

BY KATE RICE

A GUIDE TO VIRTUAL SUCCESS

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY USE TECHNOLOGY TO SELL YOURSELF



Selling travel today is as much about selling yourself as it is about selling travel. You need to show your customers that you can be an expert, not just about travel but about them, their wants, needs and desires. In our information-rich era, consumers are swamped with information about dream vacations. Their challenge is to sift through all that information and make decisions about the endless details that go into planning a single vacation. Consumers need advice, and when it comes to travel, they increasingly recognize that travel agents are the experts they should turn to.

What you want to do is ensure that when your customers are looking for that advice, you're right there to give them the answers. The way to do that: marketing.

In generations past, neighborhood retailers knew their customers because people lived, worked and shopped locally. Now we live, work and shop virtually, using telephone, email, the web, instant messaging and texting. Your challenge is to put those technologies to work for you as marketing tools in the same way that retailers of yesteryear used in-store meetings, face-to-face conversations and chance encounters on the street to build the relationships they needed to have with their customers.

Here are the technological tools you need:

A DYNAMITE DATABASE. An accurate up-to-date database is essential. This holds your customers' names, contact information, important dates, family members and travel history. You need to constantly update this. It is all-important, but it doesn't

have to take up all of your time. Ideally, the database should automatically synchronize with your booking engine and back-office systems, which means you automatically update your client profiles with their latest travel, so you can look at their past travel to get an idea of what to propose to them next.

You can opt for travel-specific CRM systems such as TRAMS ClientBase Plus (www.trams.com), ClientEase (www.clientease.com), WinCruise (www.wincruise.com) and others. Major consortia, co-ops, franchises and host agencies also provide proprietary or private-label CRM systems or partner with commercial systems. There are also generic database programs such as Outlook, Goldmine and ACT.

WAYS TO KEEP IN TOUCH. You need to reach out and touch your clients regularly. Even if the cruise or "trip to Europe" postcard or email you send them isn't what they're looking for right now, it keeps you top-of-mind, so when they are ready to travel, they know you're interested in helping them do that.

All major travel agency consortia, co-ops, marketing groups and franchises offer direct-mail or email programs with regularly scheduled mailings. The best programs segment mailings, sending offers to clients based on their demographics and past travel. Some allow you to go in and edit lists, adding or subtracting clients. Most also help maintain your database, ensuring that addresses are correct. Opting-in for programs such as these is one of the most cost-effective investments you can make. It means your clients get professional mailings that come from you

to them. Suppliers subsidize much of the cost of these mailings. Most groups provide you with a certain number of free mailings, but it's well worth paying more to add more names to a list—the price is usually a bargain.

Additionally, more and more consortia, franchises and host agencies are putting together exclusive travel offers that include elements and amenities such as after-hours tours of historic sites, which are simply not available to the general public. Or they have blocked out group space that you can book individuals into at a very attractive rate. This allows you to market exclusive offers to customers you know will be interested in the trip.

Many major retailers, host agencies and industry groups, including AAA, America's Vacation Center, American Express, Carlson Leisure Group, Jurni, Navigant Vacations, Uniglobe, Ensemble Travel Group, Joystar, Nexion, Mtravel, YTB, Cruise Shoppes, Vacation.com, the Outside Sales Support Network and the National Association of Commissioned Travel Agents, host Passport Online (www.passportonlineinc.com), which has several online marketing programs. Among them is an email marketing program that agents can customize.

In addition to providing retail agency groups with marketing email campaigns, suppliers provide customizable emails that agents can easily edit and then send out to their customers. Royal Caribbean International's HTML emails, that agents can customize and send to their clients, are highly effective—they have a 64 percent open rate, according to the cruise line. VAXVacation Access (www.vaxvacationaccess.com) offers a

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wide variety of customizable messaging, from booking confirmations (“Here’s everything you need,”) to sales promotions (“I thought you might be interested in this special”), to descriptions of hotels or destinations (“Here’s more about that property I mentioned along with some activities offered”).

