



CUSTOM-BUILT TO PERFECTION

AS THE COMPANY TOASTS ITS 30TH
ANNIVERSARY, TOURCAN VACATIONS'
VIVEK KHANNA AND PHILLIP SOLOMON
REFLECT ON THE EVOLUTION OF ITS
PERSONALIZED TOUR OFFERING - AND THE
CONTINUED IMPORTANCE IT PLACES
ON TRAVEL AGENTS

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"BEING A NEW COMPANY, IT WAS NOT EASY, BUT WE WERE PERSISTENT, AND WE WERE INVOLVED WITH AGENTS AND PEOPLE WHO LIKED US."

— VIVEK KHANNA

Every business owner remembers their big break, and Vivek Khanna is no different. After founding tour operator Tourcan Vacations in 1987, the aspiring businessman toiled in relative anonymity for some time, keeping his new company afloat and waiting patiently for his golden opportunity.

It was a while before that first breakthrough finally arrived. Air Canada was commencing service to Mumbai and they wanted a tour operator with local expertise who could supplement their flights in the region. Seeing an opportunity for his fledgling company, Khanna lobbied extensively to be given a contract and funding to promote India.

"Being a new company, it was not easy," he reflects, "but we were persistent, and we were involved with agents and people who liked us. After several meetings, Air Canada finally agreed to work with us – at the time, a relatively unknown company."

The success with Air Canada gave liftoff to the company's aspirations, and since then, Tourcan has never looked back. Its anniversary in 2017 marks an eventful 30 years in business, during which time Khanna and general manager Phillip Solomon have witnessed dramatic change – in the evolution of Tourcan's product, the expansion of destinations offered on its tours, and the introduction of air consolidation to its offerings in 1994. One factor, however, has remained constant: the prominence of travel agents in promoting and selling the company's range of exotic itineraries.

While continuing to produce the catalogue it first unveiled in 1987, the majority of Tourcan's business now consists of unique, personalized vacations that are requested by the customer, relayed through the agent and created by one of the company's destination experts.

"We still have this magnificent brochure which started in 1987 with India," Solomon tells *PAX*,

“and we have a ton of guaranteed departures to various destinations. Despite that, about 77 per cent of what we sell doesn't come out of here anymore... we sell more customized tours than we do set departures.”

“We're now known for customizing our itineraries to suit the needs of the individual traveller,” he continues. “People will use our brochure as a menu – they'll go to a travel agent and say, ‘I want to go to China – can you customize it for me?’ That's our strength.”

Glancing around Tourcan's Toronto offices, it's not difficult to see why Solomon affectionately describes the company as a 'mini United Nations.' The place is brimming with flags, memorabilia and mementos that reflect not only the diverse range of destinations on offer in the company's catalogue, but also the variety of nationalities represented among its employees.

The diversity of Tourcan's staff, Solomon feels, is an invaluable asset that has helped position the company uniquely as an industry expert in selling its range of personalized tours in disparate exotic locations.

“What's important is that the staff who work here have been employed for their knowledge and expertise about the destinations that they sell,” he explains. “So, if an agent calls and wants to talk to someone about Africa – they'll talk to someone who's either lived in that destination, was born and raised there and came to Canada, or

someone who's travelled there extensively. The same will apply for Asia, South America and so on. These people are experts in their field and know their destinations well.”

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With some 98 per cent of its business still conducted through travel professionals, the company unsurprisingly retains a strong emphasis on its collaboration with agents.

“We make ourselves extremely visible to the travel industry,” says Solomon,

“in terms of guiding agents, meeting with them and their clients to help the process and close the sale.”

Tourcan's staff are equally happy to lend their expertise to agents who need a hand. “We won't hesitate if someone has difficulty in selling a destination because they're not familiar with it – we're happy to do an online Skype call with them and their client and work through it with the agent.” →

GIVING BACK

A recurring theme Tourcan began to notice about its customers was their interest in giving something back to the local communities of the destination they visit. This inspired the company to launch its Enriching Lives International Relief Program, aimed at improving living conditions for communities in Tourcan's range of destinations – by providing clothing, books, pens and paper, and collaborating with suppliers to address other difficulties.

“We have three projects we are currently supporting, in Peru, El Salvador and Tanzania, and we're also looking at some projects in India and Vietnam,” confirms Khanna. “We'll continue to look for more projects we can support and help down the road.”

“The idea is that we get involved to give something back, and then give clients the opportunity to go there,” adds Solomon. “If they want to make a contribution, they can.”



THE ADVENT OF PRE- AND POST-CRUISE TRAVEL

An evolution in Tourcan's business has come about after the emergence of a recent trend: the phenomenon of pre- and post-cruise travel. Here, Tourcan will cater to cruise customers who have arrived early to their cruise's point of departure, or who want to experience some local sightseeing after their cruise has ended.

"When clients arrive in Singapore, for example, ahead of a cruise," Solomon explains, "an agent will call and say, 'I have people going on a cruise, can you do anything before they depart?' We will transfer them to a hotel, give them accommodation and sightseeing – and then put them on a ship, and off they go. And we do it the other way around as well."

Worth bearing in mind if your cruise ends, but you're not ready to go home just yet!

"Some agents will approach us and say that they would like to promote a group departure to a specific destination," he adds. "When this happens, we work very closely with the travel agent to help them put the itinerary together."

"But this is what sets us aside from our competitors: we don't just say, 'OK, great, call us when you get ten or more people.' We work with them in the promotion of the group: we will help them with the marketing; we will produce e-flyers

for them that they can send out to their database. Where possible, myself or Wendy [Schader, sales director, Western Canada], out west, will go and do a consumer event with travel agents helping to do presentations to the consumer to help promote their specific group departure. We get very involved in the promotion and the marketing of the group itself.”

Tourcan's involvement in the Let's Talk Travel trade shows, meanwhile, has also provided fertile ground for new sales and further growth in smaller communities with less exposure to the mainstream travel industry.

“Have we seen sales from our participation in Let's Talk Travel? Yes, we have,” affirms Solomon. “Have we established relationships with people in towns and cities that we probably wouldn't have? Yes, we have. We all get the opportunity to go to Montreal and Ottawa and Toronto and the major cities,” he continues, “but they get to see us more than the others. This gives me, and all of us, the opportunity to promote our products in the travel industry in the smallest towns that we would not normally go to.”

As the company reflects with satisfaction on its successful first 30 years in business, attention inevitably turns to what's in store for the future. While its leaders hope to see the opening of new and untapped markets in the years ahead, the continued evolution of its existing products is also the name of the game for Tourcan. “When you've been selling a Kenya safari for the last 25 years, you've also got to look at what can be done to enhance that particular experience for people,” Solomon opines. “You have to look at what you have, and how you can further enhance each experience.

“It's essential to be able to not repeat what's been done before, but to enhance what's been done before.” ■



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