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FINDING SALES IN ROMANCE

HOW TO CREATE PERFECT HONEYMOON, ROMANCE & DESTINATION WEDDING TRAVEL EXPERIENCES



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Lucky in Love

Three agents discover that romance travel can be lucrative

Romance travel—honeymoons and destination weddings—is one style of travel that seems virtually recession-proof. Couples are going to get married and go on honeymoons no matter what's happening with the economy. They may downscale a trip, choosing less expensive accommodations or shaving a few days off the vacation, but they will travel nonetheless. Following are profiles of three successful agents who specialize in this perennially profitable market.

Romance travel accounts for about 30 percent of **Carolyn Waffle's** transactions and about 40 percent of her revenues. "It's absolutely profitable," she says. "Next to groups, it's the most profitable product there is."

But it's also fun. Waffle, CTC and an independent affiliate with America's Vacation Center based in Binghamton, N.Y., likes romance. She likes touches such as private pools and outdoor showers in the Caribbean and Mexico, over-water private bungalows in Tahiti, or, her hands-down favorite, Italy's Amalfi Coast, where your private terrace opens onto views of the sea.

You have to know the product in this market, and Waffle does. "Because I like that sort of thing, I'm drawn to it," she says.

Waffle never goes anywhere on vacation without inspecting hotels. She considers knowing the product one of the most important things agents can do when it comes to selling romance. Personal visits are ideal, but webinars can be an excellent source of information—and they mean no one has any excuse for pleading ignorance when it comes to embracing the romance market. She's always looking for new and romantic venues and reads bridal magazines to stay abreast of what brides are looking for.

And that pays off. Of the three destination weddings she's in the middle of planning right now, one is a cruise, another is in Aruba and the third is in the Riviera Maya, Mexico. She has already stayed at the resort in Aruba and has traveled extensively in the Riviera Maya.

Waffle does a limited amount of marketing. She originally participated



"Next to groups, [romance travel] is the most profitable product there is."

—CAROLYN WAFFLE

in bridal shows but found that to convert a lead into a honeymoon required five to 10 follow-up calls—too much work for too little payoff. As a member of the National Association of Wedding Professionals, she's listed on its website, and that's a source of leads. She occasionally partners with other wedding vendors, such as bridal shops, holding an open house featuring a particular designer. She'll feature materials from well-known honeymoon resorts such as Sandals to help establish her credentials.

Honeymooners are keenly aware of the values available right now, and Waffle makes sure they get the free honeymoon package—champagne, strawberries dipped in chocolate, a couple's massage—that might normally cost \$100 to \$150. Room upgrades, the fifth night free, spa credits and similar value add-ons are common.

She cultivates preferred suppliers. America's Vacation Center is an American Express agency, so she uses American Express Vacations, which she says has "top-notch" service and "amazing" overrides.

Finally, honeymooners and bridal couples are a source of continuing business. As long as Waffle follows up with them, she retains them. "Once you establish that [connection], it's very easy,

with very little effort, to continue the relationship," she says.

Amy Johnson, owner of Room with a View Travel, in Germantown, Wis., went from being a clinical instructor in dental hygiene at Marquette University in Milwaukee to a romance specialist. Marquette closed down the program, and for a few years, Johnson stayed home with her kids. When her youngest went off to kindergarten, she wanted to work but still have flexible hours and summers free. She signed on with her own travel agent, herself a former teacher, and went to work for her, initially booking only cruises. She now specializes in cruises and all-inclusives. Living in the Midwest means that nature is her marketing partner—when winter hits, her phone starts to ring. Johnson's geographic specialty was a natural lead-in to honeymoons, and her first destination wedding was a Hawaii cruise, the perfect place to start for an agent who was originally cruise-only.

Johnson's destination wedding business is growing, which she credits to the fact that 20-somethings see it as a good value. Even small groups can be profitable. Currently she has 30 people booked for a wedding in Cancun, Mexico, in February, and she hopes to in-

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crease that number to 40. A wedding trip is especially profitable if it's land-based, since cruise commissions are plummeting as cruise lines drop fares to fill their ships.

