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A 2012 Wake Up Call

For the past five years, TRO has worked in depth with travel professionals assisting to put together their marketing plans. One thing we have learned is that great travel agents are not necessarily born that way. Thankfully, it is possible to nurture and plan your way to greatness, especially with the proper mentoring.

Not much in business has come easy over the past few years. The travel industry has been bounced between economic collapse, environmental and socio-political events and minor pandemics. Although the concept of planning seems to be an impossible task in the face of so much turmoil, failing to plan only adds to the sense of living impromptu.

When you are in business, time passes fast, as do opportunities. Now is an excellent time to begin working on your 2012 marketing plan. Passion is a great start, but of equal importance is the ability to channel your passion into a real, workable plan.

There is always the temptation to work without a marketing plan. After all, you know what you need to do, right? Provide your services to more consumers, hold your expenses in check and your business will grow. Unfortunately, improv is best confined to comedy. Unless you have charted a clear path to both acquiring new clients and retaining your current ones, 2012 is likely to be less than you hope.

Would you like some assistance? In the pages following, TRO’s 365 Guide will provide you with the key elements of a marketing plan. Follow along as we begin with today’s first installment on a marketing plan audit. We will provide the theory and some practical advice each day so that by the beginning of the year, you will be equipped to take advantage of the opportunities that come your way.

This effort is in keeping with our editorial mission to assist travel agents in the professional development of their travel planning practices. Whether new to the industry or an experienced old-timer, we hope to give you some real, practical advice that you can use in your business next year. As we do, please feel free to comment on the advice being offered and to support other agents with your own insights and contributions.

Luck has a lot to do with success, no doubt about it. Equally true is the maxim that the better prepared you are, the luckier you will seem to be.

Let’s start 2012 prepared for luck.
Start With a Marketing Audit

Each day, Monday through Friday, TRO publishes at least one new marketing article specifically designed for travel agents. Now, we are going to take the next three weeks to organize the materials of the past year into a 2012 Marketing Plan for travel consultants. Follow along, day by day, read the materials, do the assignments and at the end of the three weeks, you will have a marketing plan. It’s as simple as that – and it is every bit that difficult. Building a workable marketing plan takes discipline. Set aside some time each day to work on your plan. 2012 will, I promise, be a better year for your effort.

Note that this series is for travel professionals, not “agencies”. Each agent in an agency needs their own marketing plan. Regardless of whether you are an employee, an independent travel agent or the owner of a mega agency, you need a personal marketing plan to enhance your net worth as an agent.

We will begin by defining your broad business parameters. We will look at the successes and failures of 2011 and we will set objectives for 2012 by doing an audit of your current marketing plan. We will clarify your mission statement and we will set goals and objectives for the upcoming year. We will then set forth a strategy and we will devise tactics for achieving your objectives.

We will encourage you to place your marketing plan in writing. Why? Because if you put your 2012 Marketing Plan in writing you memorialize it in a way that makes it more real. Dedicating a plan to writing ensures that you can articulate your plan. More importantly, it holds you accountable. You can check your progress in a real way and you can revise it as needed. When your plan is in writing…it’s a real plan. If it’s not in writing, it’s somewhere between good intentions and wishful thinking.

Let’s begin with an audit of your current marketing plan. Answer the questions in our Preliminary Marketing Plan Audit. For each “No” answer, highlight the question with a marker. For each “Yes” answer, gather together the materials that support your answer. For example, question #1 asks if you have a written mission statement. If your answer is “No”, then highlight the question for later action. If your answer is “Yes”, write down your mission statement.

Consider this exercise an “audit” – a way of evaluating where you are now. We will cover each of the items addressed by the questions later in the series.

Now, download the Preliminary Marketing Plan Audit and start the process of planning for growth in 2012.
Create Your Mission Statement

If you have been reading The 365 Guide for any length of time, you know that I feel the concept of a Mission Statement is important for a travel agent to understand and employ. A mission statement is a clear and succinct statement of the aspirations of a travel agent as those aspirations relate to clients. Underneath the mission statement is a set of core values that are important to the agent. The moral and ethical underpinnings of the agent, their way of relating to clients, their expectations of performance are all encapsulated in a single statement. It’s a statement to the world of the principles for which the travel agent stands. Below, you will find tools to help you build your own. It will be the foundation for your 2012 marketing plan.

The mission statement has a very important purpose – it provides a benchmark for every corporate action, for every marketing effort, for every decision the company makes. Your mission statement states what you believe in and establishes how you want others to know and think of you. If an act is consistent with the mission statement, then it passes the test for consideration. If an act is inconsistent with the mission statement, then it is discarded. Without a mission statement, you run the risk of serious inconsistencies, of confusing your clients, of appearing inauthentic.

Your mission statement should motivate you and those with whom you work. Your mission statement should inspire and comfort your clients.

Why are you a travel counselor? Can you provide a short, succinct answer to that question? It is almost a trick question, because if the answer is about your love of travel, your passion for travel, the many places you have been, then we are probably on the wrong track. Your love and passion for travel are certainly important reasons for being in the travel industry, but those qualities don’t speak to why you chose to assist others in their travel ambitions. The more clearly that you can define your core mission, the values you represent as they relate to your clients, the easier the task of representing your travel practice authentically. Your mission is the touchstone for all of your client communications and corporate decision making – its value cannot be overstated.

Can you articulate a brief summary your company’s mission? Can you describe in a short, clear fashion what you do as a travel consultant? How your clients benefit from your services? What your unique selling point is? Can you communicate your company’s most important characteristics clearly and concisely? Can you do it without resorting to industry jargon or cliché? Spend a few moments writing your message down and improving your ability to communicate it. Read it aloud and practice it until it is a creed that you can easily and naturally repeat.

Here is TRO’s mission statement: “To enhance the lives of travel professionals.” Note how our mission statement is phrased in terms of our clients, not in terms of TRO. Be client centric in forming your mission statement.

Clarity in your mission statement is the absolute requisite to authentic marketing.
Exercises:

1. Read the materials below. Download our Mission Statement Worksheet and develop a mission statement of your own.

2. Review some past 365 Guide Articles on Mission Statements

3. Some Mission Statements worth reviewing (note the emphasis on the customer experience!):
   - Starbucks
   - Apple Computers
   - Google

4. Resources:

   http://www.missionstatements.com/
A SWOT Analysis

Annually a company needs to be reminded of the need for a SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. The traditional SWOT looks at Strengths and Weaknesses of a business (internal factors) and tries to thereby ascertain the relationship with Opportunities and Threats (factors external to the agency). Doing a periodic SWOT analysis is a good exercise as you develop your 2012 marketing plan and assists with developing the appropriate goals for your travel practice.

Generally speaking, your travel practice has certain strengths that justify its existence. These strengths give rise to the ability to take on opportunities. On the other hand, your agency probably has weaknesses that provide an opening to your competition where they are better capable than you of taking advantage of the market. A SWOT Analysis makes each of these factors clear and provides a guideline for approaching each in your planning. Our SWOT Analysis Worksheet will assist you in performing your own analysis.

The high and lofty aspirations of a mission statement, if they are to be realized, have to be effected in the context of the real world in which the travel agent operates. An honest evaluation of the possibilities inherent in the mission statement will require the travel agent to closely examine his or her weaknesses and the threats the economy and other external factors pose. Likewise, the strengths of the agent, and the opportunities that present themselves, need to be clearly contemplated and prioritized. From that perspective, the agent can more realistically create goals for their practice, develop strategies to realize those goals and make the most effective use of assets. A SWOT analysis plants the goals of the agency firmly in context and presents the possibility of realization. Now, we have some reading to do…

Read these articles to remind yourself of the parameters of a SWOT analysis and what’s involved.

