

Your Ally, the Receptive Tour Operator

Use a receptive operator to gain a competitive edge in the industry.

By Linda Edelman

As we say in Vermont, “Folks don’t want to hear how the maple syrup is made anymore, they want to go out and tap the trees themselves!” Travelers want new ideas, relaxing yet exciting itineraries, challenging personal experiences, lots of options, and, as always, they want to have fun, they want to learn, and they want to “give-back,” be it volunteering or choosing eco-friendly components that will ensure a better world for their grandchildren, and beyond.

Hands-on adventures, optional activities, culinary demos that include participation, eco-friendly components, and the emergence of agritourism, are all examples of the newest niches in today’s motorcoach travel world, and the savvy tour operator will need to include these experiences as we move further into the twenty-first century.

The recent recession has certainly impacted the mindset of our customers with regard to travel. They are more savvy, more skeptical, and more price-conscious. They’ll be checking out everything you offer them via the Internet because they can; they’ll question you until you wish the Internet was never invented. How can the travel professional create fresh and exciting components that will entice these new travelers to get on a motorcoach and leave the driving to us?

The receptive tour operator is your vehicle to successfully navigate these new roads. Receptive operators are regional specialists who not only anticipate changing trends, but also have long-standing relationships with local suppliers, and are constantly working with them to update and improve what they offer your customers. The receptive operator is the person who will give you, the tour operator, the competitive edge with your loyal travelers, thus bringing them back to you time and time again.

Hotels change hands/show wear and tear, restaurants change chefs, bridges close/construction reroutes you, deposits, cancellation policies, payments...how can

you keep on top of each and every detail for every destination? One rooming list, one check, and the receptive does it all.

Tour operators are beginning to understand that time and knowledge are truly valuable. It is the receptive’s job to create experiences in their local area of expertise that the tour operator simply cannot do on their own.

Clayton Whitehead of Sports Leisure Vacations says, “A good receptive operator is worth his or her weight in gold, but I stress the word ‘good.’ First they must understand my culture, my customers’ expectations, and honor my brand. Then, they must bring to the table things I can’t do, get, or even think of without their help. This can be anything from local expertise and contacts to offering exclusive tour opportunities, to bulk buying power in the region they serve. If they can’t do it better than I can, I might as well just do it myself and retain full control. But if they can indeed do it better, and there are quite a few out there who do, then I’d gladly pay them ten times their mark-up—they’re worth it.”

How do you get that good receptive? Interview your receptive operator. Wouldn’t you interview a new employee to make certain they understand your “culture”?

Once you’ve found your receptive partner, let them negotiate rates (which they already have done), make all the hotel/rooming lists, restaurant, ferry, attraction, entertainment, and in some cases motorcoach and airlines reservations, confirmations, changes, etc., while you devote your time, and your staff’s time, to marketing and selling to your customers. Then watch the travelers return from your tour totally wowed. And you can sit back and take all the credit because you deserve it—your ally, your receptive tour operator has made certain of that.

Linda Edelman is owner of Custom Tours in Montpelier, Vermont, a receptive tour company.