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## Become an Adventure Advocate!

By Kate Rice

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Guess who's looking for travel agents these days? The answer, surprisingly, is the adventure travel industry. At the Adventure Travel Trade Association's World Summit ([www.adventuretravelworldsummit.com](http://www.adventuretravelworldsummit.com)) in October, adventure operators were looking for travel agents -- though only a handful of agents were at the conference. And that's too bad, because adventure travel holds huge potential for agents. It's a complex, varied and highly individualized travel product. Its customers are knowledgeable, but often overwhelmed by all of their choices and options. They need an expert to guide them.

At the same time, adventure travel suppliers need agents like you because you've got the personal relationships with your customers that can help you play matchmaker between consumer and supplier. For some adventure providers, travel agents have been and remain a major source of business. For example, agents generate two-thirds of luxury provider Travcoa's business, according to Perry Lungmus, the company's vice president of sales and marketing.

Agents also generate about two-thirds of luxury adventure provider Cox & Kings' business, according to Jeanie Fundora, the company's Africa product manager. Suppliers also see the value that travel agents deliver and that's why there are 43 of them in VAST, the Virtuoso Active and Specialty Travel Program, according to K.C. Hoppe, who directs the program.

What agents have to offer adventure travel providers are their relationships with clients as well as their product knowledge. The truism that you sell what you know pertains to adventure travel as much as it does to any other product. Cox & Kings took one agent on an Africa fam trip in 2003. Since then her business has exploded, according to Fundora, and she's become a top provider generating a big chunk of business for the tour company. "I have heard for 10 years that agents are a dying breed, but travel agents are alive and kicking and a big part of our business," Fundora says.

But it's a big world. No one person can know all of it. At the same time, the adventure travel distribution model is changing, and agents and suppliers are trying to figure out what the next iteration is going to be. The old model used to be the outfitter who operated what Michael Culhane, president of Adventure Link, the online adventure aggregator powering VAX VacationAccess Adventure, calls "the sharp end" of the experience. That's the guide, the river rafter, the camp operator, or whoever provides the on-the-ground experience.

Next up the supply chain is the in-country operator, who bundles the outfitter, additional hotel and transportation, and other components. The in-country operator, in turn, works with the outbound wholesaler, who puts together the entire itinerary. Then that wholesaler sells through a network of travel agents.

This was a pretty fuzzy paradigm to begin with and it's gotten even fuzzier with the Internet, which enables consumers to make contact with any point in that old supply chain. Consumers do that, but they are often overwhelmed by information. So they're looking for experts and they're going to experts already knowing a lot, says Helen Nodland, a Virtuoso director, adventure travel specialist and author of The Travel Institute's Adventure Travel Lifestyle Specialist program ([www.thetravelinstitute.com](http://www.thetravelinstitute.com)).

These knowledgeable customers need experts who can add value by helping consumers find the adventure experience they want. Culhane proposes a model in which intermediaries send customers to suppliers, playing matchmaker between consumer and supplier but taking a relatively hands-off approach when it comes to the trip planning. That's a hard concept for many agents to accept, since it's far too easy to lose your client to a supplier in that situation.

But you have to remember that adventure travel customers are omnivorous. They're not going to go river

rafting in [Costa Rica](#) every year. They're going to do something different each year. That means they can still turn to you as the expert who can cut through the enormous amount of marketing noise out there.

Operators are already doing this, recognizing that a customer who just did a luxury Amazon cruise with them is not going to do it again, but may be primed for a trip with another tour operator. The first tour operator knows the second operator will take care of that customer, and so it is comfortable referring clients to the second company. It's a sort of co-opetition or cooperation among competitors.

Some suppliers want agents to deliver a total hands-on service to their customers. One of them is Francesco Zugaro, whose Aqua Expeditions ([www.aquaexpeditions.com](http://www.aquaexpeditions.com)) offers a once-in-a-lifetime luxury cruise down the Amazon. He wants agents to be his sales force.

Similarly, Dan Austin, director of Austin-Lehman Adventures ([www.austinlehman.com](http://www.austinlehman.com)), says he would love to sell through just one channel: travel agents. "If I could shut down my marketing and sell all my trips through travel agents through Adventure Link, I'd be golden," he says.

Of course, selling through just one distribution channel is no longer a viable model. Some studies say that 80 percent of dreaming-to-buying decisions are influenced most strongly by people who have actually been to a destination. What this means is that agents opting to specialize in adventure travel have to know how to sell what they know and where to go to sell what they don't know.

It means knowing your customer well and then learning about the many resources that are out there for you to use. To hear Nodland talk about all that adventure travel has to offer you and your clients, as well as how you can integrate it into your own business, see my video interview with her at [www.traveltube.com/video/22804-Interview-with-Helen-Nodland?S](http://www.traveltube.com/video/22804-Interview-with-Helen-Nodland?S).

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