- SWOT Analysis for Travel Agencies
- SWOT Analysis for Travel Agencies – Strengths
- SWOT Analysis for Travel Agencies – Weaknesses
- SWOT Analysis for Travel Agencies – Opportunities
- SWOT Analysis for Travel Agencies – Threats

Exercise:

Download our SWOT Analysis Worksheet and fill it out as completely as possible.
Understanding Goals and Objectives

Yesterday we looked at the importance of a SWOT Analysis to your 2012 marketing plan. So far, so good, but now our terminology becomes more complicated. The terms Objectives and Goals are both important in building a marketing plan, but differing experts and schools use these terms in varied ways. Some use them interchangeably, while others reverse their meaning from the way I will use them here. For the sake of clarity, let’s define each.

For our purposes, the term “Goal” refers to an achievable aspect of the mission statement. The goal describes a desired outcome. Thus, a goal for ABC Travel might be to “increase the number of clients with which the company works.” Another goal may be to “achieve the highest level of client satisfaction.” Goals can refer to revenue, “To increase profitability” and to expenses “Trim unnecessary expenditures.” Typically, the company will have no more than a few high-level goals. At this juncture, don’t include specific actions, (we will later call such actions ”Tactics”) which might help achieve your goals. For example, you might list “Improve client communications” as a Goal, but don’t list “Start a Newsletter” which is more of a specific tactic.

By themselves, however, goals are not measurable and most often do not have a time period associated with them. For that, we turn to objectives, which brings a quantitative reality to a goal. Thus, an objective which corresponds to the first goal may be “to acquire 75 new clients in 2012.” Note that through this objective you have quantified the goal and placed it on a timeline. The lofty goal of achieving the highest client satisfaction may appear to be more difficult to measure. However, client satisfaction can be measured in repeat business, client testimonials, referrals or surveys and feedback provided after travel.

Certainly the very act of setting objectives and goals has merit. What really puts a goal into high gear, however, is writing it down. A travel agent who can objectify and articulate their goals is more likely to achieve them. Yet, the truth is that very few travel agents work from a written marketing plan or set of goals. More often, we “wing it”! What might we achieve if we were more disciplined in our approach? It is one measure of how much potential the travel industry has that so many can earn a living without the need to follow so basic a rule. If you will take the time to write down your goals, it is almost a guarantee that you will achieve more. Writing your goals down gives them substance, orienting, clarifying and programming your mind in relationship to everything around you.

In setting your goals and objectives, use the SMART system:

- Specificity
- Measurability
- Attainability
- Reward
- Timeframe

Specificity means that you know what you want to achieve and how you are going to do it. Setting a goal such as “increase the number of clients I work with” is a great goal. However,
when you indicate that you are going to acquire 75 new clients this year, then your goal has much more substance. When you then begin to work through the strategies and tactics you will use to actually successfully work through the full buying cycle with 75 new clients, then you have a much more specific, and therefore achievable, goal.

**Measurable** means that you can monitor your progress with a clear end result. Break your goal and objectives up into measurable increments and track your steps along the way. Make adjustments as you need to insure that you are on the right path to hitting your targets. If you cannot measure any objective, you will almost certainly lose sight of it along the way. In each instance, find a way to measure your goals and objectives.

**Attainable** - your goals and objectives have to be realistic. It should be a stretch, no goal should be set too low. But make your goal something that with a lot of hard work and perseverance, you can attain.

**Reward** – This is your motivation for the entire effort. Perhaps it is as simple as more income. If so, be specific. How much more income? Perhaps it is the satisfaction of knowing you can set a goal and keep it.

**Timeframe** – When are you going to be the world’s greatest travel consultant? Someday? Be specific. Use a calendar to make your goals real.

We will introduce you to your marketing calendar next week! Remember, we will continue to revisit and re-work aspects of your marketing plan for the next three weeks, so don’t worry if some aspects seem ill-defined right now. Together, we will put it all together before the Holidays!

**Exercise:** *Now, download our [Goals and Objectives Worksheet](#) and begin crafting your 2012 goals!*
Strategies and Tactics

Now we begin to delve in the actual mechanics of a Marketing Plan. **Strategies** answer “how” the travel agency is going to accomplish its objectives. For example, exactly how will the company achieve 50 new clients between now and the end of the year? The strategy for achieving that objective might read something like this: “**In order to achieve the acquisition of 50 new clients in 8 months, the company will increase the number of distribution channels through which it markets and increase its overall marketing investment.**” Note that in the process of forming a strategy the company must take into consideration its resources. This is the point at which the company should evaluate its marketing budget, the personnel available to carry out strategy, and the intra-company support necessary to achieve objectives.

Some of your strategies, for example, the engagement of a new niche market, will require much more extensive planning and preparation. In fact, a strategy as encompassing as a new niche market may involve a “plan within a plan” with its own goals, objectives, and strategies.

**Tactics** are the “action items” of your marketing plan. Tactics are about the real execution of the strategies you elect to use. So, if your strategy involves increasing the number of distribution channels you use to reach out to the market, the tactic will be to choose those channels, to work with the media and contacts in each channel and to set up calendar dates and begin working on content.

For example, you may choose the following new tactics among others:

- Cross-marketing with a local jewelry store;
- Advertising in the local newspaper travel section;
- Writing travel articles for a business magazine;
- Developing a public speaking calendar;
- Engaging a niche market.
- etc.

In each of these distribution channels, there is work to be done. You have to choose appropriate venues for each, make the appropriate contacts, set up calendars, develop content and prepare each for the individual efforts to come. Each strategy and tactical chain should have a budget attached to it, and the individual tactics used to implement the strategy must live within that budget. If the money you have to invest in your marketing plan is tight, you will naturally gravitate to tactics that are more dependent on your personal effort and involvement than on cash outlays.

Next week, we will look at individual tactics and discuss each in turn. For now, it is enough for you to begin to think about the strategies you want to use to achieve your objectives.
Exercises

Read the TRO article on Distribution Channels and take a look at your Goals and Objectives Worksheet.

Now, download the TRO Strategies and Tactics Worksheet. Begin jotting down some strategies and tactics for your travel practice that will assist you in putting into action the goals and objectives that you have set for your company. We will refine your choices later, but think in terms of your likely budget for 2012. Look over the past year and decide what worked well for you and what did not. What new ideas seem to be possible avenues for your 2012 marketing efforts? What new channels of distribution do you want to explore?

Later we will also discuss appropriate budgeting considerations. I always advocate using techniques that require more personal involvement than capital outlay however.
Beginning a Marketing Calendar

Every travel consultant is very much aware of the seasonality of the travel business. In the winter people head south and in the summer they head to Europe and in the fall they seek out New England, except for the real bargain hunters who decide to cruise during hurricane season. A time and a season for everything, right?

Actually, that is exactly right. We can improve on our marketing by being a bit more scientific in our examination of the calendar. Smart travel consultants who pro-actively market know they have to stay ahead of the calendar. They are constantly looking “down the road” to see what holidays and destinations are around the corner. Typically, you will be promoting months in advance to give clients time to consider, plan and budget for their travels.

Too often, we rely on last minute urgency prompting us to market too late or too little. By rigorously using a marketing calendar, travel consultants can better stay on top of their marketing plan. A marketing calendar, noting when to market and on what destinations to focus, will enable you to be better prepared and to market more efficiently. Set up a calendar and revisit it each week, making notations of what marketing you did and how effective it was. Make adjustments as you read about new destinations, economic conditions or other factors influencing the market. Next year, you will have a terrific written record to assist you with formulating a new marketing calendar for each season.

