

A VIEW FROM MEDIA

ENGAGING TRAVEL JOURNALISTS DURING COVID-19

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MARCH 26, 2020



INSPIRING TRAVEL
THROUGH RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM



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As tourism comes to a standstill, it's not just hoteliers and cruise crews feeling the impact. The media, including editors and staff writers, freelance travel journalists and digital/self-publishers, are also facing a crisis as readership drops and coverage pivots towards COVID-19 related stories. With so many media outlets relying on clicks and page visits for advertising revenue, their jobs are now in peril, or they are at least adapting to this unprecedented crisis.

SATW, in partnership with Development Counsellors International (DCI), joined forces to understand better how travel journalists are faring during this global pandemic. We wanted to know what priorities and workflows they are engaging with at the moment. As we move forward during the COVID-19 crisis, knowing when to pitch and what types of topics to promote will be invaluable to the public relations efforts of destinations and tourism experiences worldwide. The travel media will be essential to recovery initiatives once commercial tourism becomes acceptable and safe, therefore we wanted to get ahead of the curve to make sure we are working with travel journalists and journalists as efficiently as possible.

This research is a snapshot of travel journalists' perceptions during the COVID-19 crisis. By late March 2020, most of the globe has succumbed to the pandemic, but near-constant updates create an everchanging landscape. These findings are indicative of a moment in time, but provide valuable insight into the professional habits of travel journalists during an unprecedented global crisis. Above all, the responses help provide hope, with 47% of travel journalists still actively organizing editorial travel in the future. This pandemic will end, and when it does, travel public relations professionals and the travel journalists they work with will want to be prepared, and this research is an early step towards a much-anticipated recovery phase.

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KEY FINDINGS

#1 . Keep in Touch:

Like most of the workforce, travel journalists are sheltered in place and working from home. Few are seeking in-person meetings, but phone appointments are still possible. While hardly news, it provides a strong message for those in PR. For public relations professionals, know that travel journalists are still open for business and receptive to contact and maintaining relationships. They want you to keep them updated – even if opinions on how much is too much remain divided.

#2 Wait...Until When?

A segment of the media is hopeful that by April they will be accepting travel pitches en masse again (39%) though the majority is more conservative that May, June, and Q3 in 2020 will be more likely. While the future of tourism remains uncertain, at this point in time, it seems like pitching efforts are still at least a month off (by May 2020), before they fall on receptive ears. That said, press trips should wait, even though 47% of respondents are actively planning future travel. Travel journalists may be willing to research stories sooner than later, but few are ready to travel for press trips before Q3 (40%). Pitching stories in the lead-up to this time, however, seems to be a timely strategy, given the current state of the COVID-19 crisis.

#3 Travel Content is Still King:

Those surveyed are still interested (82%) in travel content. Initially, we hypothesized that travel journalists may pivot towards other domains or fill gaps in other genres, but most are continuing within their expertise. This is good news for travel public relations professionals looking to set the stage for recovery efforts in the coming months, as their allies in the

media industry will not have strayed far. Within travel, travel journalists are accepting a range of pitches, but travel news (50%) and destination features (49%) are the most popular. COVID-19 (31%) and lifestyle stories (40%) are just behind. This insight allows travel public relations professionals to tailor their pitches appropriately, and to understand that the media landscape may have quickly been saturated with resiliency stories early on during the outbreak.

#4 They Have Time:

Travel journalists are staying the course, with 59% researching stories for the future, when travel stories become required again. Unsurprisingly, however, 43% are engaging in other activities, from cleaning up websites and writing book chapters to updating old content and writing in other domains. More than anything, this finding is helpful to public relations efforts because it indicates that travel journalists have one thing they usually don't: time. Engaging with them now is an investment for the future when recovery efforts begin to kick into high gear.

#5 Read the Room:

Travel journalists are struggling. Additionally, they are in uncharted territory. Being more flexible with requirements for upcoming press trips and maintaining a more sensitive tone are just a few examples of ways for travel public relations professionals to adapt alongside travel journalists. Most importantly, be prepared for diverse responses across the board as few travel journalists are on the same page about what they want or need at this time during the COVID-19 crisis.