The fact that she's near Milwaukee, which has a lot of charter service, means she also gets commission on air, an additional help to her bottom line. She tends to use Funjet Vacations and Apple Vacations.

But Johnson says her success is not all about 20-somethings. She does a fair amount of anniversary trips, and these too can turn into small groups. One couple will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary, and one or two other couples will join them.

"Believe it or not, a lot of Wisconsinites want to go to Alaska," she says. Many of her anniversary clients opt for an Alaskan cruise. Her older clients also enjoy European cruises.

Johnson deliberately targeted the romance niche by participating in a bridal tradeshow, but what really got her specialty going were referrals, most of them from past clients and friends of clients. She also runs an ad in the local Yellow Pages.

Johnson has leaped into social media. She started out with a personal page on Facebook and now has a fan page. She has linked that to Twitter so that what she posts in one immediately bounces to the other. She's sensitive to the need for a light touch when it comes to social media marketing. Her posts are a mix of reviews and photos of resorts she's visited, as well as hot deals. She also writes a blog, which is connected to LinkedIn.

She and her partner, Louise Rumpf, are Joystar refugees and members of Vacation.com. She uses its Engagement direct marketing program and capitalizes on its preferred supplier relationships whenever it fits appropriately with her clients' needs. The result: Despite a sagging economy, Johnson just had her busiest summer ever.

Nancy Barkley, owner of Philadelphia-based Honeymoons and Get-a-Ways, has gone through several stages in establishing herself as a romance travel specialist. Barkley, who is currently working on seven weddings, has 22 years in the business, but built her agency from scratch starting four years ago. She sent out neighborhood mailings and worked the bridal show circuit, using her preferred supplier relationships to give away honeymoons that would place her prominently on the show marquees.

She has used online advertising and still is a frequent participant in online bridal forums. Barkley is also a destination wedding expert featured on bridal show panels hosted by the Mexico Tourism Board and its regional and supplier partners. At a recent panel in New York, she met a mother of a bride and is now working with her on the wedding.

Barkley is involved in the forum on Brides.com, answering questions and generating leads in the process. For example, a bride might ask about Costa Rica and Barkley will offer to answer questions and give the bride her phone number.

commissions of up to 15 percent. However, destination weddings are also a lot of work; she is essentially planning FITs for groups that may start out as 100 but then shrink to 20. It can cut both ways of course: One couple was surprised to find that they had 80 guests planning to come to their event; they had expected only a handful to make the trip.

Barkley finds her brides and grooms are careful consumers. She recognizes the responsibility she holds and the relationships she's developing. "Especially with destination weddings, you're in it for the long haul—nine months to a year out,"

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That establishes her expertise and attracts business. She also participates in forums in TheKnot.com and the WeddingChannel.com. She works in bridal shows, partnering with vendors to give away stays at five-star hotels. She can convert these leads to sales; she's currently doing a mailing to brides she met at a show early in the year, because their weddings aren't until the end of 2010 or 2011.

Barkley has learned that destination weddings are profitable. A modest honeymoon may cost \$3,000, but a wedding-honeymoon combination can easily run \$5,000, and often far more than that. She uses preferred suppliers when it's a good fit, which means she can earn

she says. She works hard for her clients, handling small but important details that don't generate commissions but do cement her relationships, such as working directly with the hotel to arrange a romantic dinner or some other special perk for a couple.

The beauty of romance travel is that these clients can turn into lifelong customers. "The repeat business is golden," she says—and it's not just from the brides and grooms, but from their parents and guests and friends. Recently a bride who had a destination wedding with 85 guests in Puerto Vallarta in 2006 called Barkley to ask her for help in planning a trip to Italy with three other couples. @



One advantage of romance travel is that "the repeat business is golden."
—NANCY BARKLEY

