

# AGENT@HOME

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hosts

BY KATE RICE

## On-the-Job Training

A look at the educational resources offered by some top host agencies

Host agencies are facing a growing demand for education. They must provide effective training to far-flung networks of agents with disparate business models, locations and schedules. To manage this challenge they usually offer a combination of face-to-face classroom courses accompanied by virtual training. Following is a sampling of some of the opportunities available.

**America's Vacation Center:** America's Vacation Center has one goal, says Brad Anderson, its co-president, and that's to increase the income of its agents. That's the focus of its training as well. The company accepts only established agents, so its training starts at a very elevated level. Because America's Vacation Center is a marketing machine, sending its agents qualified leads through its Live Leads program, it doesn't offer classes on marketing or website design.

Its curriculum focuses instead on product knowledge, closing sales and how to deliver the kind of customer service that generates repeat and referral business. And it delivers its training through its online program, America's Vacation Center University, and in face-to-face settings, such as its national conference and regional meet-

ings. Other educational events include seminars at sea, ship inspections and fam trips.

America's Vacation Center University provides different vendor, destination, product and sales training almost every day. These sessions are recorded, allowing AVC agents to access them on demand.

Affiliates start with the New Independent Affiliate Training Program, which includes a Welcome Aboard and Quick Start session, as well as training on its much-vaunted agency operating system, Agent Power. A weekly sales coaching conference features guest speakers and discussions of best practices, selling techniques, company news and more. AVCU offers business development coaching, vendor website training and vendor presentations. It also has group sales training.

The host agency provides a variety of ways for you to network with your colleagues, using instant messaging, a community forum and the "My AVC Buddy System."

Anderson says that one of the best ways to become proficient at your job is to network with equally successful agents; America's Vacation Center facilitates that. It also provides internal newsletters, weekly webinars, mentoring

and roundtables. And in the end, there are no grades. AVC measures just one thing, your performance, says Anderson. And if you perform well, you pass.

For more information, visit [www.joinavc.com](http://www.joinavc.com).

**Cruise Holidays:** Cruise Holidays, which is part of the Travel Leaders Leisure Group, is a franchise that originally targeted storefronts. A year ago, however, it merged with its sister franchise, SeaMaster Cruises, which targeted home-based agencies. Now about half of its agencies are home-based.

Cruise Holidays has its own certification program: Certified Personal Cruise Expert. It uses both online and classroom training, and incorporates courses created by preferred suppliers and CLIA, as well as Cruise Holidays' own training materials. Franchisees start working toward their certification as soon as they sign their franchise agreements. They begin their studies online, preparing themselves for the intensive, weeklong Cruise Holidays Cruise University, held every quarter in Minneapolis.

The online courses introduce students to material that they'll cover on a more in-depth level in classrooms. That makes the classrooms much more interactive—students can ask questions about the material they've just studied and have the chance to delve into it in a more intense way. It's a conversation, not a lecture, says Mark Schiffner, vice president of Cruise Holidays.

Cruise University covers the economics, terminology and sales basics of cruising. It covers Cruise Holidays' systems, which include the Cruise Holidays sales system and Cruise Web, the company's proprietary web-based operating system. Agents study business practices such as marketing and draw up an explicit action plan.

All educational materials are available in The Bridge, Cruise Holidays' extranet (named for the bridge on a ship), which holds all information that

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franchisees need to run their businesses.

Twice a month, Cruise Holidays holds an online "Coffee Chat," a teleconference in which industry experts and preferred suppliers cover specific topics.

All this prepares them for Phase Two of Cruise University, the 40-hour Advance Group Training program about selling groups, which is held aboard a cruise ship. More training is offered at Cruise Holidays' midyear and annual meetings. Staff members from Cruise Holidays act as mentors, calling or emailing franchisees every week or so to offer help or answer questions.

For more information, visit [www.cruiseholidays.com](http://www.cruiseholidays.com).

**Cruise Planners:** Cruise Planners University (CPU) takes franchisees from freshman year all the way to a Ph.D., with a rigorous program that includes not just Cruise Planners' own training and educational materials, but also the best of what cruise lines and CLIA have to offer.

It's an online university that you can customize at MyCPU.com, but it includes face-to-face classroom training as well as virtual classes. And online content backs up the courses you take live, meaning it's always there for

you to review.

The freshman-year program has 45 courses; the sophomore year has nearly 40. You must earn 100 points to continue from one year to the next; you earn points from CPU's own classes as well as from CLIA and suppliers.

CPU kicks off with a six-day mandatory New Agent Training program held six times a year for new franchisees, both new entrants or industry veterans. The CPU training covers the cruise industry, as well as Cruise Planners' own practices and systems. There's an evening tradeshow with 30 vendors; supplier partners give presentations; and industry experts cover travel law, marketing, social media, and an overview of business practices.

Terri Burke, MCC, CTC and senior vice president, relationship marketing for Cruise Planners, divides a class up into teams to have them work together on booking a cruise, complete with shore excursions, insurance and other options.

"To this day, we have never all gotten the same price," says Burke. "It just demonstrates how volatile the industry is in terms of pricing and options." The six-day session includes ship inspections. Some franchisees have never taken a cruise, and this gives everyone hands-on experience on a cruise ship.

Once franchisees have finished their freshman year, they're eligible to take one of the many fairs that CPU offers. There are also regular seminars at sea. Cruise Planners provides more training at its annual meeting, being held this year Nov. 10, with three days at the Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) Westin and a two-night cruise aboard the *Celebrity Eclipse*.

For more information, visit [www.cruiseplanners.com](http://www.cruiseplanners.com).

**Nexion:** Nexion offers two major face-to-face training options. Its two-and-a-half day Boot Camps are held throughout the year at its headquarters in Southlake, Texas. Its annual conference is set to be held this year Sept. 29-Oct. 1 in Miami.

Nexion's Boot Camp—where Nexion staff dress in khaki or pink camouflage—covers preferred suppliers, destinations, Nexion tools and business practices. Boot camp groups are small—about 40 people—to promote camaraderie among the agents that they

can maintain even when they return to their home offices.

Back at home, agents can use Nexion University, which contains everything else Nexion has to offer, from a library of resources to a variety of webinars that agents can attend live or access from an archive. Nexion University offers two Nexion Fundamentals classes, one geared for experienced agents, the other for novices.

Nexion also hosts two or three supplier calls each week, in which the guests talk about their products and answer questions from agents. Jackie Friedman, Nexion's managing director, holds a monthly Ask Nexion conference call in which she updates agents on what's happening with her company, as well as providing a forum where agents can share their perspectives and insights.

## Host agencies must provide effective training to far-flung networks of agents.

The company is continuing the Travel Industry Executive programs that it began last year. These feature industry executives such as Mike Going, president of Funjet; Vicki Freed, senior vice president of sales for Royal Caribbean; and Jim Smith, CTIE and director of marketing for CLIA. Industry leaders such as these offer tips for increasing business or discussing the state of the cruise industry.

The host agency also is continuing its Target Market Discovery Series, in which two or three suppliers on a virtual panel talk about their specialty. New this year is the Nexion Explorer Series, which focuses on destinations.

Nexion University also has a library with document templates, reference guides and interactive training on such topics as booking Nexion's blocked cruise space.

For more information, visit [www.nexion.com](http://www.nexion.com). @



Cruise Holiday's extranet, The Bridge, holds everything franchisees need to run their businesses.