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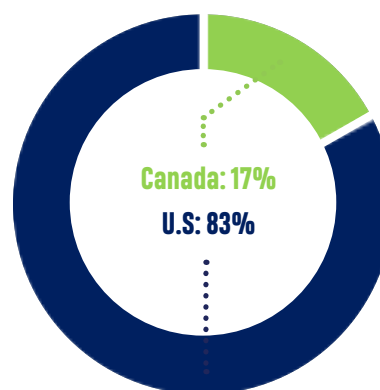


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OVERVIEW

SATW and DCI sent out an online survey to travel journalists resulting in 386 responses towards the end of March 2020. The majority (83%) were travel journalists in the U.S. market, with the rest (17%) in Canada. Most respondents (60%) were freelance contributors. The sample also included digital/self-publishers (17%) and staff travel journalists (19%).

In which market do you live?



Freelance Contributor



Staff Writer/Editor



Digital/Self Publisher



Other



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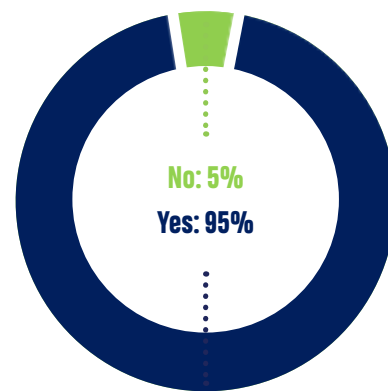
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STAYING HOME BUT KEEPING IN TOUCH

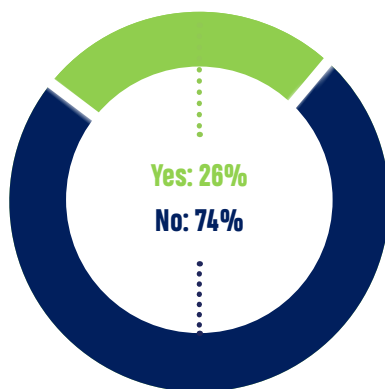
While freelancers inherently work from home, staff travel journalists and editors report a general mandate among 95% of them to work from home with no specific end date. This general trend is by no means surprising, given that most non-essential industries have followed suit. Working from home, however, has not closed off travel journalists to engaging with travel public relations professionals. A portion (26%) of freelancers and self-publishers are still willing to schedule in-person meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Far from advocating for in-person meetings, instead, this research indicates how willing travel journalists are to get ahead of the curve, to keep in contact with destinations, and to be prepared for publication when recovery begins in full. The majority (86%) are open to phone calls for marketing purposes, which is, at this time, the more advisable avenue to take. The key takeaway is that travel journalists are not sitting on their laurels, and travel public relations professionals should continue to engage travel journalists and journalists so that relationships are built and maintained, priming them for recovery efforts.

Has your publishing house issued a work from home mandate? (staff travel journalists only)

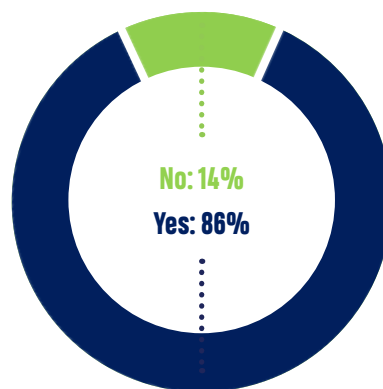


(freelance, digital/self publish, other) At this time are you open to:

One on One meetings (in person)



Phone meetings



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SOONER OR LATER?

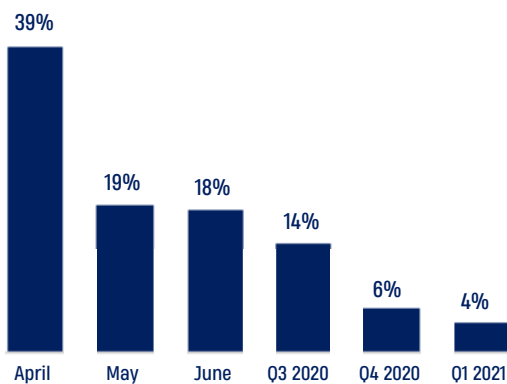
While many editorial calendars have been disrupted and freelancers have been put on pause, we asked travel journalists if they had any feelings about when they would start accepting travel pitches again. A large portion (39%) reported that by April they would be willing to receive pitches again – if for no other reason than to maintain professional habits during the crisis. The majority was more conservative, with a quarter suggesting they would wait until quarter 3 of 2020 or beyond. With May (19%) and June (18%) also popular choices, the findings suggest that media pitching should start sooner than later in order for publications to sync up with recovery efforts that may begin in earnest during summer 2020.

