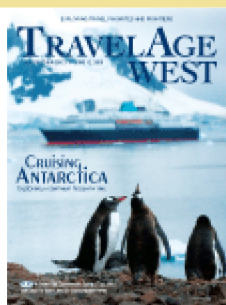


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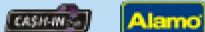
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NICHE

Selling the Life of Luxury

The luxury travel niche is an increasingly crucial market for agencies. Industry heavy-hitters weigh in on techniques for getting your slice of the luxury pie.

by J.L. Erickson
05/29/2006



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What would you sell your client today if money were no object? Chances are good that the answer is at least part of the key to what experts say is an increasingly crucial move for agencies to boost sales, particularly in the lucrative luxury market that is one of the industry's fastest-growing

segments.

Lavish Amenities

While Peninsula Hotels has a relatively small number of properties — seven worldwide — it also has established an international brand name and reputation through quality and commitment to service excellence.

Peninsula keeps agents informed about the latest updates and new programs and Jean Forrest, general manager of marketing for Peninsula, says the value proposition the hotels offer upscale clients is the key focus.

"Although staying at a Peninsula may be slightly higher than some of our competitors ... there is always so much added value that you don't always quantify as a feature but is delivered as a service. For example ... special amenities that are unique to each hotel and staff," Forrest said.

Such high-end services are what Beverly Hills, Calif.,-based Mansour Travel Co. has capitalized on for more than two decades, catering to the entertainment and business world specializing in celebrity, film and TV production arrangements.

Gary Mansour says he built the now \$25 million-a-year business by word of mouth as clients told others about the quality of his services.

"I proved I could do the homework and do the work ... I found a way to figure out what they need. I'm honest. I didn't try to snow them when I didn't know. But I told them I would find out," he said.

Mansour now has leveraged that reputation to launch Avion Private Jet Club, a commissionable service offering per-seat pricing on Los Angeles-New York-Los Angeles flights. The service includes door-to-door transportation, private airports, Italian cashmere blankets, preferred hotel and spa rates and complimentary cuisine by chefs, including Wolfgang Puck Catering. Members pay a one-time fee of \$14,500, as well as annual dues. And that's on top of the per-flight cost of \$6,000 one way. Avion, which had its first flight in March 2005, now has 60 members.

"I want [clients] to be as invested in me as I am in them," Mansour said. "I offer quality work and my staff is good. ... Agents don't want to turn down clients, but they shouldn't be afraid to do that. We have to charge for what we do. ... You're worth it."

Tepper advises agents looking to sell up to focus on quality, service and specialization.

"It's not going to happen overnight. It takes a lot of patience to build that trust," said Tepper. "If you're moving into that world, you're more than a travel agent you're a consultant or advisor. And that's a process of building trust, comfort and commitment. You have to earn the respect."



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