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# United Airlines on the environment and being recovery ready

By Linda Fox (/Linda-Fox) | March 11, 2021

The pandemic has been worse than the worst-case scenario for travel generally and aviation in particular.

There wasn't really any way to prepare for it, figure out how long it might last and build a picture of what the future might hold.

Yet that is what airlines had to do just over a year ago and are still planning for recovery now.

Scott Kirby, CEO at **United Airlines** (<https://united.com>), says he doesn't allow people to say worst-case because there can always be worse.

At a **CAPA Live** (<https://capalive.capaevents.com>) online event this week, Kirby says the team just set out to be “realistic and accurate from the beginning.”

He believes United managed to get ahead of most airlines when the COVID-19 crisis hit and that its measures will stand it in good stead coming out the other side.

“We started in the last weekend in February. We were having meetings before anyone else thought it was a big issue. By this point in time, we had completed a \$2 billion bridge financing deal, we were cutting capacity and talking to the pilots’ union about a deal we were going to need to do.”

Kirby says the airline took some big decisions about its network at the time betting that business travel would come back and that international travel would come because it “had a different view of the recovery.”

“Business travel is not transactional, it’s about relationships. Going to events and having drinks, that’s where you get to know people. It’s a question of human nature instead of technology and human nature is not going to change.

“The first time someone loses a sale to a competitor who showed up in person is the last time we’ll do a sales call on Zoom. People were having this conversation 25 years ago with video conferencing and the death of business travel, it was wrong then, it’s wrong now.”

Kirby adds that there’s little the carrier can do to help business travel recover faster, aside from initiatives already undertaken such as eliminating change fees and improving the flying experience.

“Instead of it being a necessary but unwelcome part of your vacation or business trip, we’re trying to make the flying a better experience.

“I’ve condensed my job to two things - make all our employees proud and get our customer to like us - hopefully one day to love us.”

## Environment pledge

He believes United’s recent **pledge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 100% by 2050** (<https://hub.united.com/united-pledges-100-green-2050-2649438060.html>) could go a long way in building that love.

“I get some of the most emotional, positive feedback of anything we have ever done. It’s really changing how people feel about United by standing for something that is bigger than just being an airline. I’m more and more convinced that we have a platform that we can do things to change the world. We’re going to have a magnified impact.”

The ‘100% Green’ initiative does not involve carbon offsetting.

It is based on using sustainable aviation fuel and “direct air capture and sequestration” - a process of capturing carbon from the atmosphere and storing it in the ground.

Kirby believes that many airline bosses are ticking boxes with carbon offsetting but those initiatives won't make a difference.

“I was reading early research and science journals about climate change 35/40 years ago. In the 90s it was clear it was happening and it has taken us far too long to accept the scientific reality.

“The problem with climate change is the dramatic tipping points that can happen that fundamentally alter our society and how we can live and they are essentially irreversible. It's a defining issue for our generation to solve and I now have a platform and a position where I can actually make a difference.”

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