But your marketing calendar is more than just a reminder of dates and seasons. Once you have noted special holidays, seasons and events, work your distribution channels and tactics into your marketing calendar. Also, calendar in your objectives. Work in both calendar quarters and months. Calendar your goals and objectives into bite-size pieces. Your marketing calendar will be your benchmark and accountability as the year progresses. Naturally, you will re-visit your calendar often in the year to make revisions for circumstances as they arise, but start thinking about your tactics (to be covered later) and how you might schedule the following:

- Advertising
- Public Speaking
- Writing Opportunities
- Press Releases
- Group Leader Program
- Cross Marketing
- Networking
- Newsletters

Calendars make your Marketing Plan real. They hold you accountable.
**Exercise** – set aside time to sit down and begin to work on a marketing calendar, plotting when to market particular programs. If you have notes from years past, use them to gauge how well particular efforts might have worked and how well timed they were for the market. I like to work first with a paper calendar as it gives a good spatial sense of the elements of your marketing plan. Get yourself to Staples, buy a desk calendar and get to work (in pencil, because you will be erasing a lot of work)! Let’s begin with seasons and special holidays. For example, with July 4th vacation possibilities, you should begin marketing packages for the date in early April. Likewise, how will you market to clients this year with birthdays and anniversaries? When will you be marketing summer vacations, fall foliage and ski vacations?

Pencil in your Objectives now. If you have set 75 new clients as an objective, how many will you get in the first quarter? How many in the second, third and fourth? Calendar as many of your objectives as possible.

Remember, all of your work thus far is tentative. Over the next two weeks we will review all of the possible tactics and distribution channels you might use and we will then work those into your marketing calendar.
The Tactical Array

The list of possible tactics a travel consultant might employ building their business can be long and, at times, overwhelming. For new agents, it is typically best to choose a few tactics and learn to do them well, rather than to attempt every possible tactic. A few efforts well accomplished will typically yield better results than an entire array of marketing efforts poorly executed. As we earlier discussed, stay focused, work within your plan in a series of campaigns, and you should turn good results for the majority of your efforts. From time to time you can add new tactics as you become more accomplished and efficient at implementing your marketing plan.

Keep in mind that marketing is not only about obtaining new clients – a solid program of client retention is a must. From your existing clients, you obtain a steady income. From new clients, you obtain growth. Both are essential to the vitality of your travel practice. Therefore, a good retention program will be a component of every marketing plan.

The particular tactics you choose should be the ones with which you are most comfortable, fit the character of your travel practice, and which hold the promise of a strong return on investment of time and capital. Thus, the list below is in no particular order. Over the next two weeks we will summarize each tactic, refer to past 365 Guide articles to refresh your memory of each, and work your chosen tactics using a campaign approach.

- Advertising
- Public Relations
  - Press Releases
  - Public Speaking Opportunities
  - Writing Articles
  - Volunteer Work
  - Events
  - Networking
- Group Leader Program
- Word of Mouth Campaign
- Niche Marketing
- Newsletter
- Web site and/or Blog
- CRM emails
- Social Media
- Cross-Marketing
- Referral Networks

**Exercise** – *From the list above, make notes on each possible tactic. Note whether you currently engaged in the tactic and how effectively you think your current tactical array is working on your behalf. Note tactics that you would like to add to your list. Over the next two weeks, we will review each in turn.*
Budgeting for Your Tactics

Deciding what to spend on your travel agency’s 2012 marketing plan is a key consideration whether you are a multi-office operation or a home based practitioner. At every stage of growth, a marketing budget is essential. Firstly, budgeting will enforce the discipline necessary to actually calendar your marketing efforts. When spending real dollars, travel agents become very cognizant of the return on investment. In addition, the marketing budget can and should include such essentials as marketing collateral (business cards, flyers, capabilities brochures), websites, advertising, dues to local organizations and promotional items, all professionally produced. Having a marketing budget, and then wisely spending it, ensures that the travel agency is doing everything necessary to keep its profile high enough to gain mindshare in the community.

Yet, too many travel agencies are loathe to invest in their own futures. They have no website, no professionally produced logo or collateral, no CRM system, no advertising or promotional efforts. Not coincidentally, they also don’t have many clients. The timidity is understandable, but regrettable. Every business takes on investment in its own growth. The secret is to spend every dollar wisely and to then monitor results not just at the end of the effort, but throughout the duration of the marketing expenditure so that the effort can be fine-tuned while in progress.

Without dedicated resources to leverage the company profile, the travel consultant is thrown back to the early business stages of guerrilla marketing tactics that, while useful and necessary, do not permit the strongest possible growth curve. Investment in marketing accelerates growth when properly applied.

Invest in yourself. Most knowledgeable marketing guides will indicate that for small service businesses, between 1% to 3% of your gross proceeds should be reinvested in marketing. Thus, if your Gross Revenues are $1,000,000 (commission income of approximately $100,000) a marketing budget of between $10,000 and $30,000 is a norm. A budget forces the travel agency to focus on the marketing process and to invest in growth in a responsible and predictable manner. Like the marketing plan, a budget should be in writing. Periodically, the travel agency should review its expenditures, measure return, and make appropriate adjustments.

Here’s the good news: **not every outlay needs to be in actual dollars.** Many of the marketing tactics we discuss daily in The 365 Guide are more labor than capital intensive. In fact, in a small service business like travel consulting a direct marketing approach is actually preferable to capital outlay since so much of the impact of the marketing message has to do with the people who own and operate the agency. The more the marketing plan involves direct involvement by the agency staff in events, speaking engagements, word of mouth campaigns and other public relations efforts, the lower the actual capital outlay is necessitated. Nevertheless, there is an important lesson in the simple and undeniable fact that to make money one has to spend some money. Don’t let the shoestring you operate on become a noose!

Allocate money to marketing and spend it wisely, but spend it.
**Exercise:** Pull together your 2010 and 2011 marketing expenditures and take a good look at how you spent your money. Can you calculate a return on investment for each effort? Are you satisfied with the way in which you have been investing in marketing? Tomorrow, we will begin to examine the actual tactics you will use and we will allocate marketing dollars to each tactic. For now, however, determine a preliminary gross budget that will approximate 2% – 3% of the gross you realistically hope to achieve. We will now look at public relations and how some portion of your budget can be achieved with sweat equity!
A Public Relations Overview

“Public Relations” refers not to a single tactic but to a varied number of ways that a travel agent can reach out to the public at large and raise the profile of their travel agency. Public relations tactics tend to be a favorite of guerilla marketers as they depend more on personal effort than outlays of capital and, properly executed, can be highly effective. Public relations also have the great advantage of being a more personal approach to marketing. The personality of the travel consultant is at the center of each effort, and the authenticity of the travel consultant is immediately available to everyone within the effort’s sphere of influence. Taking on a public relations effort is no small feat in that it requires that the travel agent put themselves in full view of the public with little margin.

If your travel practice is centered in your local community, there is probably no more important set of tactics than those grouped under the label of public relations. Keep in mind that you might choose one, all, or none of these tactics for your own use and depending on your own individual personality. However, a well rounded marketing plan will almost certainly contain at least one of the following tactics:

- Press Releases
- Writing Articles
- Public Speaking Opportunities
- Events
- Volunteer Work
- Networking

Not each of these public relations tactic is applicable to every distribution channel. For example, if you have a good contact at the local VFW, you need to choose the most advantageous tactic or set of tactics to market to them. Perhaps a press release directed to their local newsletter might be effective, but maybe not as effective as speaking in front of the group or writing an article for the newsletter. Perhaps several of these tactics in combination would work better than any single tactic alone. Each circumstance will be different and will require concerted analysis on your part.

Public relations also allow for the marketing plan to focus on tactics that require more intensive personal involvement and less capital outlay. If you assign a dollar value to your public relations time and involvement you come closer to achieving the 1% - 3% marketing outlay we earlier discussed without spending actual dollars.

