



Pandemic Experiences: Hilton National Mall's Vanessa Wilson



By Kaitlin Dunn, Writer, Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI)

Vanessa Wilson, director of sales and marketing at the Hilton Washington DC National Mall, has been on the job and in the office throughout the pandemic, working a modified schedule as her staff of 10 has been reduced to just her. Recently, she talked to HSMAI about her experience taking on additional work and what she expects to come in the future.

What has changed for you as far as day-to-day tasks?

As director of sales and marketing, I had a staff complement of 10 on the sales team, but after COVID-19, I was reduced to a staff of one, and most recently I am now by myself. In light of this, my tasks have changed tremendously. I wear the hat of a sales manager, a convention service manager, a reservationist, a revenue director.

Since new group business has declined, I have been mostly busy with addressing group cancellation and rebooking canceled groups across all market segments. Initially, a large number of our groups had rescheduled for later in the year, but considering the current and projected state of the pandemic, they have now had to reschedule for a second time. Most have rescheduled into next year, but some have canceled altogether.

I have been working with our customers by offering flexible cancellations and contractual terms. We understand that this is a tough period for all, and we know that business will return. With new social-distancing guidelines in place, responding to RFPs is taking longer. I customize all RFPs to include social-distancing diagrams as well as to include our new Hilton CleanStay protocols.

What limitations are in place at your property and/or in your state?

Washington, D.C., has been pretty consistent with reopening. We are still in Phase 2, which allows only 50 people to meet. Luckily, we have not had to go backwards, but we have not been able to move to Phase 3 like our neighbors in Virginia. Masks are also mandatory in Washington, D.C., and in all Hilton hotels in the United States.

What has been the most challenging part of ramping back up?

The most challenging part for us is that all states are experiencing COVID-19 very differently, so it's hard for meeting planners to resume in-person meetings. Experts say that domestic travel will rebound the fastest, but I don't see this happening if we are still seeing over 1,000 deaths in the U.S. daily. We still do not know what to expect and how things may change. We are not able to forecast the future because there is no playbook for this.

What trends have you seen with customers who are booking now?

Customers are rebooking mostly for spring 2021 and beyond. They are booking smaller meetings and they now require a lot more square footage for meetings in order to facilitate social distancing. Safety is a top priority. Customers want to know what cleanliness protocols are in place to keep their attendees safe.

Do you see things ever going back to "normal"?

I don't see things ever getting back to normal for many years, or at least not for this generation. There will be some normalcy, as we are human beings and we will adapt because we are meant to socialize, but I believe that this experience will change the world forever.

Have you seen anything positive come out of this?

Being in hospitality, everything was always fast paced and face-to-face. However, this experience has afforded us time to reflect on ourselves, to spend more time with our loved ones, to spend more time outdoors doing the things we love. For example, I personally took up running, which allows me to clear my head and enjoy nature. As things begin to normalize, I think we notice that it was absolutely necessary to slow down and do things differently. Hopefully, this will change our behavior to include some of these moments that we have come to enjoy in our regular lives.

Do you have any advice for someone in hospitality who is just being brought back to work?

If you are just coming back to work, I simply recommend that you take one day at a time. Be prepared to wear multiple hats. You will probably be paid less while being expected to do more. However, we are resilient, our industry is resilient, and we will see better days. You will always have the experiences you learn today to take with you tomorrow.

For additional information, insights, and tools, visit HSMAI's [Global Coronavirus Recovery Resources](#) page.

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