

11 Tips to Selling a Destination that you and your agency staff have never visited

Personal travels and Fam trips are excellent learning tools for destination knowledge. You can get 'up close and personal' with the sights, sounds, smells and rhythm of the destination, while at the same time developing relationships with suppliers who then become key elements in your secret stash of expertise and wow-producers.

But what do you do when a client wants to book a destination that you've never visited (and sometimes that you never knew existed). How do you become a fountain of knowledge in a very short time on topics such as restaurants, accommodations, activities, attractions, culture, people, food, transportation, climate, currency, crowds, safety, documentation and more?

Here are 11 tips to selling a destination that you and the agency staff have never visited.

- 1. Understand it:** The first question to ask when a client mentions where they are thinking of traveling, is "why". It's important that you understand what it is about the destination that excites the client and what they envision themselves doing there. Based on this knowledge you can then embark on research to complement your clients' stay.
- 2. Match it:** Part of your job is to qualify the client and see if there is a match between their needs and the suitability of the destination. There's an old industry anecdote about the elderly senior citizen you hears the couple in the agency talking excitedly about Acapulco, and when she sits down to talk with the agent she announces that she too wants to go there. The agent asks the woman what she likes to do and the customer talks about relaxing on a quiet beach in a quiet destination, meeting other seniors, playing shuffleboard and canasta, and going to sleep early every day. The agent gently suggests that Acapulco may not be the ideal holiday venue for this client.
- 3. Google it:** After understanding the reasons for the client's destination choice, the next step is to Google it. You will inevitable arrive at thousands of pages of information on the destination, so narrow it down to the top 10 ten reasons why people travel to...or top ten attractions or accommodations etc. Most countries have a tourist board website that is packed with information to assist travel agents and consumers. You can also read the quick Wikipedia articles to grasp what the country is all about, and there is usually a tourism section within that article that will give you a thumbnail sketch of the tourist scene. And your GDS will have lots of information too!
- 4. Map it:** Know where the country is located; the surrounding countries, the bodies of water, and the hemisphere—and make sure you spell it correctly. You don't want to research Oakland if your client is thinking about Auckland, or sending them to Colombo when they were asking about Colombia or the District of Columbia. Map work will also clue you into the continent and give you an idea of the climate as well as possible routings to arrive at the destination.
- 5. Check it:** Look up travel advisories on the government web site to see the status of the country, the passport and visa requirements, any medical concerns that you can bring to the attention of your client; safety issues or areas of the country that are not tourism appropriate, and even hints about the currency situation.

6. **Watch it:** There are a ton of resources available to put you into the ambiance or the energy of the country while you are half a world away. You Tube, destination videos, television programs, food T.V., guide books, travel magazines, newspaper travel sections, Netflix, online reviews of various aspects of tourism at the destination and more, will contribute to your understanding.
7. **Niche it:** While you may have a general understanding of why your client has chosen this destination, you will also want to check your CRM files (customer relationship management) to see if the niche interests of your client line-up with what is available at the destination. Someone looking for adventure travel may not be thrilled in a shopping paradise; a client who loves beaches and water activities may not appreciate a landlocked destination.
8. **Contact it:** This is networking time. Think of agents and suppliers who you've met that may have experience in sending clients to the destination. Get in touch with the tourist board; check out your LinkedIn contacts; send a query on your other social networks. Rely on trusted sources; have a healthy scepticism from anonymous sources until you check out their suggestions.
9. **Present it.** The best way to learn something is to teach it! Once you've done your homework, consider putting together a short PowerPoint or Animoto or SlideRocket story of some of the highlights of the destination. This should include some cultural aspects of the destination—music, dance, art—as well as some attractions and some hotel and restaurant choices that your client may enjoy. A presentation changes the theoretical and changes it into the realistic. No more books and videos—here's the actual presentation-and you can brand it with your agency logo. For some examples see <http://www.talkingtravel.ca/be-there-with-me.html>
10. **Sense it.** For a major client or a group booking possibility, you need to go the extra mile. This could include contacting a local restaurant that specializes in dishes from the destination; holding an information evening at your office where sample treats are provided, playing music from the destination or using your contacts (tourist board or local suppliers) to provide a feel or taste of the destination. At a Morocco evening, I handed out small vials containing sand from the Sahara; for Argentina I served Malbec wine and for Peru I handed out Coca candies.
11. **Sell it!** With all your research in place, use your selling skills as you would, any sale. It doesn't make a difference that the client seems to be convinced that they want this particular destination. You can't assume that just by researching it, they will hand you their credit card. You need to match features and benefits and respond to questions and 'objections'. You need to appreciate the nuances that separate one hotel or resort from the next; one dining experience from the others; one activity from another, all based on your knowledge of the clients' needs.

And does this work? Absolutely. Years ago I was asked to give a presentation to 140 travel agents on How to Sell Dubai. I had never been to Dubai but at the end of my talk, people approached me to ask about my travel experiences in the UAE. All I had done was to follow the 11 steps of getting to know a destination. I even found some movies filmed in Dubai so I could get a feel for the traffic and the proximity of one attraction to another. And then using photos, music, advice from colleagues who had been to Dubai, as well as the specific interests of the audience, I was able to present a destination talk that was meaningful, effective and memorable. Your own educational path regarding any destination, can yield the same results. Bon Voyage!