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Cover Focus

One Big Happy

By Kate Rice



How to sell multigenerational travel for fun and profit

Multigenerational travel is an excellent opportunity for agents during these difficult times. Far-flung families want to get together and reconnect, giving themselves, their children and grandchildren a good time and wonderful memories. Because it's group travel, it's more profitable. And its very nature makes it self-perpetuating. Do a good job with a family group, and you've introduced yourself to new customers who are raising your traveling customers of tomorrow.

If you're selling family travel already, you've got your foot in the door. Tim Larison, based in Highlands Ranch, Colo., just outside Denver, was a software engineer who took a buyout for early retirement to start Larison Travel, a Nexion agency. He and his wife, Anne, a former social worker, knew they were going to specialize in family travel. They were such devoted Disney fans that even before they started their travel agency they'd set up a Yahoo! group for other Disneyphiles. They've still got those group pages, which are now incorporated into their website, www.familytravelgurus.com, with one for Disney World, another for Disneyland, yet another for Disney Cruise Line and a fourth for the Disney Vacation Club.

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As is true of many travel agents who sell multigenerational travel, their specialty developed organically. "It's part of the whole family travel package," says Larison, who found himself selling multigenerational travel almost without realizing it. He says "Grandma is often the instigator" as well as the main underwriter of the event.

"They want to take their kids and their kids' kids," says Larison. Perhaps his most moving family reunion was for a woman with terminal cancer who wanted one last trip with her children and grandchildren. Larison planned a Hawaii vacation, and despite the circumstances everyone made the trip and had a great time.

That example highlights one of the rules of multigenerational travel. You must take into account the varying energy levels of family members, who can range from infants and small children to aging grandparents.

Jake Hauptert, founder and chief escape officer for Explorers 3 Adventures and EverGreen Escapes LLC, has found that grandparents might plan on accompanying their grandchildren on various excursions. Hauptert, an Aussie Premier Specialist, books a lot of travel to Australia and New Zealand. But he sometimes finds that a week into a trip, grandparents discover they're just not up for all that they've signed on for and pass on some of the activities, sending the grandchildren off on an outing without them.

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Hauptert recognizes that some people are part-time adventurers, and tailors activities to accommodate that kind of fitness level. He also recognizes that a family group is going to have varying energy levels and interests. A trip that will work for a small child is different than one that will keep a teenager engaged. And the types of experiences can vary, ranging from wildlife spying to snorkeling, bungee jumping or white-water rafting. There is a range of options within these categories, meaning you can fine-tune them to fit the group.

A multigenerational group is big enough to let you create a customized experience. Larison sent a multigenerational group on a Hawaii cruise for which he also booked a private shore excursion. That meant that the group could stop at a lagoon where younger family members snorkeled, and the grandfather, who was less mobile, enjoyed watching them. It also made it easy to take the frequent rest stops that such a group can require.

Family groups can qualify for group air discounts. Larison gets discounts through Travel Impressions, but many airlines also offer group air, generally for parties of 10 or more. Some carriers provide group discounts even when members are departing from several different airports.

Keep in mind that no matter what activities are chosen, not everybody has to participate. This works well on cruises and at resorts, where it's easy for family members to choose the outing that appeals to them and then gather at dinner to share their experiences.

Villas, lodges, vacation homes and condo rentals also work well for multigenerational groups. A condo can be economical, sleeping six people comfortably in three bedrooms. Renting multiple units means families can be close but still have a private retreat should togetherness become too much for some of them. It also solves the problem of who stays where in instances when the number of family members doesn't exactly match the number of beds in cabins, or rooms in cruise ships or hotels.

Terry Sim, who operates Terry's Travel, a Nexion agency in Colorado Springs, Colo., says her own family's reunion—a total of 47 people and four generations—in a lodge in northern Utah worked well. Family members could do a variety of things—swim, explore ice caves, jet-ski and fish—at a nearby lake and river. They stayed in a 15-bedroom, 6,500-square-foot lodge with a theater, pool room, rec room, dining room, hot tub and fire pit.

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Working with families requires diplomacy and the ability to gently deliver reality checks. Sim worked with a grandmother who was astonished that some of her grandsons, avid hunters, didn't want to go on a cruise because they'd have to go for a week without their rifles. That may be an unusual situation, but the preferences of one generation don't always jibe easily with those of another. The grandmother, although initially hurt, eventually planned a cruise for whoever wanted to go.

It's important to be clear about what's included in a family reunion. You have to make sure that the family representative—the person who works with you—understands what is and isn't included. Larison once had to deal with a grandmother whose go-between failed to explain that air was not included in a quote. Larison was able to remedy the situation, but it underlines the importance of making sure everyone has all the information they need. You also want to avoid unpleasant surprises, such as being presented with a large and unexpected bar tab at the end of a trip.

Sim planned one reunion for which the grandmother was paying for one family to take an inside cabin, and the family wanted an outside cabin. She very diplomatically told them what the grandmother was paying and suggested they make up the difference for the upgrade on their own.

Sim recommends bringing walkie-talkies for family members to use on ships and resorts, since cell phones don't always get reception. And make sure your families bring plenty of cameras to create

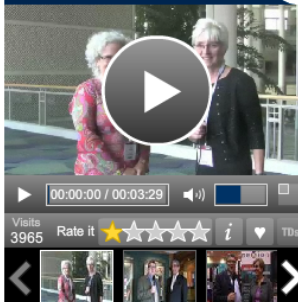


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lasting souvenirs.

Increasingly, cruise lines and hotels have rooms that can accommodate families who don't fit the traditional two-parent, two-child model, but, says Sim, these book up first, so make sure to plan out as far as possible to enable families to get rooms that will accommodate them. Otherwise, families have to decide if their third child is going to bunk with Aunt Susie or Grandma. Sometimes that works well, but it's better if it's a decision made by choice, not necessity. And Sim always asks individuals for their preferred roommates in the family.

Families should be realistic about how much time they can spend together. For some families, three days might be the limit; for others, a week. Families can also design a trip that gives individuals opportunities to break away from the main group.

Multigenerational travel grows out of other types of family travel—one client may turn to an agent for a family reunion; or a 50th- or 60th-anniversary cruise may turn into a family reunion. That means word-of-mouth and social media are effective ways to sell yourself to this market. Because grandparents often initiate the reunion, some agents find advertising in senior publications an effective way to market.

If you plan one reunion successfully, the raves from its participants can generate more business. Sometimes simply suggesting a multigenerational trip to an existing client is all it takes. Sim finds that many clients respond well to such an idea—it's a natural for them.

Websites featuring photos and descriptions of your own family trips are an excellent sales tool. Larison's website doesn't have prices anywhere; it's full of stories by him, his wife, their sons and their clients, featuring happy travel experiences. He also continues to use those Disney Yahoo! groups. His Facebook Fan page includes some travel offers but is heavier on experiences and photos. Hauptert, whose Explorers 3 Adventures is a retail travel agency and whose EverGreen Escapes is a tour operator that creates customized family itineraries, markets through his websites, as well as on Facebook and Twitter.

The demand for multigenerational travel is out there. And it's a specialty that can prove both profitable and heartwarming. @



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