

COVID-19 RESPONSE TOOLKIT

FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY

Updated: July 10, 2020

Message from the CEO

I know this is an incredibly difficult time for many of you—a global disaster that no one could have predicted, and that we are all struggling to comprehend and manage, has impacted us all. From my vantage point, I have been proud and encouraged by the way that SYTA members have worked together as a community to respond with diligence and empathy during this time.

I want to assure you that I, along with the entire Student & Youth Travel Association leadership and staff, am here to support and guide you—and our industry—through the process of response, rebuilding, and recovery.

SYTA has engaged one of the top crisis management firms to help us navigate this turbulent time. Together, we have developed this toolkit for our members to use as you continue to respond to students, parents, teachers, administrators, vendors, and media.

It is so important that we speak with a unified voice, and that our industry provides as much clarity and consistency as possible to those seeking information and refunds.

Included in this toolkit are key messages we have crafted with the input and language our members have shared with us, frequently asked questions, industry impact information, best practices, and an infographic we think will be highly useful to describe our complex booking process. This is a set of tools to help you respond to your clients and the media. Soon we will be rolling out a second phase of communications materials, which will comprise of a set of resources you can share directly with educators, school boards, and administrators. And, as your association, we plan to reach out directly to them in the coming months. We will provide updates and guidance to this toolkit as the situation continues to develop.

I appreciate your patience and understanding throughout this process as we work together to determine the best solutions for all our members moving forward. This is a time in our country when communication is a resource and a skill we cannot take for granted, and I am happy to provide whatever resources and information I can to lessen your burden.

This COVID-19 has affected our lives and our businesses in ways we could not imagine, but I sincerely believe we will grow and learn from this experience to better serve our industry in the future and to ensure what we all believe—that travel changes young lives for good.

Please, as always, feel free to ask questions or offer feedback. My phone number is 703-245-8089 and my email is cassante@syta.org.

In good health,



Carylann Asante
CEO



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Themes & Messaging

It is critical that we speak with a unified voice throughout the duration of this crisis and during the recovery period. We have identified key themes and messages that can be used to inform your stakeholders. These building blocks can be utilized as you write emails and social posts, make phone calls, and speak with the media.

Primary Messages

These messages address immediate needs and concerns facing consumers and SYTA members. They can be used as you communicate with affected customers and any media that might request comment about what you are doing to secure refunds.

Message 1:

[Your Company] took immediate action in the face of this unprecedented global disaster to protect our student travelers and teachers, with whom we have worked so diligently to plan their trips.

- Our priority was and is to ensure the safe travel of student and youth across the country and around the globe. [Specific company examples?]
- We are coordinating with industry and consumer groups to ensure that the safety and financial security of student and youth travelers and other stakeholders remain a top priority.
- A coalition of industry groups, including the Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA), has been active in pushing the United States government for financial support that would help the travel industry and its customers.
- The unprecedented situation remains fluid. Conflicting and changing information has created confusion. We are working hard to keep you updated with the latest and most relevant information. Visit my.SYTA.org for more information.

Message 2:

We ask for patience and understanding as we work expeditiously to provide our customers with information, resources, and resolutions.

- We understand the frustration you feel during this confusing and stressful time, and we assure you we are working diligently to resolve any travel postponements or cancellations as soon as possible.
- Just as securing your reservations and other bookings takes careful planning, time, and energy, it will also take time to individually request refunds or credit from each vendor on any given trip.
- The unprecedented situation remains fluid. Conflicting and changing information has created confusion. We are committed to finding a way forward and providing the most accurate and up-to-date information.
- Each trip can involve as many as 20 different vendors, each with their own policies for cancellations and refunds. We are working with each to rebook or secure refunds educational where possible.
- Our primary goal is to provide optimal support, ease and comfort for you during the travel planning process. Our team is committed to providing that same level of support as we work to resolve all travel plans that have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

Message 3:

We are staunch consumer advocates for our students, teachers, group leaders and clients.

- As the single point of contact for our clients, we work each day to streamline a complex process. Working one-on-one with teachers, administrators and tour leaders, together we plan many educational activities for our student travelers—all of which are booked through different vendors.
- Just as securing your reservations and other bookings takes time, it will also take time for us to individually request refunds from each vendor on any given trip. Each vendor has different terms and conditions that vary depending on the contract, and we work with as many as 20 or more vendors per trip.
- We are tireless advocates on behalf of teachers, parents, schools and the students who travel, negotiating resolutions with each vendor for each trip, including airlines, hotels, restaurants, attractions, entertainment, security, and more. Today the situation is changing, as many have closed and have limited staff resources.
- The ongoing pandemic affects all aspects of the travel and tourism industry, no matter how large or small the business.
- We ask for your patience as we do everything possible to best serve your interests and needs. We want to work with you again once this crisis passes and are doing everything we can to return to the business of changing students' lives through travel.

