

TRAVEL AGENT CENTRAL

Consumers Spin Wheel of Fortune with Wave Season Bookings

Step right up for two-for-one fares. Take your chance at a balcony blowout special. Tap into free air? No, it's not reality TV or a game show extravaganza. It's Wave Season 2010, which travel industry leaders say is delivering better-than-expected bookings and even some "waitlists" for popular cabin categories on peak season voyages.

As the cruise industry's prime promotional period, Wave Season usually begins in December or January and runs through the end of March or, depending on the line, into late spring. Wave Season promotions are designed to give consumers great deals and value-added perks early on – so the line fill their cabins as early as possible and, thus, stabilize pricing through the rest of the year.

Travel Agent talked with several industry leaders about their "intel" and gleanings about trends for this year's Wave Season.

Wave Season is Building

While many consumers are still reeling from the recession, most apparently remain committed to taking a vacation. Most "gung ho" of all those we interviewed is Brad Anderson, co-president, America's Vacation Center, who describes Wave Season this way: "For our affiliates, by any measure, it's the best Wave Season we've ever seen."

He says this year's Wave Season is stronger than last year's and, frankly, better for his organization than the 2008 Wave Season. America's Vacation Center affiliates now are reporting record levels in many categories -- new leads, bookings, average price of bookings and average agent commission. "It's never ever been better," Anderson emphasizes.

From another executive's perspective, "Wave Season has certainly had a different feeling this year - a much better one than same time last year," stresses Michelle Fee, CEO and co-founder, Cruise Planners. "With the stability of the economy, consumers seem to be trying to get back to living their lives. I'm not going to say they are completely back to where we were, but it's much, much better."

Echoing that thought is Jack Mannix, president and CEO, Ensemble Travel, who says he's very encouraged and believes bookings will continue to strengthen. His consortia's agents have already achieved some of their goals, and, anecdotally, he's hearing about positive trends in the marketplace. For example, "recent bookings for 2010 are up significantly over the prior year," Mannix says.

That said, he notes that total bookings for 2010 may still be a bit softer than the previous year, given that there was more Wave Season lead-in momentum in late

TRAVEL AGENT CENTRAL

2008 then in late 2009. But “all in all, I am pleased with the trending we're seeing at this point,” says Mannix.

From the perspective of Dwain Wall, senior vice president, CruiseOne & Cruises Inc., business is relatively consistent on a year-round basis and while the 2010 “Wave Season” began a little slower than originally anticipated, “we are now seeing it pick up,” says Wall. “Based on what we are currently experiencing, we expect 2010 to far exceed 2009.”

Hot Perks for Bookings

Pricewise, Fee says consumers definitely are driving the deals. That said, she also believes consumers are both eyeballing their budgets carefully and aggressively seeking value “The question is not, ‘what’s the best price you can give me for a particular cruise?’ It’s now ‘what’s the best price and... what else are you going to give me to book with you,’” she says.

Cruise lines are fielding myriad deals, discounts, perks and value-added features. But what’s really hot?

What’s perceived as the best value? Fee cites pre-paid gratuities and reduced deposits as policies that help her franchise owners and their agents close sales: “If we are able to couple those together consumers are more readily willing to book future departures.”



Regent Seven Seas' Seven Seas Voyager

Mannix reports that all clients are seeking great deals, including luxury customers. He says Regent Seven Seas Cruises' free air and free shore excursions continue to do well with his group's clients, as does the new Crystal Cruises program. In late 2009,

TRAVEL AGENT CENTRAL

Crystal revamped its fares and value-added promotional offers with two-for-one pricing, "All Inclusive - As You Wish" spending credits, free roundtrip air transportation (even free Business Class) from many North American gateways, as well as a price guarantee.

A key member of Wall's team, Steven Hattem, vice president of marketing, CruiseOne & Cruises Inc., also tells Travel Agent that price remains the prime driver for many clients and that onboard

credits "always help" agents in closing a sale. But the ultimate success of the promotions, and determining which promotion works best, really vary by type of cruise product, he says.

For luxury segment cruises, business class air upgrades or special shore excursions are a big draw, notes Hattem. Clients may save up to 50 percent on fares and get free airfare from certain North American gateways when bookings select European cruises by February 28 on Seabourn Cruise Line; clients booking Asia voyages receive free business class air.

For contemporary cruise clients, Hattem cites the top booking hooks as onboard credits and upgraded accommodations. For example, Norwegian Cruise Line's "Year of the Freestyle Vacation" Wave Season promotion offers free stateroom upgrades and a coupon book worth \$400 for bookings made by March 14. And Royal Caribbean International has unveiled a free upgrade promotion. Through February 28 on select sailings, your client might book an outside cabin for the price of an inside cabin.



Royal Caribbean's Oasis of the Seas

TRAVEL AGENT CENTRAL

Hot Products, Plus Waitlists

In the past few years, lines also have begun shifting the start of Wave Season a bit earlier. This year, it began in early December for many lines. Our experts report strong January sales of river and tour products as well as upper and premium category cruise products.

Helping the premium category along are such offers as Princess Cruises' "Balcony Bonanza," allowing passengers to upgrade to private balcony cabins for the cost of an ocean-view stateroom. Or, clients might save 25 percent off an Alaska cruise-tour with the line's "Denali on Sale" promotion. Agents can tap into customizable sales tools at www.onesourcecruises.com.

Clients sailing on Oceania Cruises for select European voyages will receive free roundtrip airfare plus additional savings of up to \$1,500 on two-for-one fares. In addition, Holland America Line's popular "View & Verandah Sale" has returned – saving clients up to 45 percent on oceanview and balcony cabins, as well as 25 percent on pre- and post-cruise hotel packages.

Celebrity Cruises and Azamara Cruises also have fielded promotions; Azamara offers free or \$99 roundtrip airfare from many North American gateways for select Miami departures to the Caribbean.

"Another area of [cruise selling] strength, which we got involved with last year, is the exploration cruise side," Anderson says. Working with Cruise West, a small ship operator offering exploratory voyages, has proven lucrative for his agents; a client's two-week vacation might net a \$25,000 booking.

Guests seeking value on Cruise West will find it, though. For clients who book and pay in full by March 26, the line is offering free roundtrip international airfare from San Francisco (SFO), Los Angeles (LAX), Chicago (ORD), Washington D.C. (IAD or DCA) and New York (JFK) or an air credit of \$750 per person. The offer is valid for voyages 1 through 18 of the 24-voyage segments of the "Voyages of the Great Explorers."

This year, many of the most desired European voyages on prime dates are selling out quickly. Anderson's agents are increasingly placing clients on "waitlists" for most desired dates and cabin categories.

"I'm watching all the waitlists that are being deposited and it's kind of frightening," Anderson says, as clients can't get the cruise departure date or specific type of accommodations they want on a certain sailing. They're being put on a waitlist, hoping space opens up.

Anderson gives this advice: "Booking is of the essence. You do your clients a disservice by indicating that they've got time to wait or that there's going to be a better

Travel Agent Online
January 20, 2010
By: Susan Young
80,000 visitors / month

TRAVEL AGENT CENTRAL

deal... or that they might be upgraded. This has turned quickly from a complete buyer's market into a marketplace with much more equilibrium."