

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE HOSPITALITY RESPONSE

In the summer of 2012, I was sitting by the river in Greenwich when my phone rang. A journalist from the US wanted to know how the Olympics were being received locally. As it happened, just a few moments earlier I had been speaking with a local pub manager, who was complaining that Greenwich had become a 'ghost town' in the evenings. The phrase would soon go global in the media. The usual plethora of tourists had been replaced by day visitors, who were only interested in getting into Greenwich Park in the morning but were heading straight back to their hotels at the end of the day; such were the unpredicted and unintended disruptive effects of the Olympics on local businesses.

In retrospect, the Games of 2012 seem a minor disruption compared to the near total shutdown we are experiencing, and the hospitality and related industries have been at the centre of the COVID-19 challenge almost from the beginning.

The virus started to spread from a food market, a stern reminder of how crucial food and safety standards are throughout our supply chain. The ease of global human mobility has been another factor: our industry relies heavily on the mobility of both labour and consumers. We were among the earliest business casualties in the first lines of defence: vibrant Chinatowns around the world became mini ghost towns and in normally tolerant London, we saw racism raise its ugly head. The emptying effect soon spread to neighbouring hospitality and entertainment districts, like the West End.

Hospitality businesses large and small across the UK must be commended for their selfless, near-immediate adherence to Government public health guidelines despite the substantial pain suffered by them and their employees. We have learnt from retail analysts that hospitality does not only mean discretionary luxury; in

some work environments, meals bought and consumed outside the home can be as high as one third of consumption.

The wider economic impact has been devastating. In the events industry, daily news circulars announce the postponement or cancellation of hundreds of millions of pounds', euros' and dollars' worth of business. Everything from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to family events like weddings has been affected. High profile cancellations include Glastonbury festival's 50th anniversary, Wimbledon's tennis competition has been cancelled for the first time in over 70 years, the Edinburgh festivals will not host their four million visitors; countless hotel rooms and seats in restaurants, pubs and cafes will remain empty. Shock waves are felt throughout the supply chain; logistics, labour, food, technical equipment, cleaning and security... the list goes on.

But as an industry, we have refused to be victims; the hospitality industry is now playing a pivotal role in the fight to contain the virus and keep essential services functioning. Typing this at my desk at home, I can practically see the ExCeL exhibition centre from my living room window; the hospitality, restaurant and travel trade shows I attended so recently now seem a distant memory and the venue is rapidly being converted into the biggest hospital in the world.

Wholesale food suppliers have redirected their production and deliveries from hotels and events to meet domestic demand and breweries have re-tooled to produce hand sanitisers instead of spirits. Our industry's ingenuity and compassion have been nothing short of remarkable.

I conclude with two macro observations. First, it is imperative and fair that the government acknowledges the cooperation and support of the hospitality, events and related industries. In our service-led economy, bringing

these sectors back on track will be crucial catalysts for the rest of the economy. We expect suitable assistance to be provided in due course.

Secondly, our close relationship with our EU and wider European neighbours has been a source of mutual strength. Any contribution that free movement may have played in transmission has clearly been outweighed by our seamless ability to share expertise, data and supplies across borders. One of the most striking images for me was the aeroplane from Croatia landing in Spain laden with life-saving medical supplies: no customs checks, no employment visas, just the highest standard products reaching those most in need. Geography still matters. Brexit needs a fundamental re-think.

When the current restrictions are eventually and safely lifted, there will be an unleashing of positive energy and hope from our industry that I predict will surpass anything we can imagine at the moment. To paraphrase the old theatre motto: the shows, dining, exhibitions and concerts WILL go on one day.

Let us work together positively and safely towards that better future. **■**



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