Recovery Messages

These messages focus on a return to regular operations and earning the trust and confidence of student travelers, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Message 1:

The safety and well-being of our student travelers is our top priority.

- We are a proud member of the Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA), whose mission is to provide life-enhancing travel experiences to students and young people. We instill confidence in our travelers by establishing quality and safety standards for travel providers, and we empower our members through advocacy, education, training and networking opportunities.
- SYTA's certification programs educate student and youth travel providers in the administration of safety and risk management processes, and provide customers with information to understand the products and services they are buying from their travel providers.
- In light of the ongoing pandemic, we are fully committed to providing continued safe guidance, expertise and travel assistance for our customers when they begin to reschedule travel plans affected by the coronavirus.
- We know students are going to be traveling again. We are here when that planning begins.

Message 2:

We believe in the positive impact travel has on students.

- We remain passionate believers in the impact travel has on students and youth. We look forward to the time when we can get them traveling again.
- Student and youth travel experiences are proven to increase independence, self-esteem, intellectual curiosity, cultural tolerance, self-expression, adaptability, and even the desire to seek higher education.
- We encourage all parents and faculty to consider postponing rather than canceling the educational experience, to ensure your child still receives the benefits of travel.
- We recognize the impact the coronavirus has had on the travel industry and upcoming student travel plans. At this point, we know most plans will require change or cancellation and we are working directly with those affected to find solutions.

Frequently Asked Questions

Health & Safety

Q: I am no longer interested in traveling to this region because of the coronavirus. Will you provide me with a full refund?

A: There may be an opportunity to postpone a trip or change the itinerary to another destination. If this is not possible, we will work with our vendors to determine what refunds may be available for your trip.

Q: I don't feel safe traveling right now. Do you care about the safety and comfort of your customers?

A: Our top priority is the safety and well-being of our travelers. Our team is educated on safety and risk management policies and practices, and we work with our industry group—the Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA)—to ensure we remain trained and up to date in safety and risk management practices. We are happy to address any specific concerns you might have.

Q: Why are you still promoting student and youth travel during this pandemic?

A: We are strong believers in the positive impact travel has on students. To that end we will continue to promote travel as an essential part of a student's education. Domestic trips generally take nine to 12 months to plan, and international trips can take up to 24 months, so we are working in anticipation that travel will begin to rebound once the crisis abates. We want to be ready to help students travel, when they are ready.

Q: Did you have any student groups traveling in impacted countries?

A: Yes. We had groups traveling in affected countries during the start of the outbreak. We worked directly with these groups and the appropriate government offices to ensure their quick and safe return. We provided resources and guidelines outlined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

A: No. Thankfully none of our groups were directly affected. Our team worked with groups who were traveling in unaffected regions to provide updates and facilitate expedited departures where needed.

Q: Are you encouraging or did you encourage students who flew to infected countries to self-quarantine?

A: Yes. We followed guidelines provided by the CDC, WHO and U.S. Department of State for returning travelers. In most cases, school districts determined the quarantine process for their students.

Frequently Asked Questions

Cancellations and Postponements

Q: What are my options for refunds of canceled or postponed trips?

A: There may be an opportunity to postpone a trip or change the itinerary to another destination. If this is not possible, we will work with our vendors to determine what refunds may be available for your trip.

If rescheduling or postponing a trip is not an option, our team will work on your behalf to secure refunds from vendors where possible.

Q: Who is responsible for ensuring I get my money back?

A: We are your advocate, working on your behalf to secure refunds for your trip. Payments are made in advance by the tour operator to the vendors. Itineraries include multiple vendors and each vendor has a different refund policy. The full refund amount might vary based on the terms and conditions of our contract and any nonrefundable deposits outlined in that language.

If you booked parts of your trip yourself, you will need to request refunds directly from the vendors.

Q: Does your policy serve the best interests of your customers?

A: We are staunch consumer advocates and working on behalf of our clients to secure refunds and credits, where possible, for trips we have spent months planning for clients.