**Exercise:** Take the time to read these articles on public relations. Look through your marketing efforts and determine the role that Public Relations tactics have historically played. How successful were your efforts at reaching out on a personal level to the media, the public and through networking opportunities? Evaluate which of the above tactics you would like to know more about. Determine to stretch yourself and to take on a tactic that might not feel entirely comfortable to you.
Finding Your Niche

Well over three years ago, TRO identified having a niche component to your business plan as being one of the characteristics of top travel agents. But, the concept of niche marketing is often misunderstood. Niche marketing is a way of helping you focus on locating new clients, not a set of restrictions on your business offerings. Niche Marketing is not necessarily about gearing your entire business to a particular type of travel. It is about segmenting your marketing efforts to focus on particular groups of people, however.

Niche marketing refers to the process of focusing a marketing effort on a particular theme or destination. Many travel consultants avoid it as a concept out of fear of having to turn away business outside the chosen niche, or being too closely identified with the niche. Properly executed however, niche marketing is a terrific way of locating and marketing to a group of potential clients in a highly effective and cost efficient manner.

One great advantage of a niche market is the way in which it helps you locate potential clients. When you are marketing general travel, everyone is your potential market and you lack focus. When your market is “adventure travelers”, however, you know where to find them. When your market is “golfers”, you know where to find them. Once you have located your market, it is much less costly to reach out to them as opposed to using much less efficient “shotgun” approaches. As you learn more about your niche, you will better understand the people involved, their preferences and their needs.

When you focus on a niche, you very quickly become an expert. You will be able to speak with authority on your topic and marketing will be a matter of speaking directly to those who share an affinity for your niche. As an expert in a niche, your ability to generate referrals and word of mouth advertising will be amplified as those who have used you in the past tell others interested in similar travel experiences. You will also develop deeper and richer relationships with the suppliers that you use as they come to understand your devotion to their area of business.

The lesson of effective niche marketing is this: It is important to be clear about the market you are addressing and to address that market clearly. This might require you to have one marketing brochure or presentation for adventure travel and another for senior escorted tours and yet another for golf travel. You do not have to devote your practice exclusively to any of these niches, but you can devote some of your marketing tactics to the niche. Then, choose the appropriate marketing tools and pitch for the market you are addressing.
**Exercise** – Choose a niche market for which you have some affinity. Decide to devote some major portion of your time developing your niche as a specialty in your travel practice. Set up a FAM trip or visit to the destination if possible. Next, study the suppliers for your niche destination or theme. Set Choose several to decide on the best ones to work with on your project. If you need assistance, use the TRO Community to ask other agents for suggestions on good suppliers with which to work.

Open a file to aggregate information. Spend some time on the internet studying the marketing of others in similar niches. What are their unique selling points? What elements seem essential? What is missing from their marketing?

Finally, spend some time figuring out the demographic of your selected niche. Where do the people who are in that niche market congregate? How can you best reach them? What will be your best approach to the market? Chances are, you will quickly realize that not far out of your reach is a group of potential clients just waiting for you to grace them with your presence.
**Word of Mouth Marketing**

Word of Mouth happens with or without your participation. Clients, for better or worse, are going to talk about their experiences with your travel agency. However, that does not mean it is out of your control and cannot be managed. To the contrary, you can promote and amplify your brand through a good word of mouth campaign. By strategically cultivating your message, you can help ensure that when people talk about you, they are saying the things you want the market to hear.

Word of mouth marketing is really no more than consumers providing information about you to other consumers. As a travel consultant, you know the value of a good reference. Smart word of mouth marketing encourages and gives people a reason to talk about you and your services. While word of mouth marketing happens with or without your participation, you can encourage and facilitate it. Let’s explore how you might do so.

At the heart of a strong word of mouth campaign is authentic marketing: knowing exactly who you are, what your travel practice is about and being able to clearly articulate that message. If your core marketing identity is not well defined and clear, if you are not able to easily identify your mission, then others will not be able to do so either, and your message in the market will be muddy and not well defined. This is particularly important because a word of mouth campaign depends on an initial group of “influencers” being charged with the mission of “spreading the word” – employees, associates, family and other contacts who know your travel practice well.

The secret to casting a wide net with community word of mouth is to locate and utilize “hubs” – community segments that form small “tribes” within the community. Churches are a “hub” as are social clubs, charities and civic organizations. Ethnic communities often form loosely knit hubs as do seniors and groups with political agendas. Choose your hubs with care. There must be an internal dynamic that holds the hub together. Thus, an apartment complex is probably not a sufficient “hub” for most word of mouth opportunities, but a local chapter of the VFW may be. Local radio, newspaper and television stations are also hubs, but fall under the more specific public relations topic of press releases which we will cover at another time. Finally, online communities are also hubs.

Let’s use an example. You want to promote the use of your travel services in the ranks of those citizens in your community that are military veterans. You have chosen this particular avenue because you have several clients who are veterans who have traveled with you and who are very pleased with your services. Perhaps you are a veteran yourself. You understand the inherent desire in many veterans to return to the battlefields where they lived out a very important part of their young lives. You are certain that you can assist the veterans in your community to have a profound travel experience by returning to Normandy, Vietnam or South Korea. The place to begin your word of mouth campaign is with those closest to you – co-workers and existing clients. That inner circle needs to clearly hear and understand your mission, to grasp your authentic belief and passion for the project. If they do, they will become your evangelists. If you can assist them to understand the importance of this project to veterans in your community, one of them will tell two others and those two others will tell four more. That is how good word of
mouth public relations happens. The resulting word of mouth will re-inforce every other effort you undertake in your campaign: presentations, press releases, networking and advertising.

One of the most important ways to facilitate positive word of mouth activity is to very directly ask for referrals from your existing clients. Give your happy customers a way of easily describing your services to others. Provide two business cards to each of your clients: one for them and one to pass along to someone else. Some clients reward their clients for referrals with a small gift. However, a “Thank You” note is also an acceptable acknowledgement of the favor.

Testimonials are another source of word of mouth marketing techniques. Testimonials provide a third-party endorsement of your travel planning ability. They act as a public record that you have performed well in the past; so well, in fact, that someone felt compelled to give you a testimonial. Such assurances calm the concerns and fears of new clients when they turn over thousands of their hard earned dollars to you for their vacations.

Good public relations is the result of much effort and planning. Word of mouth has an important role to play in any PR campaign and will contribute substantially when it is launched with a clear vision and articulation.

**Exercise** - Write down a list of clients that you can ask for referral and testimonials. Most satisfied clients are happy to provide both.

Ask the clients on your list to write you a short recommendation of your services. One of the best times to ask is within a few days of a client’s return from a successful trip. Ask permission to place their comments in your marketing materials. Include the testimonials on your web site, in your brochures and on your other printed materials. Below is a short note you might write to request a testimonial.

**Betty:**

Would you do a favor for me? I value your business greatly and want more clients exactly like you. Would you provide me with a short two or three sentence recommendation? If you could give me a small testimonial that I can use in my marketing materials, I would be very appreciative. Just a mention of how satisfied you are with my services and the travel planning I have done for you would mean so much.

Many thanks,

*Angie Agent*

Once you have obtained your first testimonial, show it to other clients when requesting theirs so they have an idea of how to write one for you.

Next, incorporate asking for referrals into your marketing plan. Formally request your clients to refer their acquaintances to you. Facilitate the process by making it easy for the client to pass along the good word by providing them with extra business cards and marketing collateral! If
you actively promote referral activity with your clients, some of it will return to you in the form of the new business for which you are looking for the balance of this year and beyond.

