

#### 4 Key Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

As travel restrictions continue to be loosened or lifted, the future of our industry looks radiantly bright. But returning to business-as-usual isn't going to cut it for the brave new world we're living in. The ability to learn and adapt is the critical component of any industry's long-term success. That's why I wanted to share what I think are the four main lessons Travel Advisors should take away from the pandemic.

- **Build solid relationships.** It's crucial to always be supporting the customers and suppliers who have supported you and figure out ways to deepen those relationships. We are a relationship business, after all. Successful Travel Advisors never lose sight of that. We at the host agency level are only as successful as everyone else in the industry. It may sound like a cliché, but the quality of your customer and supplier relationships will always be more important than the quantity. Nurture those relationships – get to know your local Business Development Manager, and make sure you have an excellent customer relationship management process in place. Most importantly, learn about your clients' personal desires, concerns, and long-term plans. Let them know you're in it for the long haul.
- **Strengthen your business.** Being a great Travel Advisor means being a savvy business owner, and being a savvy business owner means making sure you get paid for your work and expertise! It's always the right time to sharpen any business skills that you may be lacking. Figure out the right mix of revenues and a marketing plan to keep that revenue flowing in. Make a one-year *and* five-year business plan. Ask yourself key questions: Do I have a particular niche or specialization that I want to develop? How do I set myself apart from others in the industry? The first step in a successful plan is knowing where you want to go. Bottom line – you need to be aware of all the components that make your business unique. As I like to say, work *on* your business, not just in it.
- **Show your expertise.** Travel advisors need to invest in developing their expertise—this could mean certifications, attending a webinar or in-person class, etc. Many of you already wear multiple hats. Not only are you a frontline Travel Advisor, you're also a business owner, even if it happens to be a one-person business. This requires a certain level of specialized knowledge, which is ultimately what separates the expert from the non-expert. There's an important caveat here, however. While expertise matters, it's good to avoid becoming an “education junkie.” Too often, I come across new Travel Advisors who feel like they need to take every course that has ever been developed before they can make their first booking. Remember, it pays to be targeted. The question you'll need to ask yourself, then, is what specific courses will be the most advantageous to me, and what kind of knowledge will be the most useful to the clients I serve?
- **Finally, know your audience.** It's important to remember that the post-Covid traveler will be more sophisticated and thus more eager to work with an expert. Younger travelers especially are showing greater interest in working with travel professionals, so now's the time to hone your elevator pitch! Whereas in the past, young people might have been more likely to take the DIY approach to travel and leisure, those who have tried this are beginning to realize that it often leads to needless confusion and inconveniences that can ruin an otherwise pleasant trip. We also know that younger people are deeply influenced by recommendations and weigh them heavily in their decision-making. These young travelers are looking to advisors for their

knowledge, competence, and professionalism, meaning those who can display glowing recommendations are far more likely to stand out. Once again, building and maintaining strong relationships is the key to success.

You've probably noticed the theme that runs through these four points. Relationships are everything! There's a good metaphor I often like to use, which I credit to the Counselor Salesperson program at the organization Wilson Learning. They talk about having a "balanced bicycle" when it comes to your professional skills. The front wheel represents your soft skills (i.e., interpersonal "people skills"), while the back wheel represents hard skills (your professional knowledge and competencies). Both are important, but I always caution new Travel Advisors not to underestimate the soft skills that they might bring to the table. Given the importance of relationship-building in this industry, those soft skills need to be at least as strong as the hard ones. Maintaining that focus on the relationship aspect of your business will keep you on the path to success.