With no clear end to the COVID-19 crisis, travel may begin to resume this summer, at least in some locations, though

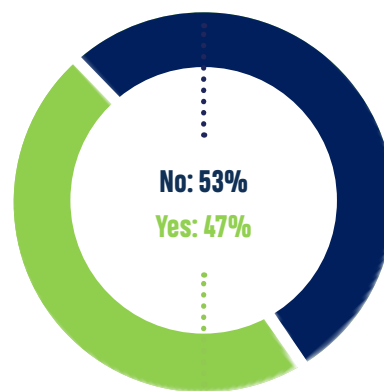
more conservative estimates might suggest autumn 2020. Nearly half (47%) of travel journalists are planning research trips in the future, but not immediately. Most respondents (40%) report not considering press trips or professional travel before the third quarter of 2020, so the end of the summer and early autumn seem like reasonable times – at the time of writing – to consider organizing any sort of press events.

In either case, travel journalists need ample lead-in time to research and write stories as tourism resumes. While April might be ambitious for an early summer boost in travel, May and June seem like more reasonable estimates to start laying the foundations for press coverage, to help prepare for a later summer/early autumn return to a sense of normalcy when editorial travel can restart.

When do you expect to start accepting lifestyle and/or travel pitches again? (Choose all that apply)



Understanding the situation is changing daily, are you currently planning any future editorial research trips (either sponsored press trips or travel at your own expense)?



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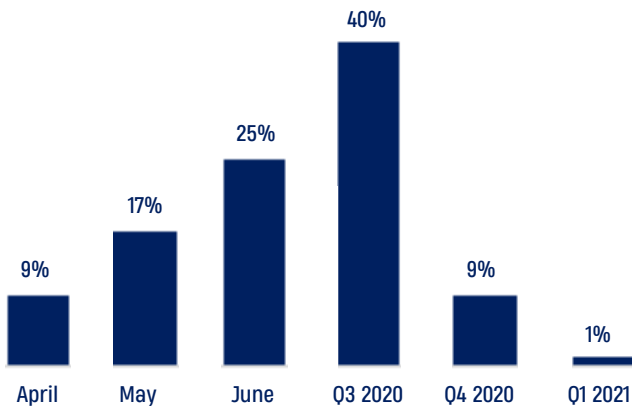


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In what time period are you currently considering editorial travel?

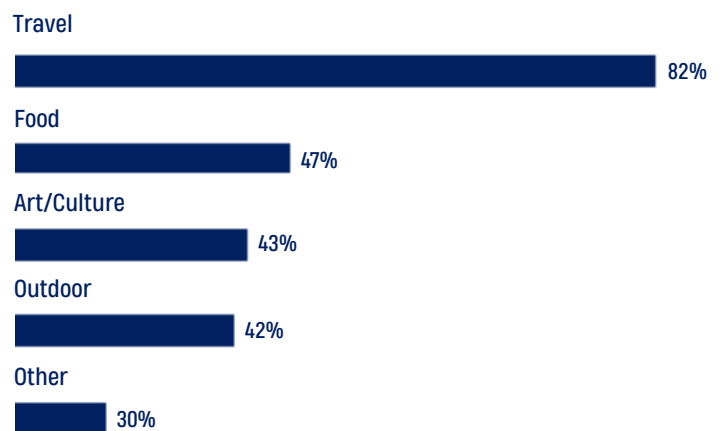


STILL FOCUSED ON TRAVEL

When asked what types of stories staff travel journalists and self-publishers are looking for, travel is still the main theme. In normal times, we would expect 100%, since we are surveying travel journalists, so this high percentage of focus on travel is far from surprising. Initially, however, it seemed that there would be a drop-off in travel-related stories in order to pursue other topics, but 82% confirmed that travel is still the main topic. Food, art/culture, and outdoor stories are popular choices, but travel journalists made it clear that they are publishing travel stories first and foremost. For travel public relations professionals, the key takeaway is that travel journalists are not pivoting too far from their bread and butter, maintaining a focus on travel stories. A look at the angles and topics covered within travel may reveal changes in content strategy, but travel journalists are not straying from their domain. Marketing efforts that veer too far from travel may end

up missing the mark with staff and self-publishing travel journalists who are still working during the COVID-19 crisis.