Examine the possible marketing “hubs” you might access most easily. Consider how you might use employees, business associates and influencers in these hubs to assist with a word of mouth campaign.
A Travel Agency Newsletter

The need for regular communications with your existing clients as a way of maintaining relationships and staying in contact is clear. One of the best ways to stay in touch with clients is through a newsletter. Even if you do not own the company for which you work, you might consider a personal newsletter to build your brand with clients and to further establish your value to your agency. While publishing a newsletter is no small undertaking, it is well worth the effort. Done well, it will build your brand and contribute substantially to your marketing efforts, helping to establish you as an expert in your field. Done poorly, it may do damage to your practice. So let’s do this well.

To be a success, your travel newsletter will require good content, good design and a circulation. If we take each of these components up in turn, we can better understand how to begin. Here are a few tips that will assist you in working a newsletter into your marketing plan for next year.

The most important consideration is content. Your newsletter should be centered around an editorial mission – its reason for being. Perhaps the mission of the newsletter is to inform and entertain. Perhaps your newsletter’s mission is to present the best travel bargains available or the most interesting trips of the month, or perhaps a some mix of these objectives. Whatever its mission, you should be able to state it in a short sentence.

Having an editorial mission will keep you focused on appropriate content, giving your newsletter an “edge” in capturing the reader’s attention. Some content you can derive from the faxes and emails that arrive each day from suppliers. Other content can come from sources like USA Today or Budget Travel or any of a number of mainstream media. While you cannot infringe on the copyright of these publications by reproducing their articles, you can summarize and link to them, or you can use them as inspiration for your own articles. Make sure that your content is engaging. Just listing 20 “ho-hum” specials without any unifying rationale will not be likely to contribute to your brand in a positive manner. Readers like short, easy to understand articles with a headline that grabs their attention. “5 places to Hide-Out this Fall” / “The 10 Top Destinations for Buddy Trips” / “Girlfriend Getaways”. The headline should grab the reader and push them into the article. Keep in mind that TRO publishes content specifically for professional travel agents to send to clients in newsletters.

The design of your newsletter, especially early-on, should be simple. It can be plain text in an email if done well, or it can be a multi-color print product. Your newsletter might be a conventional format like TRO’s Travelgram, or it might be a blog-style periodical. In any case, keep the need to be very easily readable in mind. Good fonts and font sizes, bold headlines and good use of white space. People scan a newsletter for articles they want to read. Make the headlines highly visible and engaging. Make good use of graphical elements. All of our previous discussions about professional design and graphics apply here as well. Use a good template or have a local graphic artist assist you in your design.

“Circulation” speaks to the readership as well as the timing and manner of delivery of your newsletter. Will your newsletter be a hard-copy print product? If so, how will you deliver it and to whom? Will it be emailed? If so, to only your existing clients or to potential clients as well?
How often will you send it out? Maybe it will be only on your web site. If so, how will you promote the newsletter? Make it easy for your readers to comment on your articles and to pass it along to others.

Once you commit to a newsletter, you need to continually develop your writing and research skills. A few weeks into the process you can evaluate the return you are generating. You can decide if your brand is receiving the positive feedback for which you hoped when you launched your new endeavor.

**Exercise** – Consider adding a newsletter to your 2012 Marketing Plan or enhancing your current efforts at publishing a newsletter. Write down the “editorial mission” of your newsletter. Look for good templates that make your content highly visible and readable. As an experiment go to USA Today and Budget Travel or Forbes Travel or TRO’s daily Travelgram and find content that you might use in your newsletter.
Develop a Group Leader Program

Experienced travel agents seek out good group leaders. In its most common incarnation, a “pied piper” or group leader is provided with a free or “comp” travel opportunity as both incentive and as compensation for organizing and recruiting others to travel as a group. In some instances, however, the group leader acts as a focal point or celebrity for the group and assumes a central role in the marketing of the travel to others. The travel consultant that consistently and patiently grooms a series of group leaders is establishing the groundwork for regular group travel opportunities. By marshalling the energies of one or more group leaders, the travel consultant both leverages the group leader for a particular trip and also comes into contact with a number of new individual clients.

Group leaders typically fall into one of two categories: affiliated and spec. The affiliated group leader belongs to an organization or a group of people that share a common interest. As a member of an existing organization, the affiliated group leader’s position provides them with access to and influence with the group. The “spec” group leader is one whose personality, influence or drive to travel makes them a natural recruiter or focus for a group. A local radio personality or yoga instructor might be a good “spec” leader as might an individual who simply delights in organizing groups of people out of their own desire to travel.

Make sure from the outset that the group leader has a clear understanding of his or her responsibilities. If the group leader is to play an active role in administrative and organizing functions, those responsibilities should be very clear. In all instances, it is important that the group leader feels that they are earning their travel in exchange for their duties. In this way, the travel consultant is actually able to leverage the time of the group leader. The role of the consultant does not change, but the group leader, as a focal point of the trip, should play a key role in either the marketing or the administrative and organizational duties.

Good group leaders will provide a focus for the group and insight into how to coalesce the trip’s theme. As an authority figure, the group leader should understand the dynamics of the group and assist the travel consultant in pulling the group and travel theme into focus. Ask any experienced agent – a good group leader is worth their weight. Make a group leader program a part of your own marketing plan.

**Exercise** – write down the names of two or three individuals you know that would make good group leaders. Seniors make good group leaders as do instructors (think dance schools or photography classes) and teachers. Give these individuals a call and meet with them to discuss the dynamics of being a group leader. Offer your support, and the support of your suppliers, in putting together a trip. A few good group leaders worked into your marketing plan could make a big difference in your bottom line.
A Travel Agency Website

Is there any more confusing marketing decision than how to conceive, build and deploy a travel agency website? What information should be included? What are clients expecting? How to keep it updated? Should it have a booking engine? How much should the agency spend given the amount of business that the site generates? How should the site be promoted? Is the target market local or far-flung? It’s enough to make the hard working agent go screaming into the dark.

The options are many and the answers to the above questions are as individual as every agent. By the way, some of the best sites I have seen promote individual agents, employees and contractors, that work in larger agencies.

While in this article we won’t be able to cover the answers to each of these topics, we can look to a few principles that will assist in making good decisions.

Firstly, remember that you are not selling travel. You are selling your agency’s expertise, its knowledge and associations, its relationships with suppliers. Consider how best to relay your agency’s story in a way that give clients confidence in your brand. Emphasize the local accountability and service over the impersonal 800 #'s of the big internet brands.

That said, however, spend a lot of time studying major travel sites. Look at Travelocity, Budget Travel, iExplore and sites like Cruise Critic. Study other agency sites that you admire. One thing you will learn is that content is king. Good content keeps readers coming back to the sites again and again. That is one reason for the increasing popularity of blogs as a website format – every entry is new content, a reason to return and read. Look at the differing designs and layouts of the “big boys.” They have spent millions in research and development of their sites. You can leverage that investment by making a study of how they are using their screen real estate to market to the masses. You can obtain very inexpensive, professionally produced content from TRO’s sister company Voyager Travel Guides.

Decide what you want the website to be. Are you hoping for online bookings or just to open the door to the sales process? Who are your likely viewers…existing clients or those who are not familiar with your agency? Like a periodical, a website needs an editorial mission – a reason for being. A good website will reflect your agency’s story and tell it well. Far too many sites look like the Las Vegas strip, filled with logos and flashing lights with little to say about the personality of the agency underneath the clutter. For most local agencies, the best approach is veer to the personal side of their story.

Professional design is a must. Again… “do it yourself” is not a message your agency wants to communicate to the public. Get a good designer or a solid template and give your site a professional look and feel.

