

# Advice on Selecting a Host Agency

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— Dwain Wall



Dwain Wall

possibilities with local businesses; and turn hobbies and passions into unique travel niches. They need to be flexible, and if they fail, they need to regroup and try something new.

The key is that agents really need to stay close to their customers and work their databases regularly to avoid falling prey to indifference. The more they know about the customer's wants and needs and use that information to market to them, the better chance they have of winning repeat business and helping their customers choose the best vacation for the best value.

Our focus is to provide agents with the marketing, business development and training to really help them accelerate their success. From there, it is up to them to make things happen.

**Gagliano:** Our outlook is very positive. We continue to offer the most competitive programs to help agents be successful and reach their goals. We are looking for professional agents wishing to grow their sales on preferred suppliers with a commitment to use our marketing programs built around Vacation.com.

**Garcia:** We have been asked this question a lot lately, and meet interested/shocked/flustered faces when they hear our somewhat “bullish” re-

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— Betsy Geiser

sponse. For the most part, we are so encouraged that this year will turn around, and when it does — those of us that have been “out there” are going to BOOM. Agents need to align themselves with strong Hosts, that are professional and credible and offer them the tools and support to grow their business...don't go it alone in this environment.

For example, we are spending 30% more in our marketing efforts so far this year over last year. We are making a sizeable investment in new software for our agents to be released later this year and we are launching new programs to drive leads to our agents. We just are not stopping. This is the time to innovate and reinvent.

**Geiser:** There is no doubt travel is down this year but it is allowing agents to review their marketing and

business plans. We have tried to be very proactive on this front and are promoting more training and marketing assistance for our agents so they don't lose momentum.

**Lee:** I think there is great opportunity for agents with drive and initiative. Simple low-cost marketing techniques like email blasts and direct mail pieces are easy to do and very effective. I've found our suppliers are very open to co-oping on creative marketing ideas our agents have proposed.

However, agents who are going to sit back and wait for the phone to ring probably won't be seeing the call volume they have in years past.

**McClure-Mysza:** I believe it's going to be a tough year for travel in general for 2009, but we're busier than ever. So people are traveling.

Travel will become more impacted as unemployment rises. No job, no vacation. Overall, I believe Montrose Travel (and reputable Host agencies in general) will be poised for growth in this environment. I'm very pleased with the continued growth of our Hosting business.

**Wall:** We actually like what we have seen recently as bookings continue to increase at or above our expectations. The booking window has also decreased slightly, which is bringing in more last-minute business. We are cautiously optimistic about the future and believe that sales will continue to grow. Many members of the travel agency community are currently seeking out new homes, looking to affiliate with a company that has a strong tradition and the financial stability to weather any and all storms. As a result, we are also welcoming many new, experienced franchisees and independent agents to our organization, which will continue to be important to our overall growth.

**Anderson:** Our outlook going forward is extremely positive. We are fortunate to have had a very strong January and February, and recently launched the Travel Agent Stimulus Plan, committing \$1 million to the travel agent community to be spent by April 30. This initiative not only decreases the startup costs to join America's Vacation Center, but also it is a pledge to significantly increase our consumer marketing to generate even more Live Leads, which are the primary source of bookings for our current network of Independent Affiliates. We are confident this program will strengthen professional sellers of travel and the overall travel industry.

“Host agencies should treat prospective agents the way an agent treats a prospective client.”

— Betsy Geiser



Betsy Geiser



Stephanie Lee

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## Q What should agents be aware of when searching for the “perfect” Host affiliation?

**Garcia:** Here are six questions that agents should ask EVERY Host. Compare the answers; then look for the Host that best fits your needs.

Don't just join one because they “claim” to give highest commissions. Rather look for one that can help you grow your business.

1. Every Host Agency should have some type of technology to help support your business.

2. Home Based agents must find a Host that has a great marketing program. For the most part, Home Based

agents tend to be “grass roots” or market in their local area. A strong marketing program should be at the top of the list. It will build your business.

3. How many current members are there? You want to make sure you're not a number. But, you don't want to join a Host that has less than 300, or you just won't be able to play with the big guys. How many Home Office staff are there to support you?

4. Does the Host have a business that competes with you? In other words, do they sell direct to customers?

5. Do you have local cruise line support? Make sure you work with a Host that allows you access to your local reps; this is invaluable. If a Host won't share their list, then beware, beware, beware. What do they have to hide?

6. What type of business development and training does your Host offer? Make sure they offer online training, both live and on-demand. Seminars at Sea: What better way to learn about the product you sell, than to experience it with your peers? Conventions: Does your Host run an an-

nual convention? Make sure it has all the components, including cruise line speakers, trade show, interaction with the Host's executive staff and camaraderie with your peers.

**Geiser:** Finding a good Host takes a lot of due diligence on the agent's part. Check out the BBB and associations that the Host belongs to and whether the Host belongs to PATH, OSSN and NACTA. Get references from other agents working with the Host.

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