

CRUISE VACATIONER

ABOUT THE INDUSTRY

TRAVEL PROFESSIONAL

MY CLIA



Jason Coleman, ECCS, LCS Business Development Manager/MentorU Coach, UNIGLOBE Travel Center Irvine, California

Describe your career as a travel agent. How long have you been in the business? What attracted you to it?

I started in the industry in 1998 as a meeting planner at an educational association in Washington, DC (yeah for my 20-year anniversary!!!). In that role, I planned dozens of events and conferences each year—from small board meetings to large, thousand-delegate multi-day conventions. But I was getting bored with the monotony and repetitiveness of that. In 2001, I took my first cruise on Disney Cruise Line. It was just a three-night sailing to the Bahamas, but I was hooked! During the day, I would people-watch on the pool deck, and realized that I wanted to work with people going on vacation. They looked like they were having a great time and I wanted to be in that environment. I immediately started researching how to get into the cruise industry when I stumbled on a CLIA VHS tape titled “Principles of Professional Selling” on eBay. On the reverse side, I saw the video instructor was Dr. Marc Mancini, who then taught travel at West Los Angeles College, a community college in my area. I registered for my first semester of classes two months later, and the rest is history!

What is your approach to serving clients?

I’ve focused my business around selling groups, specifically special interest and niche market groups. As such, my goal has been to develop a system and be as efficient as possible. I’ve approached selling a cruise much like you buy a ticket for a show or experience through Ticketmaster. Most non-cruisers are familiar with that kind of transaction experience, so I’ve found the approach is less intimidating to them. My goal is to provide top notch entertainment or enrichment experiences onboard, and service the heck out of my clients with surprises, special gifts, and touches that WOW them and convert them into lifelong cruisers.

What is your biggest challenge when selling cruises and how do you overcome it?

To be honest, with the business I have built, I don’t really experience many challenges selling cruises. I create a product that is unique and they can only get through me. I think of my role as a service provider from start to finish. It’s not a sales transaction. It’s a service I provide that delivers some of the most important memories of their lives. Lifelong memories are built around travel experiences. I approach our interaction with that approach. From conversation number one, our discussion is about their needs, desires, and wishes for this trip. When I respond with statements like, “I heard you mention that you wanted X” and then offer the cruise’s features and benefits that directly address that, it’s not selling. It’s servicing. And there is no reason for them to say no. The biggest challenge I am focused on is finding ways to identify and target new first-time cruisers. That’s where I’ve found my success and it’s also where I think the biggest opportunities and potential exist.

What has been a career highlight, thus far?

In 2012, I was featured on the front page of *The New York Times* Sunday travel section in a feature called “Are Travel Agents Back?” I was the sole cruise specialist among the group of young travel agents they profiled. Coincidentally, that article landed while I was in the middle of a cruise vacation. I couldn’t keep up with all the phone calls and inquiries

resulting from that article. I think I booked over \$1 million in cruises over the next three weeks. I later found out the article was also picked up by MSNBC.com and other online and print outlets. The funniest thing about the photo shoot was the photographer they sent to my office wanted me in cruise vacation attire. Since I showed up in my regular office attire, his solution was to shoot me barefoot.

How has your CLIA membership and certification helped you as a cruise travel professional?

CLIA's training and certification program has played a high role in helping me be educated and confident in promoting and selling cruise vacations. I was lucky enough to have found that very first CLIA video on EBay which paved the way for my entry into this industry. But every single course I have taken has given me something valuable I can use. I particularly love the online courses and when I was working on my ACC and MCC, I printed every page and made a "textbook" of every course. I still use that library today as a reference! I've been so proud of my CLIA certifications that one version of my business card even had their logos and benefit statements on the back side. Get certified, promote the heck out of them, and reap the rewards. I'm a big proponent of certification!

What cruising trends are you seeing?

Cruising has really grown up! There have always been experiences for every style and interest, but those choices are becoming more sophisticated and diverse. On the one hand, cruising is becoming more all-inclusive at one end of the spectrum and more options at the other. The vast number of promotions are, to be quite honest, overwhelming, and that continues to grow. In addition, the pace of change seems to continue to speed up. That applies to everything from policies and processes to products. Marketing and selling has become more complex as well. Servicing savvy cruisers who, let's be honest, frequently come to us with more information and knowledge than we have at times. And to be frank, not all of it correct due to misinformation and rumors on cruise community sites and online social media groups, which adds additional challenges to our job. One thing is certain, this job keeps me on my toes. It's a good thing I like that!

What is your fondest personal cruise memory?

Besides my first (and every subsequent) Disney cruise, sailing in a Norwegian Haven suite is my ultimate cruise experience. And I say that having sailed numerous times on Crystal, Cunard, and Regent. I love the Haven and sometimes have to find excuses to leave. Dinner is a good reason, though. On Norwegian, I only dine in the a la carte restaurants and absolutely love the ambiance, service, and menu selection above anything else. From my Garden Villa on the *Norwegian Pearl* to Haven suites on *Norwegian Breakaway* and *Norwegian Epic*, it's my idea of a real vacation. The other thing is that Norwegian really knows how to throw an inaugural party! I've been blessed to have been invited to seven Norwegian inaugurals, and they are truly a celebration. I'm especially looking forward to my next christening and inaugural party on Norwegian Bliss in May. Of course, living across the street from the Seattle cruise terminal has its perks and I will enjoy waking up to that site every weekend this summer.

Any last thoughts?

I'm a cruise fanatic. I can't imagine a more enjoyable vacation experience. I love being fully taken care of. I personally related to the old CLIA tagline, "Do it all, or nothing at all." Every cruise for me is a combination of both of those extremes, and everything in the middle. I can't wait to see what the future holds as cruising continues to evolve and adapt to changing tastes and priorities. It's an industry I love being a part of and can't see myself doing anything different!