Cross-promote your site on all of your business collateral. Obtain your own domain name, and make sure your web address is on your business cards, brochures and marketing material.
Introducing a website into your marketing mix is a major decision. Websites require care and feeding if they are to serve you well. Here is a grouping of past articles on travel agency websites covering topics like search engine optimization, content, design and marketing.

**Exercise** – Spend some time studying the websites of major national brands and also of some local agencies. See if you can determine the editorial mission of each site and then note how well the content lines up with that story. Write down in a sentence of no more than 20 words what you want your site to accomplish. Decide how committed you are to the care and maintenance of a professional site – and decide what role the site will play in your overall marketing mix. If you have a site already, evaluate how well your site tells your agency story. Does it have personality? Is it selling your agency or is it selling travel?
Social Media

My opinion of social marketing has not deviated a great deal since I first looked at the potential of Twitter, Facebook and other forms of social media as marketing channels for travel agents. Some agents report good results, most have yet to garner significant business. Of those who have had successes, Facebook and participation with various online communities seem to hold the most promise.

The venues are new, the actual return on investment difficult to measure, and the case studies few and far between outside of very high profile brands. There is little doubt that for some companies with a tight niche market, tangible products or a well-defined brand, social marketing has been an extraordinary and exciting new way of creating buzz among consumers. The return on investment for most travel professionals is more difficult to assess.

Social marketing wrongly implemented can be a productivity and time waster. Many well-intentioned travel agents simply try to do too much – Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace, Online Communities and blogging – time that could and should be spent elsewhere if the return is not evident and growing. Therefore, travel agencies are well advised to layer on social marketing not as a primary marketing channel but as one that supplements a well-grounded repertoire of fundamental marketing tactics like networking, public relations and advertising. Social networking is cost-effective as most networks are free to join. However, each effort requires an expenditure of time and energy.

Social marketing is marketing that seeks to raise the profile of a company with a target audience by leveraging or creating networks of consumers. In essence, when you join the Chamber of Commerce in your local community for business purposes, you are social marketing. There you will meet many new people and some of them are potential clients. You will introduce yourself in your travel professional persona and have a great many conversations about a variety of topics. In your Chamber activities, you will attempt to create an association in the minds of the other Chamber members between travel and your company and thereby raise the visible profile of your company. Social media on the internet seeks to do the same thing. By joining or creating online communities of people, you will thereby encounter many who are potential clients for your business. You will also better retain those clients over the long-term by keeping them engaged in your company’s story.

The essence of social marketing on the internet is creating a conversation with the other members of the communities you choose. Those conversations will often, perhaps even most often, not be overtly commercial or even about your business. Social marketing conversations frequently cover topics of a much wider scope or application than your need to promote your business. In fact, the key to keeping your audience engaged in conversation has everything to do with their needs, not your own. So to the extent that the conversations you foster are of immediate and real benefit to the other members of the community, the more engaged they will feel and the more likely you are to realize conversions from conversations to actual sales opportunities. So, avoid aggressive marketing and incessant promotion. In your conversations, share your insight, share your expertise and the rest will follow.
While you might want to experiment with a number of social marketing venues, you are well advised to find one or two and stick with them. Each different opportunity will involve your time and energy and those are limited resources. Spend them wisely. Once you have adopted a venue, make it an object of study – become an expert in the media, not just a dabbler.

- **Target your community** and then target your conversations! If your target audience is not on a given community, it does not matter how large the community is. Niche social networking is smarter than simply going where the crowds are – think about blue ocean strategies.
- **Be interesting!** – don’t just pump one “travel special” after another over the channel. Anyone can do that. Can you imagine a conversation with a person where their every sentence was not about the weather, the news or some interesting aspect of their life, but was instead a stream of travel specials? Engage clients in a conversation. Pick a news item from the Travelgram and talk about it. See who joins in.
- **Develop a consistent persona.** Who are you? What is your brand? What image do you want to project? Just as when you meet someone in person, you will carry a personality into online social marketing. Your brand must be clear, and while you probably will not want to be overtly commercial, do remember that you are on a business mission. Your online persona will carry your brand into the online community, so spend a lot of time polishing and working on perfecting the image you want to project.

**Exercise** – Read the introductory articles on social media and decide if any of them fit your personality and whether you want to incorporate it into your 2012 marketing plan. Develop a plan and stick to it. Sophie Bujold and Nolan Burris have done terrific No Limits Webinars available to you in the TRO Community that is a “must see” for getting started and for developing a strategy. Resist the temptation to make social media a major portion of your business plan unless you have had real results with it to this point. Experiment with it and, if it works for you, then by all means run with it. But most travel agents cannot expect to substitute a virtual community for the real one just outside your door.
Networking

An important component of building a successful travel practice is the network of people with whom you come into contact. Although your own circle of influence may be small, it grows exponentially because your friends, family, neighbors, acquaintances, teachers, and co-workers all have circles of influence into which you can market. These relationships provide opportunities to introduce your practice to people with whom you might otherwise not come into contact. Networking is an almost essential element for most traditional travel agents, and an important skill to undertake and develop. There may be no more basic, fundamental marketing skill than networking.

The 365 Guide has several articles on networking, and these are recommended reading. It is important to realize that we are speaking here of face-to-face contact with people in your community. Social networking we will leave to another column.

Analyze the various ways you have at your disposal to gather a network and expand your circle of influence. Certainly there are the professional associations in your hometown such as the chamber of commerce. There is your active involvement in schools, at church and in the hobbies in which you participate. Finally, there are the opportunities you have connecting with family, friends and personal acquaintances to expand the scope of your circle of influence.

At this point, distinguish between networking and public relations. When we think of public relations we refer to opportunities to speak or write about travel. We also want to separate asking for references and referrals from networking. When we network, our goal is to expand the number of people with whom we come into contact and who know us as individuals outside of our day to day professional context.

Almost all marketing activity has the goal of brand building and networking is no exception. In this instance, YOU are the brand, so networking is a perfect media for growing your business. The more people you know, and the better you are at communicating your story, the more benefit you will receive from networking.

There is one very important point to make at this juncture. The key to successful networking is simply that you get from it what you put into it, or better put, you get by giving. The more you give to the other individuals and organizations in your network, the more you will get in return. The more you expose your “self” to others, the better they get to know you and your travel practice. Not because you are overtly selling anything, but because they are seeing you in a context in which your personality and a wider range of personal characteristics are on display. As you network in your community, seek to build genuine relationships with the people with which you come into contact. If you are genuinely passionate about travel, that passion will infuse itself into your casual and social conversations and those you come into contact with will begin to know you as “that travel person.”
**Exercise -** In preparation for building a systematic networking strategy into your business plan, read the past articles on the topic in the 365 Guide. How will you build on and expand your network? Sit down with a sheet of paper and write down every civic and social group to which you belong. Decide which of those you could give more of your time to in a context that would allow you to come more into contact with potential clients.

Next, write down your hobbies and avocations. Are there groups that center around these activities with which you would enjoy socializing? What opportunities do you have for volunteer work? Are you participating fully in the opportunities that surround you? How can you give to each of the opportunities around you in such a way that you can truly expand your circle of influence?

Narrow down your choices to be efficient. In which of your opportunities can you build the most genuine relationships? Commit to being more “out there” in your community. Your business will grow as a result, and so will you.
Advertising

Advertising is one of the most vexing tactics for a travel agent to properly implement into a marketing plan. The capital expenditure for advertising is one of the most risky since client response, or lack thereof, occurs outside of the view of the travel agent. It is often difficult to measure results and to ensure the target audience is indeed even seeing the advertising. Done correctly, however, advertising can be very effective and can raise the public profile of the travel agent and help drive sales. The secret is to properly develop the advertising, to choose the right media and to follow up appropriately.

