on travel.

Finally, I was very intrigued by Nathan Blecharczyk, a co-founder of AirBnB. It’s always interesting to hear what they are up to. AirBnB was the most mentioned company at the conference. It seems like everyone fears them, but no one dares to admit it. It will be interesting to see what they do next.

**What was your biggest takeaway from the conference about where the travel industry is headed? What big changes or shifts can we expect in the near future?**

Several threads seemed to permeate the conference. For one, the big players are getting bigger, acquiring smaller companies and startups and always diversifying the range of services they can provide.

Everyone still struggles with personalization, with trying to find new and better ways to make their customers’ experiences as tailor-made as possible. In this regard, loyalty programs are more relevant than ever and will continue to grow in importance.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, technology and data are at the heart of most companies. There was a lot of mention of blockchain, but few people seem to understand exactly what it is and how it can be used. I expect we’ll be hearing a lot more about it, and individuals and companies who understand it and know how to implement it will have a huge leg up in the near future.

**Was there any mention of possible disruptions to the travel industry (from natural disasters, terrorism, etc.) and their consequences for travelers, destinations and the industry in general?**

Yes, there was a lot of talk about how both natural disasters and terrorism shape the industry. Research suggests that travelers are increasingly taking terror risks into account when planning trips, and certain destinations have suffered temporary decreases in visitor numbers in the wake of terror attacks.

Additionally, natural disasters like the ones experienced recently in the Caribbean have destroyed much of the tourist infrastructure in countries that rely heavily on tourism. We will have to wait and see exactly how this will affect the destinations and the industry long-term. But overall, momentary setbacks aside, tourism is still very much on the rise.

**How will ArrivalGuides move forward after the conference? What did you learn at the conference that will change the way AG focuses its efforts and resources?**

I learned that ArrivalGuides needs to become even more data and marketing focused. This is a shift that we have already begun, but we need to take it even further, since this is what clients want now a days. But content is still King! I am confident that a combination of these three facets will take the company to entirely new levels.

**Were you able to foster any new relationships at the conference? Are there any new partnerships on the horizon?**

One of the best things about the conference was the networking. Very high-ranking people from some of the biggest names in the industry (as well as tons of new and innovative up-and-coming companies) were in attendance, and it was easy to connect with them and start a dialogue. We hope these connections can lead to some new and exciting partnerships before the end of the year.

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