

TRAVEL AGENT INTERVIEWS

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Travel Agent Interviews

Agency Membership

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Jackie Friedman
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Tell us about your career in the travel industry. How did you start out? What attracted you to travel?

My original plan was to be a composer. I graduated from university with a degree in music composition, but soon realized that it would be very difficult to make a living composing and I wasn't otherwise prepared for a specific career. My mother, who was pressuring me to get a job, said I needed to find something I was passionate about. My aunt and uncle worked in the travel business and, along with my mother, encouraged me to explore the world of travel, which I agreed to, first and foremost, to get my mother off my back. I went to travel school and volunteered at a local agency two afternoons a week. It didn't take long until I was hooked. Becoming a travel advisor not only gave me a job, it helped me indulge my passion for travel. After working as a travel agent, I moved to Sabre, and then on to Nexion Travel Group in 2004. I have ended up with an incredibly enjoyable career. I guess mothers do know best sometimes!

In your role at the helm of Nexion, what have been some of your career highlights, thus far?

My success revolves around helping others to become successful, which is incredibly rewarding. Over the years, I have watched many new travel advisors build well-respected, lucrative businesses, and I love having a hand in that.

Another thing I love about my job is that I am constantly challenged to find the right balance that lets everyone be successful and satisfied. Not only does Nexion Travel Group need to deliver results, but I need to make sure whatever we are doing is in the best interest of our members, our employees, our supplier partners and our company. Achieving success in finding that sweet spot is very rewarding. Another thing I am very proud of is the work Nexion has done over the years to become a standard-bearer for developing new sellers of travel. In the early days of the organization there was an intentional focus on building out that capability. We established Travel Leaders of Tomorrow, our Nexstart training and, more recently, our Veterans in Travel Program. All are designed to help those new to the industry become successful travel advisors.

What trends are you seeing in the business?

The biggest and best trend is the resurgence of interest in working as a professional travel advisor. More and more people, from many different walks of life, are coming into the fold. I work with new members from ages 18 to 80.

And travelers are realizing that travel advisors are here to stay. Millennial customers are where I am seeing the greatest growth, which makes me feel very hopeful about the future.

When it comes to the types of travel people are looking for, I am seeing more interest in adventure travel, culinary travel and solo travel. The cruise industry is doing a great job of capitalizing on those trends. The scale of innovation happening in the cruise industry is truly amazing. We see clients who are now very focused on the ships themselves and what innovations and features they can find on board and others who are very destination focused and seeking unique and extraordinary land experiences, all of which the cruise industry is really excelling at.

What advice would you give anyone embarking on a career as a travel advisor?

Firstly, I'd say congratulations on picking such a great industry! Secondly, I'd encourage them to take both their hard and soft skills seriously. A good travel advisor should know how to run a business, but also have sales skills and destination knowledge. Thirdly, I'd tell them to do more with less. Don't be afraid to specialize! You can always broaden your focus later, but in the beginning, don't overwhelm yourself. Figure out your niche and learn it backwards and forwards. Take advantage of training offered by CLIA and others. One of our newer members, Melissa Erskine, attended CLIA Cruise360 for the first time last year. She decided she wanted to focus on group sales and went to the groups training. She got familiar with cruise lines she thought would be good for her business then went home and immediately put a plan together. She promptly sold over 100 cabins into her first group. It's a great example of honing in on area of focus and going for it.

Tell us about your work with the Family Bonds Foundation.

The Family Bonds Foundation was started by my colleague, John Lovell, who had a vision to create a charitable organization to serve our travel industry colleagues, their families and communities. I have been continuing his work as the foundation's current president and I am overwhelmed at the generosity people have shown. We have given a wide variety of grants, ranging from people affected by natural disasters like the California wildfires to those dealing with health challenges. One of my favorite stories is the grant we gave to a child (the

granddaughter of a travel advisor) that helped her get a service dog. This dog helps this child manage her epilepsy and makes her life a little easier. Our supplier partners, many who are members of CLIA, have shown incredible support for the Family Bonds Foundation, donating both money and cruises to be auctioned off for fundraising. We could not do this without them.

What has been your most memorable cruise experience?

What a difficult question! I have been so lucky to sail on a variety of cruise lines, and I truly take something away from every sailing. Ocean cruises, river cruises, big ships, small ships...I've had so many amazing experiences. If I had to pick though, I treasure the memory of my role as godmother to the AmaViola. My family was with me and having them there to share such a special moment and wonderful journey was an unforgettable experience.

Now for a little fun... if you were working as a crewmember aboard a cruise ship and you could have any job you want, what would it be?

I would want to be a cruise director. I have seen firsthand how they interact with guests and truly make a positive impact on people's vacation experience. My second choice would be a barista. The coffee bar is one extremely happy place on a cruise ship! The baristas serve up joy in a cup, along with a splash of artistry, as they put a smile on everyone's face. Perhaps that will be my "encore career."



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