Q: Why can't I get a full refund right now?

A: We have spent months working with clients and vendors to develop a customized itinerary that met the needs of the teacher and their students. Trips can include 20 or more vendors who received payments in advance to reserve their services. These payments—made with deposits and payments from schools and students—might no longer be in the operators' possession.

We are working to rebook or secure refunds, where possible. This is a time-consuming process and our team is working to return as much money as possible, as quickly as possible. We ask for patience and support while we advocate on your behalf.

Q: If I can't get a full refund, can I get a partial refund?

A: In most cases, we can secure at least a partial refund. Every situation is different and must be viewed on a case-by-case basis, as terms and conditions vary with each vendor.

Q: Why isn't the refund process easier?

A: Under normal circumstances, cancellations and refunds would have been easier. Now with shutdowns, furloughs, and layoffs by vendors, we are working with changing cancellation and refund policies that are out of our control.

In some cases, there is no one working at the vendor to process the refunds. We paid these vendors with the deposits and payments from our clients and we do not actually hold the funds. Regardless, we will continue to work as an advocate for our clients and ask for your patience while securing these refunds.

Frequently Asked Questions

Rescheduling Travel

Q: I am only interested in keeping some of my travel plans. I'd like a partial refund for certain activities previously planned. Is that possible?

A: It may be possible. We have negotiated special group rates with vendors that we provide to you. In some cases, these negotiated rates are part of a packaged itinerary that may not be able to be broken up into segments and refunded. There may also be contract or liability issues if the student purchased their trip as part of a school group and now wants an individual refund. We are working together with schools to resolve these situations on behalf of their student travelers.

Q: How can I change my travel plans to a different date/location? Will the cost be affected?

A: We worked with our clients in advance to develop an itinerary that met the goals and budget needs of their group. This includes the timing of the trip, the cost of the destination and the number of students traveling. The same itinerary may vary in price based upon the time of year. We are prepared to work with our clients and will offer options based on their needs.

Q: Will original costs of airfare be honored or will my flight credit only go toward the new airfare rates?

A: Airline policies are determined by each airline and change daily—especially during this global pandemic. We will continue to work on behalf of our clients with the airlines to get the best possible flights and rates. It is important to note airlines extend different rates and policies to individual travelers who book direct or through online booking services. As a student group, we secured special rates and group reservations so young travelers can travel together with chaperones and group leaders.

Q: What if airfare or hotel prices increase later?

A: We continue to negotiate on behalf of our clients and secure the best possible options for future travel. Together, we will try to develop an itinerary for your group that meets your budget needs.

Q: Who is my point of contact to resolve my travel plan concerns?

A: We continue to be your point of contact and are working on your behalf with vendors to secure refunds and credits. Our team is working to streamline a complex process, given the circumstances, and we are happy to speak with you about any concerns you may have.

Q: When will the travel restrictions be lifted? What if we do not feel safe to travel for another school year? How do we get our money back?

A: Travel restrictions are determined by the government and individual school boards. If a group determines they do not want to travel for another year, we will help them understand all their options before postponing the trip again or requesting a cancellation.

Q: If we choose to rebook our travel plans later this year, will you provide masks or other resources as precautionary measures?

A: We will continue to use trusted resources like the CDC, WHO, U.S. Department of State and individual school board policies to determine how precautionary measures are implemented for a trip.

Frequently Asked Questions

Schools

Q: My student/class is graduating and cannot participate in a postponed trip. How do I get a full refund?

A: We understand the terrible impact the pandemic has had on the graduating classes of 2020. They have missed their “rite of passage” as a senior, including their senior trip.

As your service provider, we have spent many months working on your students’ travel plans. From the moment of the first deposit, this process includes reserving accommodations, reserving restaurants, hiring security and booking tour guides. We purchase transportation, including airline and motorcoach tickets and vouchers on your behalf. Deposits and trip payments were used to pay these vendors. While we work on refunds, we will contact these same vendors involved in the trip itinerary and begin the process of requesting refunds. As your partner, we will work to secure the highest refund possible, though a 100% refund may not be possible in every case.

Q: Some of my students are no longer able to participate, but others are. What are my options for a partial refund?

A: Group travel arrangements are based upon the total number of students participating in the trip and are priced accordingly. The tour operator working with the school will determine what refunds are available for individual students.

Q: We are on the fence about rescheduling. Why should we still go on our trip?

A: We are aware conditions are changing constantly and we must follow federal, state, and local school guidelines and regulations. We will continue to monitor the situation and work with schools to rebook trips. Our ultimate goal is to ensure students are still able to have this important educational experience. We remain passionate believers in the impact travel has on students; research shows travel experiences are proven to increase independence, self-esteem, intellectual curiosity, cultural tolerance, self-expression, adaptability and even the desire to seek higher education. We will work with our vendors to see what additional value or opportunities are available to groups who keep their travel plans.

Q: What resources do you have to make this experience valuable to my students?

A: When we collaborated with the group leader to develop the itinerary, we reviewed the purpose of the trip and selected activities that met their education goals. Many attractions offer specific resources for STEM, music, drama and more, based on state curriculum. These resources will all be available to students and group leaders.

Frequently Asked Questions

U.S. CARES Act / Stimulus Package

Q: How does the government passing the CARES Act affect our ability get a refund for our trip?

A: The United States Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act for small and mid-size businesses. Loans secured through this act are primarily operational for small businesses and are not allowed to be used for refunding money to customers for things like student trips. The loans are restricted to items such as payroll, salaries, rent and insurance. In addition, the U.S. Government has awarded \$25 billion to airlines for bailouts of their businesses, which we are hopeful will increase the probability of a more generous refund policy; that remains to be seen. While it would appear these new financial aids would speed the process of determining possible refunds to our customers, the application and receipt of loans and bailout benefits is extremely long and complicated. We ask our customers to continue to be patient while we continue to do our best to find satisfactory solutions for trip cancellations resulting from the coronavirus pandemic.

Q: Now that the airline industry received separate funding, why can't I get an airline refund?

A: We continue to act as your advocate. Each airline has its own refund and credit policies, however, which are constantly changing. At this time, we do not know how this funding will affect refunds and cancellations for group customers. Note: Individual refunds for tickets purchased are refunded or credited differently than tickets purchased for groups.

Economic & Social Impact of Student Travel

Global Student Travel

A growing and vital market around the world.

- The global youth travel market, according to the WYSE Travel Federation, generates \$333 billion in tourism receipts and accounts for at least 20% of the global travel market.
- The United States is the No. 1 destination choice for student and youth travel around the world—thus benefiting from the greatest percentage of that value.
- The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) predicted youth travel would account for 300 million arrivals worldwide by this year—and was showing a 3% average annual growth.

Social Impact of Student Travel

Travel changes young lives for good!

- According to the SYTA Student Travel Digest, 74% of schoolteachers surveyed believe that travel has a very positive impact on a student's personal development.
- More than half—56%—of teachers believe travel has a very positive impact on a student's education and career.
- The Digest also shows 74% of teachers believe travel positively impacts students' performance at school.
- Teachers perceive travel as a remarkable opportunity for young people to get in touch with different cultures and communities outside of their usual environment—74% see an increased tolerance of other cultures and ethnicities, and 66% believe international travel increases students' tolerance and respect.

Student Travel Industry

An underestimated economic driver.

- The U.S. student travel industry alone supports hundred of thousands of jobs, including those of tour operators, tour guides, motorcoach operators and drivers, security personnel, and others. It also supports the commerce of destination management organizations and suppliers in every aspect of a trip, such as attractions, restaurants, theaters, special events, concerts, and festivals.
- The majority of student travel tour operators are small businesses, many of which are former teachers and educators.
- While on a trip in the U.S., student travelers visit an average of two or three destinations and spend twice as much money as adults.
- The peak season for the student travel market is between March and July, indicating student tour operators will have lost nearly 100% of their business for the year as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.

SYTA Contribution

Professionals with safety as their No. 1 priority.

- The Student & Youth Travel Association members constitute 140 tour operator companies and more than 900 supplier partners.
- SYTA tour operators move more than 3 million students and youth travelers annually.
- SYTA travelers generate in excess of \$1.5 billion to the U.S. economy annually.

Social Media Best Practices

Do

Do: Review all scheduled social media posts and pause any posts inconsistent with the current messaging strategy/situation.

Do: Review and streamline your social media policies for your company's Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, and other accounts.

Do: Identify who is responsible for monitoring and responding to/escalating posts.

Do: Clarify and increase the frequency for monitoring social platforms and providing reports for internal teams.

Do: Develop standard responses to posts and respond to any posts made on your social platforms.

"Hello [name]. I'm sorry to hear you are frustrated. I'd be happy to help. Can you email me at [email address]?"

