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## VALERIE WILSON TRAVEL



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# VALERIE WILSON

## Travel

Providing respect, integrity and trust for 30 years

BY RUTHANNE TERRERO

**A**T VALERIE WILSON TRAVEL, it's all about the new: discovering the next great hotel or destination for savvy clients, finding new talent to mentor the agent community and devising fresh ways of assisting its 225 travel consultants by using the very latest communications technology.

This is the 30th year since Valerie Wilson launched a small boutique travel agency in Manhattan, whose main goal was to craft luxury experiences for clients going to Europe. Three decades later, Valerie Wilson Travel sits atop the industry, reaping more than \$300 million in volume annually, with 14 offices nationwide.

**Travel Agent** recently caught up with the agency's namesake chairman and her two co-presidents (who also happen to be her daughters), Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg and Kimberly Wilson Wetty, in their Park Avenue, Manhattan, offices.

But before broaching the details of what's new with Valerie Wilson, who, by the way, will publish the second edition of her book, *Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels and Resorts*, this year, let's get one thing straight. Valerie Wilson may be a proven business woman, she operates one of the world's largest travel companies, which is completely debt free, and she may very well be, by every definition, a celebrity in the luxury travel world—but she is still very hands-on when it comes to creating dream trips for her client. And she wouldn't want it any other way.

In fact, you only need to look at her desk to see that she is; a binder with a fortunate client's customized itinerary is inches thick and there are clearly other trips in the works, judging by other activity on her desk.

"I love it. It's part of what keeps me wanting to come to work every day," she tells **Travel Agent**, noting that she spends about 40 percent of her time planning trips for clients.

She's also ultra-passionate that hotels be run properly and that they're constructed correctly so that the guest experience is nothing less than ideal. She is the first to call herself a "frustrated hotelier."

"I've always wanted to own and run hotels. In fact, I was in the process of doing that in 1990; I was about to purchase what is today Orient-Express' Hotel Caruso in Ravello, Italy, and got cold feet because of the Gulf War," she tells us.

That hasn't stopped her from giving practical advice when she's being given a VIP preview of a new luxury hotel, putting herself in the position of a hotel guest who may not be happy with the way a hotel is laid out but is too shy to say something about it. Such advice could be that a beautiful bar overlooking the beach should have a door out to a terrace, or it could come in the form of three pages of notes given to a hotel company CEO or GM, who rarely hesitate to make the changes she's suggested.

Wilson is equally passionate about the way she treats the company's preferred suppliers, who frequently stop by VWT's offices to make presentations to its travel advisors. She makes it a point to stop by as many of these meetings as possible to show her regards.

### Respect for Suppliers Is 'Number One'

We asked Wilson what advice she could provide to our readers when it comes to interacting with suppliers.

"Number One is respect!" she says firmly and without missing a beat. She also emphasizes that VWT doesn't try to leverage its position with vendors.

"I really don't personally like the phrase of 'asking for favors,'" she notes. "There is a much more polite way of asking, suggesting or seeing if there is the potential to do something that is memorable for an experience, which for me is often just personally greeting the customer or making a phone call on arrival to say 'I am here to help you at any time,' because the customer loves to be recognized for who they are. It's also important to think of how you personally would like to be treated if you were in a supplier's shoes. We have firmly said for 30 years in the business that we shouldn't have shouting, we shouldn't have screaming and there shouldn't be people saying things that aren't true. That

again all goes back to respect. And with respect, comes the trust.”

Daughter Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg agrees, noting that it’s important that vendors know the VWT team only asks for something when the client needs it, not because its advisors have over-promised or under-delivered. “It’s because something has gone wrong,” she says. “That’s when we are great as a team, when our frontline advisors come to us and say, ‘I have a challenge.’”

### **The VWT Team in Action**

Case in point: Recently, a family of five was traveling on a 10 p.m. flight and two members were bumped. That was the call that Wilson-Buttigieg got one evening on her cell phone. She promptly called the airline’s senior person in the northeast, at home, who got the two seats reinstated.

