

In search of talent

One of the biggest challenges facing the industry is to convince professionals that working in the sector provides viable career opportunities, says Virtuoso's CEO Matthew Upchurch

In my last column, I established that despite predictions to the contrary, the internet has not trumped every other form of travel planning. Studies released earlier this year show that while travel may have surpassed a 2010 estimate that 50% of all trips would be booked online, it was the only e-commerce category to have a decline in consumer satisfaction for the year, as well as a drop in sales for two consecutive years.

While we may refer to our business niche as 'luxury travel', we should view it in the larger context of industry 'polarisation'. Most industries are in some stage of polarisation between "optimised commodity economy companies" and "optimised experiential economy companies", as defined by Dan Sullivan of the Strategic Coach.

When we changed the name of our organisation to Virtuoso in 2000, I explained that our job was to exit the 'travel business' and move into the 'life experience business', with travel as its primary conduit. We knew that a massive number of retired baby boomers, as well as Gen-X and Gen-Y travellers, did not simply want to book a holiday – roaming the globe is part of their DNA. These consumers, for whom travel was an integral part of their life, not unlike their health and wealth, were accustomed to having trusted advisers in those areas.

However, the opportunity to capture this market was squarely based on one reality: we could only be as good as the relationship between our advisers and their clients. We had to grow the number of advisers, both by providing a path from the transactional 'agent', whose value was delivering information with a cost-based differentiation, to that of 'trusted adviser', with whom a client had a personal bond.

Today, with even more people spending their discretionary money on luxury travel, we are seeing those relationships and the collaborative planning process become equally, if not more, important than the trip itself. The request for experiential travel planning is so great that one of the biggest challenges is having enough consultants to meet the demand.

This lack of qualified professionals isn't only germane to our industry. Numbers show a declining workforce over many professional sectors: Fortune 500 companies will lose

50% of their senior managers over the next five years, and the Employment Policy Foundation in the US projects a shortage of 10 million workers by 2015.

It sounds like a bleak scenario but, fortunately, it's one that's rectifiable. For starters, we need to attract fresh talent to the travel arena by essentially remerchandising ourselves to budding professionals and career-changing boomers as an industry of significance – socially, culturally and economically. The mission to reinvigorate our profession should focus on an emphasis to educate those outside the travel community that working as a luxury travel adviser is a viable career path that is personally and financially rewarding. As word spreads about the vast opportunities in our industry, more people looking to find their niche will turn to travel – at least in our side of the industry.

It's a significant investment to enlist and keep consultants, but the benefits to your business and the travel industry as a whole will be tenfold. With a contented and successful workforce to bring in new clients and provide individualised service and unique travel experiences to existing ones, your agency will undoubtedly prosper. The increased revenue also translates into higher salaries for your team. And, the field will keep thriving while elevating the perception of a 'travel agent' to an informed and trusted adviser with whom a client can maintain a lifelong relationship. □

Virtuoso is the industry's leading leisure travel network, based in the US. A by-invitation-only organisation, it comprises more than 6,000 elite travel specialists associated with over 300 agencies in 22 countries in North and South America, the Caribbean, Australia and New Zealand, as well as over 1,000 of the world's best travel providers and premier destinations.

"We need to attract fresh talent by remerchandising ourselves as an industry of significance"

Matthew Upchurch



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