Do: Ensure any information or sources you republish are credible and accurate.

Do: Direct all media and/or customer service inquiries to the appropriate email contacts.

Do: Use the messaging and FAQ provided by SYTA to inform your responses and posts.

Don't

Don't: Post content that is insensitive given the current situation.

Instead: Ensure you are posting messages that are appropriate and considered.

Don't: Try to be a news outlet—you are focused on the concerns and questions of your customers and your business.

Instead: Feel free to direct users to or share content from respected sources such as the WHO and CDC.

Don't: Engage in back-and-forth discussions in the comments with a user.

Instead: Reply to each comment with standardized language and pivot the conversation off the public platform as quickly as possible, by offering to direct message or email the user to discuss their concern.

Don't: Make overly personal statements or attack users for their posts.

Instead: Share messages provided by SYTA and move the conversation off the platform.

Don't: Delete comments. This runs the risk of provoking additional anger and can look as though you are hiding something.

Instead: Reply to each comment with standard language and move the conversation off the platform as quickly as possible. Report the comment if it violates community standards.

Don't: Lie or speculate.

Instead: Use SYTA messaging. Acknowledge when you don't know something but offer to research and get back to them.

Media Interview Best Practices

Understanding Reporters

- Reporters are naturally curious and skeptical.
- Their work requires them to be “instant experts” on a wide range of subjects.
 - Facts and clear communication go a long way toward earning their trust and respect.
- They work in highly competitive environments with demanding editors.
 - Reporters are usually working on more than one piece at a time.
 - Newsrooms have shrunk, placing more demand on a smaller number of staff.
 - Often reporters must build presences on social media and produce videos, further fracturing their time and attention.
- They look for conflict.
 - Reporters may try to draw out conflict to add depth to their story.
 - Conflict provides a greater story hook and could drive clicks or views.
- They ultimately want to get it right.
 - Journalists are focused on providing factual information to their audience that informs and entertains.
 - They want to understand the issue and present it accurately.

What makes something newsworthy?

- **Importance:** How important is the issue or story?
- **Proximity:** Does the story tie into something already in the news?
- **Timeliness:** Is the story happening right now?
- **Novelty:** Is this something different or new?
- **Counterintuitive:** Does the story present counterintuitive facts on an issue?

The Three “C’s” for Interviews

Confidence

- It’s your show. Have confidence in your own knowledge.

Clarity

- Use direct messages and a clear, conversational style of speaking.

Control

- Take charge of the interview. Be prepared. Keep your cool.

7 Keys to a Successful Interview

1. Be prepared.
2. Use jargon sparingly.
3. Brevity is your friend.
4. Don’t be afraid to say you don’t know. Always offer to provide information later.
5. Beware of pregnant pauses. When you finish your answer ... Stop talking!
6. Remember: It’s only business, never personal.
7. People will retain at most three key messages. Choose your messages wisely.

Media Interview Best Practices

Never ...

- Answer or respond to a hypothetical question.
- Repeat a negative question or statement.
- Use negative language that could become a headline.
- Say “no comment” or ask to go off the record.
- Get angry.
- Answer the reporter’s question without bridging to a key message.

Bridging Techniques

Bridging refers to a statement that allows you to acknowledge the reporter’s question and then transition (or bridge) back to your key messages.

1. “The important thing to remember is ...”
2. “What our customers really need to know is ...”
3. “The bottom line is ...”
4. “The real issue here is ...”
5. “I can’t speak to that, but what I can say is ...”
6. “I won’t speculate, but ...”
7. “I understand the concern, however ...”

Tips for Being Camera Ready

- If standing: Avoid rocking back and forth.
- If sitting: Sit at the back of your chair, sit on your coattails, lean slightly forward at the waist.
- Maintain eye-contact with the camera: That is your audience.
- Avoid rapid hand movements or touching your face or head.
- Place your most important points at the beginning of each response.
- Refer to the reporter by name, early and often.
- Assume you are on camera at all times—even when someone else is speaking.
- Wear solid colors. Patterns don’t show up well on camera.