“That all happened in the hour before the plane took off; the independent contractor was very happy, the airline was most apologetic and it was just another normal situation where you have to have instant access,” she says. In another recent case, a multi-generational family of 12 going on a cruise flip-flopped their preference for early or late seating in the ship’s dining room.

“We cleared it this morning and we were very happy and relieved to be able to send that e-mail to those family members, but it’s about how you ask the question and know that you are never going to overstep that line or create an emergency,” says daughter Kimberly Wilson Wetty. “It’s about knowing who we ask,—‘What’s the real story on the ground? What are the facts?’ And then people respond instantaneously.”

VWT values its partnership with its consortium, Virtuoso, and the advisors who want to join the company have said that Virtuoso was the key factor.

“It’s a relationship that we couldn’t be more proud of,” says Valerie Wilson. “I think Virtuoso continues to set the bar higher and Valerie Wilson Travel continues to set the bar higher, and it’s a nice way to sort of see that exist.”

Valerie Wilson is a hands-on owner who spends nearly half of her time planning trips for clients.



Working with preferred suppliers sometimes means running a workshop for them, which might not be the norm, but VWT sees it as adding another layer to an important relationship.

“If you are not working together as partners, from the supplier side and the travel agency side, you probably are not going to satisfy the customer the same way or you are not going to have the opportunities to see and nurture new ideas the same way,” says Valerie Wilson.

Along those lines, VWT has created Travel Fests



Kimberly Wilson Wetty lauds the tech-savvy under-30 agents at VWT who are helping the agency reach a younger traveling demographic.

with up to 30 suppliers who interact with advisors and clients in a trade show environment. These events are often attended by the top executives of luxury travel companies. Then there's the annual three-day Cruise and Tour Affair, which brings in vendors to the office to interact with VWT's advisors.

Added to that are panel presentations by competing suppliers that Wilson Wetty moderates for an hour, with questions from the VWT advisor audience at the end. At first, some suppliers were

reluctant to be in the spotlight this way but Wilson Wetty convinced them that this “is your opportunity to shine and show you are different, and what better way to do it than in this kind of safe environment?” The program has been a huge success, she says.

In other efforts to enhance partnership with preferred partners, Wilson Wetty hosts monthly hour-long telephone conference calls in which senior-level executives of either a tour company or cruise line make a 20-minute presentation to top-producing VWT advisors who call in from branch offices and from home. The advisors participate in a Q&A at the end. The success here has been that the supplier executives have been willing to share their direct phone numbers and e-mails with VWT advisors, giving them

access to top problem solvers. VWT has even been successful in having airlines participate together as alliance partners. While Wilson Wetty says it's still vital to have access to account managers for day-to-day issues, having executives explain how airline mergers affect the client is invaluable. This lets the advisors have a total understanding of what's going on.

Training is a major priority for VWT, where advisors have full access to learning opportunities in the form of specialty courses and certification classes. Case in point: This year, at Virtuoso's Travel Mart, it will have 35 advisors in attendance, meeting with hundreds of suppliers one-on-one.

And while it has always encouraged new blood to join the business (Valerie Wilson has always been a resource for those who want to change careers and give travel a try), this year, for the first time, VWT hired trainees right out of college. At this year's Travel Mart, there will be three who are under 30.

“It is truly amazing that young people today are so hands-on with technology and are such multi-taskers; it's just mind-blowing. We have all learned how to try and adapt to this younger employee concept because they think differently, they react differently and

so we have had to change how we are as an employer in how we communicate, how we mentor and how we guide them,” says Wilson Wetty. Hiring younger advisors also helps reach a younger demographic. The type of client has changed as well; even though they're in their 20s or 30s and taking a honeymoon, they've likely already been to six or seven destinations and want something different for this special trip.

“It's not their first trip and, in fact, it's not their first big trip without mom and dad,” says Valerie Wilson. “That's a whole generation of younger people that are traveling and so it's great to have younger people talking to them.”

