

The Power of Access

An Interview with Valerie Ann Wilson,
Founder, Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer, Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE *Within two years of moving to New York City, Valerie Ann Wilson was hired as Vice President to start the ladies division of Gant. From 1967, she spent the next 13 years serving on numerous committees and boards of directors, and played a part in a multitude of fundraising efforts with not-for-profit organizations in Westchester County, New York City, and London. In 1977, the Wilson family moved to London where Valerie became a founding member of the Junior League of London. Her three years there fostered her passion for travel and, in September of 1981, Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc. (VWT) was born, opening in the Pan Am Building in New York City. In 2001, Valerie became a published author with the publication of Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels & Resorts. Ten years later and as a part of the 30th anniversary milestone, she wrote the second edition of her book, Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels & Resorts, Second Edition.*



Valerie Ann Wilson

COMPANY BRIEF *Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc. (www.valeriewilsontravel.com; VWT) is today one of the largest private, women owned, and family managed travel consulting firms in the United States. Headquartered in New York City with a diverse client base, there are 16 offices in the Northeast and Southeast, stretching from Maine to Florida, in the Midwest, and on the West Coast. VWT's team consists of a highly specialized and knowledgeable network of nearly 300 Travel Consultants, Associate Agents, and employees who handle the travel management needs for companies and organizations in industries like fashion, publishing, finance, new media, pharmaceuticals, and not-for-profits. All of Valerie Wilson Travel locations are proud members of Virtuoso®. Every year since 1998, the agency has been counted among Travel Weekly's "Top 50 Travel Agencies" and most recently as the 30th largest in the United States.*

What is the state of the hospitality industry?

The wonderful thing about hospitality and travel is that it is ever-changing and you have to be prepared for those changes.

This recession has dug deeply into the corporate market, but leisure travel, and particularly the luxury high-end leisure business, has been stronger than ever with travelers going everywhere in the world.

Luxury and high-end travelers have realized how important travel is as part of their lives. They might not need a new car every year but they definitely want to take a major trip with their families.

What do you need to do today to survive as a travel advisor and what role does technology play in that?

Number one, good travel advisors dealing with their own personal knowledge, experiences, and relationships around the world – there is nothing on a computer that will develop a relationship.

Some will attempt to tell a story in writing but it's never like telling the story firsthand.

We use technology as another form of communication with our travelers because many of them want to compare properties. We look at Web sites together and we'll tell them firsthand the difference among properties or locations, because we have selected them based upon what we know about travelers and how they like to travel.

The Web can be used as a tool, but it doesn't replace getting our firsthand information.

Has the word "luxury" lost its meaning?

It's tough to define luxury. I can think of several hotels that say they are reaching for six-star status, but I would not say they are there yet. I speak with our clients about the experience of a property or destination based on what I understand about their expectations as opposed to a nebulous definition of "luxury" or "deluxe."

Luxury is difficult to define because it is experiential and everybody has a different expectation for it. You can have a fabulous hotel but it might be wrong for a particular customer. This is another reason why travelers should use an experienced travel consultant.

Which key areas should advocates for the travel industry be addressing?

Every day, the bar moves up for what the guest expects to be included in the room. Years ago, a hotel with air-conditioning was considered luxury; today, any hotel with a focus on customer service must have a respectable fitness facility and hopefully an outstanding spa, a great bar, and, of course, a prime location.

In addition, the luxury high-end traveler feels he is being nickel-and-dimed by not having Internet connectivity included in his room rate – that is something we have to move past. If the less expensive hotels include it in the rate, why would the top hotels not do the same?

What makes for a successful general manager today and how has the role evolved?

As we've gone through some serious economic times, asset management and the number crunchers are a huge part of any hotel today. The challenge for a top GM is to balance those issues and job responsibilities while delivering exceptional hospitality to the customer. A GM must enjoy interfacing with the guests.

As your business has grown, has it been difficult to transfer the relationships you have built when your customers want you?

Fortunately for me, both of my daughters, Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg and Kimberly Wilson Wetty, have been in the business with me for a long time. That second generation is so entrenched here that everyone knows that the three of us as joint owners are a team.

We have tried to emphasize among our own advisors the importance of developing strong relationships with our preferred partners, so we have a busy calendar of presidents, general managers or directors of sales who come into our offices regularly to do seminars and presentations.

Connecting with our suppliers is still very important to make sure we can satisfy customer needs. Part of our Power of Access is our desire to know a bit more than anyone else and to make sure the connection is made between our customers and their destination.

Has it become more difficult to maintain rate integrity?

It's difficult for any travel advisor because we are going to have to check at least three sources any time we make a reservation. It takes more time, but that is our job.

There are some strong companies that have rate integrity and hold to it. It's good that they do because the minute you start diluting your rate and no longer have what is perceived as rate integrity, you can damage your reputation.

How do you maintain a family culture within the organization?

When I started Valerie Wilson Travel 31 years ago, I thought I was going to be a tiny travel company for a few affluent individuals and a few small companies. Having grown to this size would not have happened without my daughters being involved in the company.

For us, it's a family owned, family run business – it's such a part of our core values that we don't even think about it any other way. Everybody within the company, no matter the role, is part of the family. ●