Advertising is paid, non-personal communication through third-party media meant to persuade a target audience to act in a desired manner. Advertising is one part of the marketing mix, but it is sometimes mistaken for the whole. Advertising works in concert with the other aspects of a marketing plan to both generate short-term sales opportunities and to position the company for more long-term objectives. Travel is a good example of a product where advertising serves both short term (“buy now”) and long term (“remember us and buy when you want to travel”) objectives.

Because of its high degree of visibility, advertising is an important part of brand awareness. For that reason, the message in the ad must be clear and should never conflict with the company’s core brand message. Typically, advertising is “non-personal” – it is directed in a “one to many” fashion, though good advertising is targeted and focused on the demographic of the media chosen. The media can be visual, like banner ads, print advertising, imprinted merchandise, television or auditory like radio or pod-cast sponsorships. But in each case, the advertising must work in concert with the other segments of the overall marketing strategy, and the hard-dollar cost that is typically involved suggests that much careful attention needs to be given its planning, execution and management.

The 365 Guide has a number of articles that provide important requisite considerations for developing a good advertising program. Not wanting to merely re-hash those articles, I recommend that as you build your 2012 Marketing Plan that you review the earlier columns in order to understand the various elements of an advertising program and how to implement an advertising campaign for your travel agency. Of key importance is the need to professionally design your advertising around your core marketing message. An ad that is not professionally designed may do your travel agency more harm than good. Equally important is to place the ad in the appropriate media, narrowing your target demographic as much as possible. Shotgun advertising in mass media works only for mass market product. Better results are often found in more cost effective niche publications and media.

Display advertising is important – it both builds your brand, generating familiarity with your company, and it can act to tactically sell. Especially during more difficult economic times you want to shift your marketing away from “shotgun” tactics designed to market to the world and advertise with media that has a tight, loyal readership. Display advertising in a general circulation newspaper is a more risky effort than a much less expensive ad placed in a newsletter that is circulated in a neighborhood the readers of which match the demographics of your current clientele.
Placing display ads in highly targeted periodicals with a well-defined readership allows for more experimentation with ad copy, format and placement. If you find a particular media that works well, it is important to change out aspects of your ad with some frequency so it does not become “invisible” to readers. Retain those elements of the ad that signify your brand – your logo, address, company name, but change out other graphical elements, position and colors. Keeping a display ad fresh ensures that people will see it multiple times rather than scanning over it with the impression that they have read it in the past.

Finally, when committing to an advertising venue, it is imperative to understand that frequency matters. Again, think in terms of campaigns. A single ad placed a single time represents wasted effort and money. To be effective, an ad must run multiple times to sufficiently impact a readership, to build the brand curiosity necessary. Thus, an advertising effort’s cost must be calculated on a campaign basis, not on the cost of a single ad.

Advertising plays an important role in building your travel agency’s brand and driving sales. However, advertising also tends to consume the greatest portion of many travel agency’s marketing budget. Plan carefully, choose your media wisely and monitor your results. Finally, keep advertising in perspective. It is only one part of the marketing mix, and many agencies very successfully market their travel practice without ever spending any capital on advertising.

**Exercise** - Read the past 365 Guide articles on advertising. Make a list of the media in your community that targets the demographic you seek. Don’t overlook non-conventional venues like neighborhood newsletters or periodicals published by retailers. Consider the allocation of a portion of your marketing budget to display advertising if appropriate, but let’s look to tightly focus its impact. Advertising’s ROI can be difficult to measure.
Establishing Referral Networks

Many travel agents have found referral networks provide an excellent source of new clients. You can generate strong word of mouth marketing by establishing both formal and informal referral networks to generate recommendations for your travel planning practice.

Referral networks are individual business people in complementary industries who commit to refer business to each other. You send business to your accountant and she tells her clients about your travel practice. You send your clients to a small boutique dress shop in town and the owner of the dress shop places your fliers in her store and tells her customers who are traveling about you. Referral networks expand the sphere of influence for each of its participants and, properly worked, can contribute substantially to your overall marketing efforts.

The key to making a referral network successful is “working” it. Simply establishing the intent to refer business is not enough. The members of the network have to commit to the process and be held accountable for their referral efforts. Organizations like BNI have developed very stringent rules and guidelines for their formal referral networks, with remarkable results. Less formal networks can also work, however, if the participants agree to certain ground rules in advance, including the responsibility to record all referrals and to inform members for whom referrals have been made. Many groups encourage their members to pro-actively call referrals rather than waiting for a call from the person referred.

As with all word of mouth advertising it is important for you to ensure that the other participants understand the essentials of your travel planning practice. Spend time with the group understanding their business and making sure that the others understand the full scope of what you do. Trade business cards and take a supply to pass on to those you refer.

Many travel planners spend the vast majority of their marketing resources, whether money or time, on traditional outbound marketing – yellow pages, newspaper ads and local sponsorship advertising. Referral networks, while requiring more effort than conventional marketing, carries with it the inherent credibility of a third party endorsement, imparting a sense of assurance that a print ad cannot.

**Exercise:** Check to see if there is a formal referral network operating in your community. If so, consider attending a function to see how the network operates and whether it is compatible with your personality. You can also set up an informal network between your travel agency and a wedding planner, a photographer, a retail clothing store and a jeweler. Jot down a reminder to speak to complimentary businesses about entering into a referral arrangement.
Revisit Your Marketing Calendar

Business plans are important. Organization is essential. Clarity of expression and correctly assessing markets: priceless. But not a one of these is worth anything without ACTION. Be sure to write an Action Plan (how and when) along with your Marketing Plan (what to do). Too many times we over-plan and over-perfect and in the process lose valuable opportunities to others who are quicker to act. It’s time to take another look at our marketing calendar.

Advice like this can be easily misunderstood. Certain essentials have to be in place prior to marketing. Don’t throw out your business plans and your careful research. But also do not let those things become excuses for not moving quickly and decisively. In fact, one of the key failings of many businesses is to believe they are executing a plan simply because they have one. It is not enough to have a plan: you must act on it!

The best way of implementing your action plan is to make your Marketing Calendar the key component. Force the plan into reality by setting deadlines. If during planning you have to re-calendar once, do it reluctantly. If you have to do it twice, get serious – refuse to re-calendar a third time. Do not let the process of planning defeat your plans.

Many travel agents have problems turning their intentions into action. One of the best preliminary exercises for getting underway with an action plan is to identify those things that stop you from accomplishing the tasks at hand. What in your daily routine wastes time, frustrates you, prevents you from implementing your plans? Are there too many distractions? Is your work area not optimal? Are you unsure of how to begin to plan? Are you afraid to write an article or speak in public? Any one of these things, plus many more, can act to inhibit your more energetic, creative side from taking charge.

The prescription is to meet these issues head-on. Make a list of reasons why you are not accomplishing everything you set out to do. Watch out for a natural tendency to misidentify problems – not knowing how to write a press release is not the same as not having enough time to write one. Be tough on yourself and identify your excuses – all of them. Make a list of “Things that Stop Me” and be brutally honest.

For each item you identify as a problem, write a short solution. Workspace clutter? Read a good article on organization and put it into action. Not enough time in the day? Identify distractions and time-wasters and eliminate them. Turn to a community of agents either online or in your own office, to help identify common obstacles to professional growth. You will find you have a lot in common with your peers.