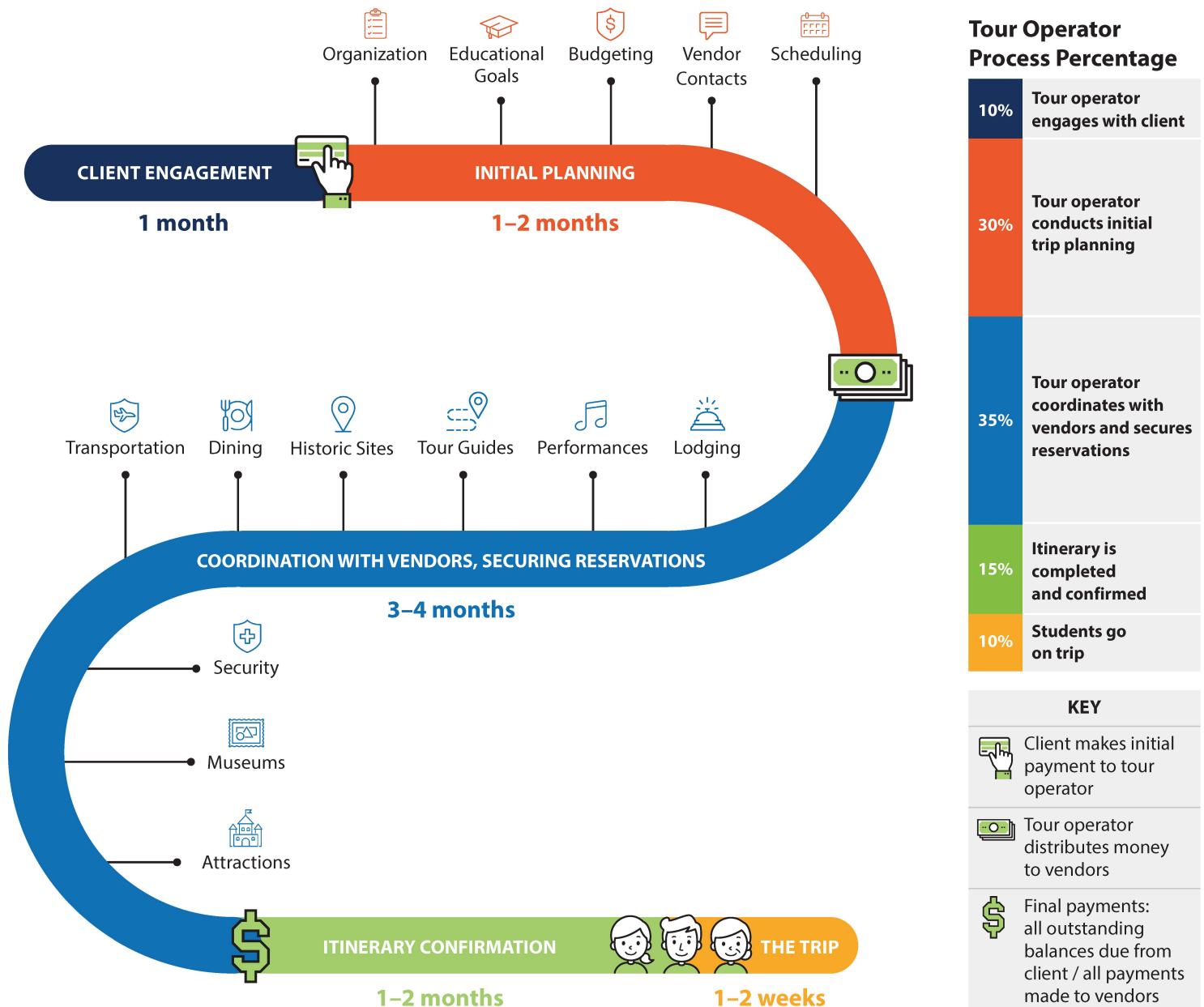
Always Remember ...

- They can only write or broadcast what you say.
- Never answer a hypothetical question or speculate.
- Get briefed before every interview, no matter how minor.
- Practice your bridging techniques.
- There is no such thing as “off the record.”
- Only up to three messages will stick.

DECISION TO DESTINATION: THE STUDENT TRAVEL PROCESS



Planning a student group trip can be complex, which is why tour operators are your partners—streamlining the planning and contracting process, collaborating with teachers and administrators to achieve trip educational goals, and ultimately providing students with life-changing opportunities and experiences. Student tour operators work behind the scene to ensure your trip is a success.*



For more information, visit www.SYTA.org/Travel-Tools

Follow Us:



*Disclaimer: The purpose of this graphic is to demonstrate an example of the student travel process and does not represent all travel booking experiences. Travel timing and scheduling may vary depending on the trip, but most payments are completed at least six weeks prior to the travel date.