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The Travel Agent Next Door brings on new suppliers, ramps up staff and eyes Quebec, U.S. expansion



The Travel Agent Next Door welcomed 65 delegates and 19 suppliers to its 2020 Vision Conference at the Iberostar Laguna Azul in Varadero from April 20 – 27, hosted by Air Canada Vacations.

By Vawn Himmelsbach

VARADERO — This year's The Travel Agent Next Door conference – the second since the travel agent network's inception in March 2014 – took place in Cuba, with a focus on the next five years. That includes adding some big-name suppliers to its roster and saying goodbye to a few others, as well as potentially expanding the network into Quebec and the U.S. market.

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The biggest change from last year, according to Flemming Friisdahl, Founder of The Travel Agent Next Door, is that the company went from about seven or eight staff to 17, including a dedicated marketing person. That's the highest staff-to-agent ratio of the top 10 independent con-

tractor networks in Canada, according to the company.

Friisdahl also asked agents which suppliers they'd like to see on board and which ones they don't do as much business with. As a result, "we made some decisions," he said. The Travel

Friisdahl says he'd like to eventually move into French Canada and the U.S., although there are no firm timelines in place. "First get what you're doing here 120%, then we can look at doing something else."

Agent Next Door signed on Sandals Resorts as an approved supplier; it also signed on Starwood Hotels & Resorts, which is offering its luxury program to

The Travel Agent Next Door agents. "Five agencies in Canada have this ... we're one of very few that has this program, and we were offered that, and considering how new we are that's pretty rocking."

The organization is currently working to sign other key suppliers. "We now have a hit list of who I'm supposed to go after and get agreements with," said Friisdahl.

However, that means The Travel Agent Next Door will also be eliminating some suppliers from its roster, "but we haven't told them yet," he said, adding that the information is not yet public. "There's probably six that we've eliminated and seven we'll end up [adding]." That means the number of suppliers will remain essentially unchanged, which falls in line with The Travel Agent Next Door's philosophy of 'less is more'.

Friisdahl says he'd like to eventually move into French Canada and the U.S., although there are no firm timelines in place. "First get what you're doing here 120%, then we can look at doing something else," he said, adding that The Travel Agent Next Door gets a call every week or two from someone in the U.S. and Quebec looking to join the travel agent network.

The Travel Agent Next Door is also working to recruit new agents, and so far it's recruited about 50 agents who are new to the travel industry.

During the conference The Travel Agent Next Door signed up another four agents, bringing the total to just over 200 primary agents (who have a direct contract with The Travel Agent Next Door) and another 83 associate agents (an agency with a storefront that employs several agents). Right now, Friisdahl says they're comfortable bringing on about seven agents a month; once he can't call each agent personally every six months, he'll know they've reached capacity. But it doesn't mean he'll keep every agent on board indefinitely.

"Some people have joined us and we've agreed after their year that we're probably not the right company for



Air Canada Vacations hosted a 'Havana Nights' cocktail party and farewell dinner to wrap up The Travel Agent Next Door's annual conference in Varadero.

them," he said. "It's generally because of volume of sales."

For others, though, it's been an ideal fit. Judi Oracheski was one of the first travel agents to sign up with The Travel Agent Next Door two years ago. "I was one of the first 10 - my consultant number was 009," she said, joking that she wanted to be '007.'

As owner of Gypsy Group Travel Inc. in Halifax, she's been in the industry for 20-some years, and has loyal clientele from across Canada. Prior to joining The Travel Agent Next Door, she had been completely independent since 2003. But she quickly discovered the advantages of a support team, after an experience considered every agent's nightmare.

"I'll use a Flemming-ism - it was heart attack-ish," said Oracheski.

"I had a tour operator in Europe declare bankruptcy and I had a group of 40 people going over, so a deposit that had been paid just went missing," she said. "Flemming got me in touch with the people who could help me ...

and where I wasn't getting my calls or emails returned, all of a sudden I was receiving information and we came to an agreement that was beneficial for both of us. The group went and it was a success. Flemming had my back and it was huge, whereas before I had no one to go to."

The Travel Agent Next Door is also working to recruit new agents, and so far it's recruited about 50 agents who are new to the travel industry, according to Rhonda Stanley, Vice-President of Talent Development.

This will become increasingly important as more agents retire. In 2011 Statistics Canada reported that the average travel agent in Canada was aged 50-55; that now makes them 55-60. And the Travel Institute estimates in next 10 years, 80% of travel agents will retire.

"So it's a huge opportunity," said Stanley. "Today, the average age of travel agents coming in [to The Travel Agent Next Door] is 45."

The Travel Agent Next Door offers three programs: the Home Based Agent program; the Agency Support Program; and the New Agent Program. It's also working with Travelsavers and the Affluent Traveler Collection, to provide access to a broad range of programs in addition to its own.