ModernAgent.com, a sister company of *Agent@Home*, gives agents a free, completely customizable newsletter on its home page. It allows you to skim a comprehensive list of industry specials and include them in a “ready to go” template or a “create your own.”

Many other suppliers offer similar tools—and they cost little or nothing. Whatever option you use, the important thing is to use your database to match the right offer with the right client, and to do so regularly, to keep you top-of-mind for them.

WEBSITES AND WORD OF MOUTH. Your website is a marketing tool that tells your clients about you as well as what you sell. Again, partner with your host agency, consortia or a company that provides web content. Many of these groups partner with PassportOnline, which has agreements from more than 80 suppliers, including cruise lines, tour operators and wholesalers. It’s adding resorts later this year and it aggregates content from these suppliers daily, updating information on specials and new products on your website—freeing you up from this task.

In addition to providing you with a core of robust travel content, PassportOnline also gives you tools that allow you to upload your own offers into the product database to display on the website. You can also upload photos and text and your own content, showcasing yourself and your specialties.

The beauty of a website is that you are always accessible to your clients. They can go to your website and search for travel ideas. They can book on it—earning you commissions and clout with your suppliers.

More importantly today, it’s a tool that you can use for viral marketing. Viral marketing is word-of-mouth marketing that happens online. It’s about getting your customers to send their friends, relatives

and colleagues to your website to learn more about you.

SOCIAL NETWORKING. The collaborative capabilities of the web have been clear ever since the advent of chat rooms. But the web keeps evolving and we’re now at Web 2.0, the current label for the web’s capability of bringing many people from disparate places together online. There are a variety of ways you can capitalize on this. One is simply by inviting your clients to post photos or videos from their vacations on your website. You can hold a photo contest—invite clients to post their best photos and have other clients and their friends and relatives vote on their favorites.

**You Want your
Marketing Materials to
reflect your personal
brand, because what
your clients are buying
is really you and your
professional expertise.**

One way to do this is by utilizing TravelTribe and TravelTube, both of which are owned by Performance Media Group. TravelTribe, which publishes travel deals featuring agent experts, is launching TravelTribe 2.0 this fall. TravelTube is essentially the YouTube of travel. Both are designed to exploit the viral marketing potential of the web. That is, you create your own “channel” on TravelTribe, by building a profile of yourself to showcase yourself and your specialties to your own “tribe” of customers that you attract either through TravelTribe’s marketing or through your own marketing. TravelTribe is more than a place to position yourself as a travel expert, it’s also place where, using TravelTube, you can post videos, photos, even blogs about your own travels. These could be about your own vacations and fam trips or footage of resorts or destinations for which you’re

an accredited specialist. You can post footage of a cruise or destination on which there’s a great special and email it to clients, even do weekly videos about what you consider the hot specials of the week, then email clients about the postings.

You can also use it to feature some of your clients’ travels—and then invite your clients and friends to visit the site. You can also invite your customers to create their own TravelTribe site—which will then feature you as the customer’s travel expert.

You can also create a blog, using services such as Google’s blogger (www.blogger.com), in which you tell your clients about your own trips—and invite them to talk about theirs. This is an interactive feature that keeps bringing your clients back for more—and more often than not, they’ll refer friends and colleagues to your site.

Suppliers enable you to use their social networking sites to build your business. CarnivalConnections.com, Carnival Cruise Line’s social networking and group booking site, is an example of one such tool you can use to market and sell groups. It has an electronic invitation tool that you can use to send an email to your clients. It can say something such as “Join ABC Travel as we host our annual President’s Cruise.” Its social networking capabilities allow your clients to communicate with each other. Some might praise the idea, saying it sounds like a great trip; others might reminisce about the wonderful time they had on the previous year’s President’s Cruise. And, they’ll send their friends to the site to see their postings—and learn about you.

These are all highly personalized functions that allow you to essentially subcontract out large portions of the marketing work to the pros who do it best. You can decide how much work you want to put into customizing your website or emails. Ultimately, you want your marketing materials to reflect your personal brand, because what your clients are buying is really you and your professional expertise, so establishing your identity—without spending too much time on it—is key. @