### Career Changers

And then there are the career changers; most recently, a woman who had a hugely successful career on Wall Street became VWT's director of business development. After handling foreign currency for 25 years, she found VWT through Four Seasons and Abercrombie & Kent. “She came for an interview and wrote the job description because we really weren't looking for that position,” says Wilson-Buttigieg, noting that it was important to remind her that “compensation is slightly different in banking and travel,” but she had such a passion for travel.

Another VWT newcomer is the granddaughter of an independent contractor, a well-traveled MBA, who chatted with Wilson Wetty at a Travel Fest event in Florida and ended up as coordinator for VWT's David's Bridal program, which provides exclusive honeymoon travel product to those visiting David's Bridal showrooms. The travel program is being extended to mother-daughter weekends.

Valerie Wilson is a big believer in giving advisors the tools they need; in fact, hers was one of the first agencies to provide an in-office Intranet that allows advisors across all of its 15 offices to communicate and to share information with each other, such as

## COVER STORY

whether they've heard anything about a certain hotel or knew of a driver/private guide in a certain part of the world. That Intranet is now interactive, where advisors can post information to share with their colleagues. There are also property reviews where "thumbs up/thumbs down" ratings are provided. A ticker with breaking news, sales and marketing tools and a "VWT Toolbox" are also part of the Intranet.

"So, at any point, our agents in any one of our 15 different offices, or those who are home-based, can access the Intranet. Advisors who are traveling can access it as long as they have the Internet. We all know we are a 24-hour business and our clients assume that we are always reachable," says Wilson.

Some of that insider information is also repurposed on VWT's consumer-facing website, ValerieWilson.com, which uses the tagline, "Explore Our World." The website was relaunched last spring to include information for all types of travelers, including multi-generational family, adventurers and world travelers, to name a few.

Valerie Wilson stresses that while technology is key, this is still very much a person-to-person business.

"It's the relationships that give you the power of access, it's because of your relationship with the customer that they trust you enough to refer a friend or to do what I call making your life plans of travel—your life planning experience combined with your lifestyle. I don't want to just plan one trip for a client because it's on their wish list," she says.

If there's any sign that VWT is doing well, it's that it recently opened an office in Palo Alto, CA, and that's a brand-new office, not an existing one that was purchased. VWT had considered the location for more than 10 years, especially since some of its existing corporate clients were pressing for a California office. Rather than wait any longer to find an agency that they could buy or have affiliate with VWT, "We decided to bite the bullet and open a new VWT branch," says Wilson Wetty. "We looked in multiple locations



Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg says that vendors know the VWT team only asks for something when the client needs it.

in the San Francisco Bay Area and based on where we already had an existing client list combined with where we believed potential growth would come from, we settled on Palo Alto. Our strategy is to continue with expansion in the West Coast," she adds.

VWT also recently affiliated with Orange Park Travel, in Orange Park, FL. The company prefers not to purchase agencies outright because it recognizes that clients have the right to go with whichever agency they choose and that the agency owner may or may not want to stay on. Instead, it prefers agencies become affiliates, which can then evolve into branches.

"We have three or four different types of programs because we realize that no customer is the same and that no travel agency or advisor looking to join us is the same," says Wilson-Buttigieg. "It's really recognizing what change they are looking for rather than trying to fit it into a cookie-cutter model, which we don't do. It's more strategically based on location; it's based on net worth and it's based on needs."

### Celebrating the 30th

VWT's 30th anniversary will be celebrated in many ways, kicking off on the official date, this September 8. Client events will start in November and continue through June 2012. An advertising, media

and public relations campaign will be integrated into the efforts and four Valerie Wilson trips are being created, with one of the Wilsons acting as host. A company and supplier "thank you" party in December will acknowledge "a very significant number of people" who have been with the company for 20 and 25 years.

"Some of them literally started as trainees and then developed their own business and became independent contractors or are now executive directors of VWT," says Valerie Wilson.

The VWT chairman says, that in the end, it all just goes back to knowing who you are and how you can fulfill the dreams of your customers. But she also acknowledges that the customer concept exists in several scenarios.