(Staff writer/Digital Self-Publisher) What types of stories are you currently publishing? (Choose all that apply)



Within travel, there are many angles and topics to cover. We asked travel journalists to choose the kinds of pitches they are still accepting, if any, helping to reveal what kinds of preferences they have during the COVID-19 crisis. Half of respondents are looking for travel new topics while 49% are still willing to accept pitches about destination features. These findings suggest that the majority of travel journalists are looking for the same sorts of stories as usual. Smaller percentages are looking for resiliency stories (31%) and destination stories (20%), either due to a saturation of such stories in recent days or a lack of interest and diversity in the scope of stories able to be told without direct reporting. Interestingly, 40% reported accepting more lifestyle pitches, which may or may not be different from more normal work routines.

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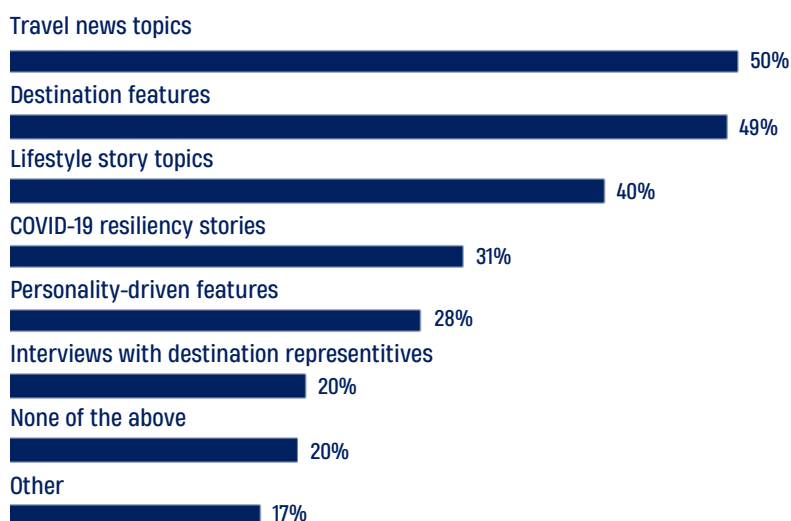


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These findings suggest that travel public relations professionals pitching COVID-19 resiliency travel stories will be less popular than traditional pitches. It's important to remember, however, that travel news topics will, for the foreseeable future, invariably include some mentions of COVID-19, but simply pitching how a destination is overcoming the crisis may not be sufficient for pitches going forward.

Which, if any of the following, pitches are you currently accepting? (Choose all that apply)



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UNDERSTANDING TRAVEL JOURNALISTS

We wanted to understand how travel journalists spend their workdays during these unprecedented times. For freelancers, the disruptions may be minimal while for staff workers, working from home may present challenges. In general, however, we found that travel journalists are spending most of their time researching and writing future stories, according to 59% of respondents. Interestingly, the second largest set of respondents (43%) chose "Other," evoking all sorts of supplemental activities. Travel journalists are penning books, working in other verticals, editing old content, updating websites, blogging, reading, and generally catching up with tasks that are not specifically related to their media work. Many are looking to PR work, editing tasks and other for-profit work to help them through these lead months as content schedules shift. Others are looking inward to their personal lives, taking family time, gardening or even vacationing in lieu of contributing to their publications.

What does this mean for travel public relations professionals? Travel journalists have time. To ignore them is to weaken the relationships you have built with them to-date, so invest a bit of time keeping up with them. Consider outreach as a form of investment in the future, when recovery efforts really kick into high gear. Keeping your destination in the conversation now, however you choose to, will make it easier in the coming weeks when you are fully pitching media stories anew.

Also, on a human level, understand that travel journalists are not necessarily optimistic about a return to "normal" in travel media. When asked about returning to pre-COVID-19 routines and readership, opinions were split between those who were generally hopeful and those who were not. What does this mean for marketing efforts? While no crystal ball exists, it does suggest that the media is acknowledging that fundamental changes in

their profession await them – if they haven't begun already. While not necessarily hopeful about return to pre-COVID-19 routines, travel journalists might still be hopeful for a robust travel media landscape that looks different from the previous one. Travel public relations professionals need to be prepared to meet travel journalists on this new terrain, however it looks.

How are you currently spending your workday?

(Choose all that apply)

Researching and writing feature stories that will be published...



