

Cruiseweek 3/07

Retailer Recognition

When it comes to cruise lines bestowing official recognition on cruise sellers, the honors are going to increasingly varied types of business models. But no matter how varied, there are two points of commonality among the winners: 1) they are extremely proud that their work has been recognized, and 2) they cite as a key reason for success a very personal working relationship with the supplier.

The granddaddy of agency awards is Carnival's Agency of the Year, around since 1980. To say that recipients are thrilled is an understatement; this year's winner is no exception. "It was like a dream come true," says Sharon Euliss, All About Cruises, Burlington, N.C. "We've been nominated three other times over the last 16 years, so I no longer got my hopes up. However, when I got that letter with the news, I'm screaming and crying. I told Wendy, our Carnival rep, to me it's like being at the Oscars and winning the lifetime achievement award."

When these awards are bestowed, it's often for symbolic reasons. The award to All About Cruises is about more than just pure volume; the cruise lines are trying to show that small storefront agencies are still viable businesses. All About Cruises is certainly no mega, with one full-time, three part-time, and nine outside agents.

Focusing on group business is why All About Cruises has remained viable, with groups as 75% of its total volume. Euliss attends numerous trade shows, particularly association shows, in order to develop group business, and she keeps on plugging away when things go awry. "We block a lot of space with groups--some fall through. I don't say, 'Oh well, it's gone.' I research and do another group that space would fit. This happened last year. I followed through on a group that was a bomb, and we wound up sailing with 146 people."

Some 35% of her group business is now incentive. "Because of the low rates now, our incentive business is phenomenal," she reports. "When you can buy cruises for \$250, people can afford to give away cruises to home builders and the like."

As with many smaller retailers, the emphasis is on service: "We treat people the way we would want to be treated, and we do follow-up," says Euliss. "When people go on their cruise, we send a welcome home card. Then we call and ask them about the cruise to find out if they had problems, etc."

The goal is retaining customer loyalty, even though consumers seem flightier than ever. But Euliss says some consumer loyalty still exists, supporting her assertion with the story of a longtime client who had veered to the Internet and its promise of savings for a recent cruise. "She came back and talked like someone who was cheating on me," laughs Euliss. "She said, 'I'm embarrassed, Sharon. This is what we did, and I promise we'll never do it again, because there's no service.'"

As for why Euliss hadn't followed the path of so many small agencies and moved home, Euliss replied: "I love our storefront location; it's very visible. We're on a corner where you go to Elon College in Burlington. While the majority of our new clients are referrals, and then it's from the phone book, there's just a lot who have driven by day after day and wind up coming in."

But Euliss says what's key to her business success with Carnival is the working relationship she has with the company at all levels. Some representative comments: "The folks in their incentive department are just awesome. I've been working with them so long that we all know each other by first name, and you develop a relationship. I like that the fact that you work with basically one person, and just as importantly, you're able to reach that one person easily."

It doesn't stop there. "I can even call the top people if necessary, like Cherie Weinstein [vp of group sales and administration] or Joan Levicoff Sanchez [vp of group sales]," says Euliss. "And on the local level, our rep does an excellent job--Wendy's message is any time you make calls, just call me. We make appointments, and we get new business for groups and incentives."

Celebrity Honors Cruise Seller

On the other end of the cruise-selling spectrum from All About Cruises is Celebrity's top corporate, incentive, and charter travel partner of the year for 2006: Buy The Sea in Plantation, Fla. Owner Shari Wallack, a former

cruise line rep turned cruise retailer, describes her operation as a "cruise brokerage firm" that specializes in the meetings and incentive business. Although the model differs from the more traditional All About Cruises, some of Wallack's comments mirror those of Euliss, including the thrill of being recognized by a supplier: "For us, this is huge," says Wallack.

In her sales pitch, Wallack emphasizes her strong relationships with all the departments at the cruise lines and, in particular, the relationship she has with the award giver, Celebrity. "We are a cruise and all-inclusive resort brokerage company," said Wallack. "Our clients are incentive companies and corporations."

On the one hand, she emphasizes her independence from the supplier in order to achieve the best fit for potential clients; on the other hand, she emphasizes having a good, personal working relationship with suppliers such as Celebrity. "The key for me at Celebrity versus many other companies is that-- from requesting the quote, to getting through to the contract, to dealing with the operational details, to dealing with upper management--they're all very onboard; they're all very interested and willing in the sale," says Wallack.

"For example," she continues, "Let's say we don't get something in the first go around. They are very open to us going to the next rung saying, 'Hey, you aren't being competitive.' They don't just say, 'Sorry, that's our pricing, have a nice day.' They come back and say, 'How can we help you make the sale?'"

Wallack, like Euliss, says the relationship goes up to the highest levels. "They know who we are, they will take our calls, they are constantly feeding us with phenomenal sales tools and information, information, information," she notes. "We get the buy-in all the way up to Dondra Ritzenthaler [vice president of sales], because they don't want to lose any opportunity."

Of course, this concept doesn't just work with Celebrity. Wallack, like Euliss, successfully sells numerous brands, though one crucial difference she notes of Celebrity, "They rely on the partners to get the message out to say, 'This is a classy product,' because they know they're not rolling off everybody's tongue."