"When someone might be joining us as an independent contractor or an affiliate, they are my customer, they are Valerie Wilson Travel's customer," she tells **Travel Agent**. "If we are sitting on any advisory capacity with any one of our preferred partners then I am their customer. And, of course, the traveler is our customer. So it all comes back into the circle of relationships and how you can best fulfill everybody's opportunities, particularly with the challenges of business today.

"I don't think there is any other industry in the world that has had more change than travel," she adds. "And no matter how many times one has had to reinvent oneself or think of a new opportunity because of the different challenges, one still has to maintain their core values. And for us, the words that we have used from the beginning are respect, integrity and trust. Only then do you really develop loyalty." ■

**ON TRAVELAGENTCENTRAL.COM**

VALERIE WILSON and Fugazi Travel's Robert Romano will participate in the "He Said, She Said" session at the 13th Luxury Travel Expo in Las Vegas, Dec. 6-8. Read more about it at [www.travelagentcentral.com](http://www.travelagentcentral.com), search "Valerie."

## OUR PILLARS OF STRENGTH



### **BUSINESS:** *Do Business with Us*

With 30 years experience, Valerie Wilson Travel understands the needs of today's business traveler. We take care of the details, so our clients can take care of their business. In 2011, *Travel Weekly* ranked VWT the 29<sup>th</sup> largest travel management company in the US.



Travel Planning

### **LEISURE:** *Live, Love, Laugh...The Power of Access™*

Whether you travel to celebrate with friends and family, or for personal fulfillment and enrichment, or simply to get away from everyday worries, Valerie Wilson Travel offers The Power of Access™ to create a lifetime of memories. *Travel+Leisure* has recognized VWT on the "A-List" for 9 consecutive years.



### **CRUISE:** *Create Your Perfect Cruise*

At Valerie Wilson Travel, we have re-defined cruising for the novice as well as the committed cruiser. Not only will we provide access to VIP treatment, upgrades and amenities, but also our lifestyle consultants will listen to your past travel experiences and match you with the perfect cruise, itinerary, excursions, and exceed your expectations. VWT is recognized as a top producer by all luxury and premium cruise lines.



Awards & Accolades

### **CELEBRATE:** *Enjoy Once in a Lifetime Events*

A romantic dream honeymoon. A golden anniversary. A milestone birthday. A family reunion. A retirement party. Your child's graduation. Once in a lifetime celebrations that you want to relish forever. VWT recognizes the power of celebrating. Let the experts make the unimaginable a reality.



Special Events

### **MEETINGS & EVENTS:** *Plan with Us*

The Meeting, Incentives & Special Events team at Valerie Wilson Travel has cutting edge experience in planning and executing meetings and special events for the most discerning clients. We know what works and what does not; we know how to make your events unique and how to engage your employees.



### **CONNECT WITH US:** *Access Us*

The Valerie Wilson Travel network services our clients worldwide. You can connect with our 300 Travel Consultants and Associate Agents through our network of home based agents or via any one of our 15 office locations from New York to California and Maine to Florida.



### **EXPLORE OUR WORLD:** *Network with Us*

Get inspired and connect with our most recent updates, current promotions, and special events. Let us share our passion. Become a fan on Facebook, follow us on Twitter, or be a guest blogger!



### **GLOBAL FOOTPRINT:** *The Tradition Continues*

Valerie Wilson Travel has always been committed to giving back and helping those less fortunate. In fact, dedication to improving the world around us is part of our heritage. Doing what is right comes naturally to the people at VWT, and our commitment is to leave a legacy for a better global footprint.



### **30TH ANNIVERSARY:** *Every Legacy Has Its Journey...*

Celebrating three decades of integrity, trust and loyalty. Our journey in travel advocacy and travel management evolves. The future is bright. We are excited to service our clients, further enhance our preferred partner relationships, expand our power of access, increase our presence worldwide, and continue to make a difference with a global footprint that is fostered by our core values.