Other



Planning future editorial research trips



Pitching new story angles

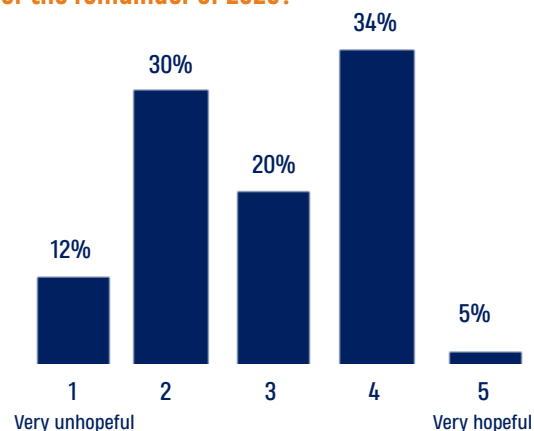


Researching and writing "how to" stories



How do you feel about the state of travel media

(returning to pre-COVID-19 routines and readership)
for the remainder of 2020?



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BE EVERYTHING TO TRAVEL JOURNALISTS

Be realistic. Be honest. Be sensitive. Be positive. Be flexible. Be informative. Be in touch.

These are the messages that emanated when we asked an open-ended question: How can PR teams serve you during these times? The good news is that travel journalists and freelancers are receptive to working with PR teams, and actively seeking collaboration. The challenge, however, is that there is no single solution to please them all.

Some travel journalists want updates on properties and destinations. Others don't. Some travel journalists want to plan to publish in May. Others don't. Some travel journalists want feel-good positive stories about destinations. Others don't. Some travel journalists want ideas for press trips in the future. Others don't. Some travel journalists just want to take a break and wait for a return to normalcy. Others don't. Being prepared to meet these diverse needs head-on is key because, as we all know, this is uncharted territory for everyone.

Additionally, PR teams need to be prepared for travel journalists to respond negatively if they think it's too soon to send a pitch or schedule a press trip. Not everyone is on the same page and won't be for a while. Travel public relations professionals, therefore, will need to bear the brunt of these frustrations and uncertainties, with a smile no less. Negative reactions may also be more rampant as financial insecurity and future employment remain in limbo for many travel journalists, who are actively seeking more stability in their profession. While DMOs and PR teams can't remedy any of those fears, being sensitive to them and adapting as needed to help travel journalists flourish while also securing coverage for a destination will create a better recipe for success as recovery advances.

The majority of travel journalists, however, do want travel PR teams to keep reaching out and to keep sending updates. As long as the tone is appropriate and it's not a hard sell, travel journalists are still receptive to new information, with the major caveat that they are still struggling to adapt to this new media environment.

Some sample responses:



A focus on travel photos and travel dreaming and future travel, and definitely not pretending life is normal right now."



know there is such a thing as aspirational travel, but I really don't want to write about places where people can't possibly visit, even if writing these stories involves culling together research from past trips to do so."



Armchair traveling and virtual tourism will soon be cliché. Let's try and find new angles! Wellness and nature trips are themes that I'll explore."



We need to embrace innovation, new angles, and optimism in order to play a role in rebuilding the industry."



By lifting restrictions on travel journalists to have an assignment in hand prior to being accepted on a trip."



The most helpful thing is just being in touch so we can start planning things when this is over."

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SATW MISSION: TO INSPIRE TRAVEL THROUGH RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM

SATW is a professional organization comprised of the travel industry's most experienced journalists, photographers, editors, broadcast/video/film producers, bloggers, website owners, public relations experts and hospitality industry representatives from the United States, Canada and beyond.

Founded in 1955, SATW has more than 1,000 members. Our members are content creators that contribute to some of the most influential print, digital and broadcast platforms. Our members are also travel and hospitality brands and

the public relations agencies that represent them. SATW is the premier networking organization bringing all of those professions together. Since all applicants must agree to the organization's Code of Ethics policies SATW is able to maintain the highest level of professional excellence among its members.

To learn more about SATW, visit: satw.org

ABOUT DCI

Development Counsellors International (DCI) is the expert in how North American travelers and business executives select destinations. We partner with destinations to increase visitor arrivals, disperse visitors, augment daily spend and increase business investment. Since 1960, we have worked with more than 500 cities, regions, provinces, states and countries from our offices in Canada and the United States.

Development Counsellors International
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