The process of identifying the issues that distract you from accomplishing your goals can be painful, particularly if you are honest. You may even meet a few inner demons that want to run the show. Banish them by giving them a name and finding a solution. Act decisively, act intelligently, but for goodness sake ACT! Or don’t. It will be up to no one but yourself. In the final analysis, it is as simple, and difficult, as that.
**Exercise:** Make a list of “Things that Stop Me” and set out a plan for ridding yourself of these issues. Now, take the tactics that you have decided to use this year and organize them. If you are going to advertise, choose your venues and begin to work your individual efforts into a calendar. Set out tentative dates for public speaking and articles. Calendar your objectives and goals. Commit yourself to your plan by memorializing it in writing.
Examine Your Points of Contact

Loosely defined, our points of contact are those points at which a client can form an impression of our travel practice. Points of contact range from our logo and business cards, to our presentation formats, our manner of dress and even the places where we meet with clients. The sum total of our points of contact add up to form our image. The more professional our image, the more confidence clients have when it comes time to turn thousands of hard earned dollars over to us for their vacation. Needless to say, therefore, our points of contact must be kept in top condition.

Evaluation of your points of contact forces us to take a hard, honest look at ourselves. To project a professional image, you must use professional tools. Too many agents use logos that look like clip art and free consumer email addresses. No doubt it is cheaper to do it yourself than to hire a professional, but a “do-it-yourself” message is not one that agents want to impart to their clients. An email address that ends in “aol” is a message that says “consumer”. The “free” email often has an advertisement in it for some third party company. An email coming from an AOL, Yahoo, or (shudder) “Hotmail” address is not professional. Likewise, it is a smart move to have a professional design your logo. Clip art invariably looks like clip art. You can amortize the investment you will make in quality materials over the entire life of your business, an investment well-made. A good professional artist will design graphics that can move from your business card to your stationary to your website.

Next, make sure that all of your marketing collateral is consistent. Does each tell a consistent story about you? Is your personality and expertise at the center of each? Is the logo the same on all? Make sure that each piece supports your branding and delivers your message in a clear, concise manner. Eliminate collateral that no longer has relevance and focus on a few strong pieces. At the core are your business cards and stationery. Perhaps you have a “capabilities” brochure. Your itineraries are an important point of contact.

Take a look at your website, blog or Facebook page. Think about the impression it leaves on viewers. Is it distinctively you or does it look like one of hundreds? Is there really any reason for a client to visit? How about your newsletter?

Marshalling your sales and marketing collateral is hard work but don’t let that stop you. The effort is absolutely necessary if you want to stand out from the crowd. Keep pushing forward until each piece tells your story in a way that makes you proud.

Exercise - Review each point of contact for a consistent and professional look and feel. Examine the copy, examine the graphical layout. Try to observe your collateral with the eye of a third party. What would you think if your competition was using your collateral? Ask your harshest friendly critic to look over your materials. Swallow hard and be willing to listen. Your professionalism is at stake.

Review each point of contact including your emails, the flyers you produce, your newsletters and website. Give everything a freshened look for the year ahead.
Revisit Your Budgets

If you have now chosen the distribution channels and tactics you wish to use in 2012, it is time to begin to tie your Marketing Plan back into your overall business plan and budget. You want to make sure that your Marketing Plan is realistic with regard to your budgets and overall capabilities. You want to be certain that your goals are measurable and achievable.

If you already have a year or more of travel consulting history behind you, the financial elements such as annual sales revenue, expenses and anticipated profit may well be established. However, it is important to now work your marketing plans into those goals. Your marketing plan, though it may increase some of your expenses, will also increase your revenues. Again, this is where your marketing calendar is so important. Use it as a way of tracking your anticipated progress and review it often. If you are not hitting your marks, both with regard to planned marketing and to your revenue goals, you can quickly adjust.

You can develop your marketing budget with overall projections that you then fill in with details. You may discover that this year’s budget has not changed markedly over last year’s. The important point here is that you must, however, support your sales goals. Each effort in your marketing plan has TWO financial impacts – one as an expense and one on your incoming revenue. For each undertaking in your marketing plan, calculate both – what will it “cost” and what revenues should result. In this way, you will keep each marketing expenditure in the context of an investment…not merely an expense. If your marketing plan calls for placing advertisements in a local newsletter, then commit to a suitable duration and effort and indicate your anticipated revenue from the effort. If you decided on the development of a niche market for your travel practice, spend time considering the financial impact of that commitment.

Exercise: Review every commitment you have made over the course of the last few weeks and assign a financial number to it and specifically designate how it supports your revenue efforts. Indicate your expectations by tying the expense into the acquisition of business. In this manner you will hold your plan and its performance accountable.
Four Steps to Greatness

Steve Jobs once used the phrase “insanely great” as a way of describing his products and it became an anthem for his vision of Apple’s brand. Go to any Apple store and look at the people crowding around, staring at the products, touching them, playing with computers, phones and iPods and listening to music. You won’t find that kind of zealous activity in the computer section at Best Buy…unless they are looking at the Apple computers. iPhone. iPad. iPod. iTunes. Each of these products are benchmarks, what all competing products compare themselves against and want to be.

Do you want to be an insanely great travel professional? Did you ever? What an amazingly simple, yet powerful, goal to set. Too often our eyes are so focused on the day-to-day detail of the work in front of our face we forget the lofty goals and aspirations that first brought us to travel. None of us begins our career hoping to be “pretty good” or “OK” at what we do. In our earliest days of planning and setting out on our careers we have a vision of greatness.

You can be insanely great.

Let’s rediscover some passion. Here are four steps headed in the right direction.

1. **Commit to being the best at what you do.** Don’t settle for less. Look at every aspect of your travel practice and make it better. Renew your vows with yourself to be insanely great. Be creative and persistent and energetic. Surround yourself with things that remind you why you love travel and why you do what you do.

2. **Commit to life-long learning.** You get back what you put in. Each and every day, learn something new about travel. Each and every day, learn something new about sales and marketing. Take courses, become a destination specialist. Go on fam trips. Attend webinars. Seek to learn from every experience, both good and bad.

3. **Follow the leaders, then become one.** Learn from the best. Go to trade shows, work in online communities with your peers. Watch what is working for others and borrow their ideas. Learn the characteristics of top travel agents and emulate them. Along the way, contribute to others and you will be surprised how much you receive in return.

4. **Guard your integrity.** Commit to a set of values and principles, and then stick to them. This is more difficult than it sounds. Do what you say you will do, apologize when you don’t, and resolve to be better next time. We all slip up, make mistakes, say the wrong thing, over-promise and under-achieve. We say one thing and do another. We avoid. We burn bridges. We get angry when we should be learning. Many of these are simply bad habits that can be broken. Resolve to break them. Begin to minimize the things that stop you, that make you feel bad, that impede your sense of worth and value. Remove the obstacles that get in your way and don’t look back. Imagine the travel consultant you want to be and become that image.

As a travel agent, you are the product that must be insanely great for your company to flourish. It’s a tall order, very difficult to achieve. Maybe you have to be a little bit crazy to be truly great in this business.
Probably.

We do, after-all, aspire to be *insanely* great.
TRO is the industry’s best online-only, completely Free resource for all travel professionals. Read the daily TRO Travelgram for the latest consumer news, travel agent editorials, marketing tips, and travel specials. Email your clients any of the 700+ Destination Guides with your agency logo and contact information. Use the professionally-moderated TRO Community to discuss travel, ask questions, and share marketing ideas. Receive Email Updates for travel deals, agent perks and incentives, and FAM trip information, or search for Travel Specials on the TRO website. Email customized Activity Guides and consumer feature stories for all types of popular and niche travel themes. Watch and email your clients Travel Videos for a new approach to multimedia marketing. Send clients an E-Postcard for a specific destination, theme, special occasion, or just to say Thank You. Learn more about suppliers and how to expertly market their destinations and travel products with one-stop, easy-to-use Marketing Kits. View and email an extensive library of supplier E-Brochures.

Free marketing resources for travel professionals and the travel trade's best editorial.

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