

The CEO of helicopter startup Blade reveals how the company is totally switching up its strategy as COVID-19 upends travel

David Slotnick May 22, 2020, 7:48 AM



A Blade helicopter lands in New York City Andia/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

Blade Urban Air Mobility carved out a market by offering private and shared air transfers between New York City and local airports and leisure destinations. It also has operations in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

With leisure and corporate travel demand at an all-time low due to the **COVID-19 pandemic**, the company has had to quickly pivot its operation.

In an interview, Blade CEO Rob Wiesenthal told Business Insider how the company was able to repurpose itself to provide a useful, on-demand service during the pandemic.

[Visit Business Insider's homepage for more stories.](#)

You can help slow the spread of
COVID-19 virus.

#Alo

POPULAR FROM BI PRIME



How much money YouTube pays for 1 million views, according to 5 creators

Blade, the six-year-old app-based helicopter and air travel startup, was thriving in the back half of 2019.



Hamptons, and other weekend hotspots, was continuing to expand its client base.

A new semi-hourly airport transfer service brought eight-minute flights from midtown Manhattan down to under \$200, which CEO Rob Wiesenthal described in June as a premium product, but one accessible to a much larger base of travelers who otherwise couldn't afford the convenience of a chartered flight.

Less than a year later, the travel industry has been turned on its head.

It's ok to not be ok

#Alo

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, air travel demand fell as much as 97%, and while it's starting to pick back up, it's happening at a glacial pace.

With summer fast approaching, it's unclear what social distancing and working from home will mean for seasonal locales in the northeast such as Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, the Hamptons, or the Jersey Shore — or what it will mean for the ferry companies, jitney operators, and air services — like Blade — that whisk weekenders from the city to the beach on Friday afternoons.

But, in a phone interview with Business Insider, Wiesenthal said he believes his company has no reason to worry.

In the months since the pandemic emerged, Blade has pivoted in a significant way.

You can help slow the spread of COVID-19 virus.

#Alo

"Last summer when we flew, we used to say that we would fly you from New York to Nantucket, to the Jersey coast, to the Hamptons, to Westchester, to the airports," Wiesenthal told Business Insider. "But now, from a marketing and product perspective, we're flying to New York from other places."



Blade CEO Rob Wiesenthal | Blade

Wiesenthal said Blade's new focus on inbound passengers also required the company to think about how best to protect customers.

#AloneTogether

We're in this together.

For ways to take care of yourself and others go to AloneTogether.com



POPULAR FROM BI PRIME



\$85 billion e-commerce giant Shopify is trying to make banks irrelevant for small businesses. Its chief product officer lays out why.



POPULAR FROM BI PRIME



Retailers with limited or no online offering such as TJ Maxx, Ross, and Dollar General are at risk of becoming 'irrelevant' in a post-pandemic world, analysts say



cases of the disease, and the death toll nears 30,000 people, according to [The New York Times](#).

"We decided masks were going to be mandatory for employees, for passengers, for pilots," Wiesenthal said. "Gloves were going to be mandatory for pilots and employees. Temperature checks and oxygen checks. We reduced capacity in helicopters and sea planes."

The company already had the framework in place for a risk-reduction and disinfection plan because of its existing business partnerships that require the company to meet rigorous criteria.

"We were lucky enough to start a medical mobility division two years ago, which partners with NYU Langone to transport donated organs, so we already have strict health and safety protocols and a medical director," he said. "So what we did very quickly when this started, is we worked to lay out what it would take to make our flyers comfortable to travel."

In the air and on the ground

Blade does not own or operate its helicopters; it functions as a broker to connect customers with third-party, licensed owner-operators, while setting the price and taking a commission. It sets standards for its operators which they have to follow in order to be part of the platform.

On the ground, the company has a fleet of cars and employee drivers it operates to bring passengers from the helicopter pads at airports to the airline terminals. With its airport shuttle business all but dried up, it has redeployed the cars to city streets to move clients between the heliport and their destinations. It's also working with NYU Langone hospital to provide transportation on an hourly basis to doctors who are treating COVID-19 patients.

"People flying in on Blade didn't feel comfortable using ride shares," Wiesenthal said. "So we're able to offer uniform, secured cars."

He predicts that people will be more comfortable with ride-sharing in a few months' time, but considered it necessary to offer ground transportation alongside its aviation service where he says customers could enjoy a seamless travel experience.

"The reason people are flying us is because of those protocols, and what's the point of going through that protocol if the next mode of your journey doesn't have that? We're offering multimodality."

≡

Q

BUSINESSINSIDER

🔍

Latest news

Hertz [files for bankruptcy](#) as the coronavirus pandemic crushes the car-rental industry.

'We're not guided by politics in this, we're guided by science': [Los Angeles mayor responds to DOJ letter](#) calling stay-at-home orders 'arbitrary and unlawful.'

Photos from across the US show what [the new normal looks like as states reopen](#) — from temperature scanners at the Apple store to marked circles at public parks.

'The governor is a servant of the state. I am a servant of God': [Three pastors defend why they're leading the charge](#) to reopen churches.

President Trump just declared houses of worship essential. [Mounting evidence](#) shows they're super-spreader hotspots.

South America has become a [new COVID-19 epicenter](#), WHO says.

Do you have a personal experience with the coronavirus you'd like to share? Or a tip on how your town or community is handling the pandemic? Please email covidtips@businessinsider.com and tell us your story.

Get the latest [coronavirus business & economic impact analysis](#) from Business Insider Intelligence on how COVID-19 is affecting industries.

How valuable was this story for you?



Don't miss industry news. Get our daily newsletter today.

Email

SIGN UP

By clicking "Sign Up", you agree to receive marketing emails from Business Insider as well as other partner offers and accept our [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). You can opt-out at any time.

This story is exclusively available to BI Prime members. Thank you for being a member, Lee!

SEE ALSO: I took a \$120 Blade helicopter flight from midtown Manhattan to JFK Airport — here's what it was like »

NOW WATCH:

