

The Power of Access

An Interview with Valerie Ann Wilson, Founder, Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer;
Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg and Kimberly Wilson Wetty, Co-Owners & Co-Presidents, Valerie Wilson Travel

EDITORS' NOTE Valerie Ann Wilson initially moved to New York City to pursue a fashion career. Within two years, she was hired as Vice President to start the ladies' division of Gant. Beginning in 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 in London fostered much of her passion for travel and on September 8, 1981, Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc. (VWT) was born, opening in the Pan Am Building in New York City. In 2001, she became a published author with Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels & Resorts. Ten years later, she authored the second edition and on February 2, 2012, Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels & Resorts, Second Edition and the VWT 30th anniversary campaign were both unveiled at the Astor Library at The St. Regis New York with industry leaders and high-profile travel, business and lifestyle media.

Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg joined Valerie Wilson Travel in February 1991. Her consistent success with both sales and business development has kept Valerie Wilson Travel in the spotlight as she provides oversight and leadership to the company's corporate travel, meetings, incentives, and fulfillment divisions, its business development, and its strategic initiatives. She is actively involved with the American Society of Travel Advisors (ASTA) as Co-Chair of the Government & Political Affairs Committee and was former Chair of the ASTA Corporate Advisory Council. Her efforts have earned her a number of honors, including the 2018 Paul Ruden Industry Ambassador Award, Luxury Travel Advisor Award of Excellence, the Top Humanitarian Award, and the ISTA / ASTA Barbara O'Hara Advocacy Award in 2010. She graduated from Haverford College with a B.A. in history and a minor in political science and received her Executive M.B.A. from the Owner/President Management (OPM) Program at Harvard Business School in 2004. She began her career as a Corporate Sales Manager of the Westbury Hotel in New York.

Kimberly Wilson Wetty joined Valerie Wilson Travel in February 1995 and has been instrumental in developing the company's cruise division and launching the company's first website.



Jennifer, Valerie and Kimberly on safari in Kenya

Today, she is responsible for managing the leisure division, VWT's membership in Virtuoso®, as well as human resources. She is also responsible for all the brand and marketing strategy for VWT. Renowned for her extensive travel expertise, she has been awarded many honors in the industry, including Family Travel Specialist on the Travel+Leisure A-List and is a member of Travel+Leisure's Travel Advisory Board. In 2015, she won the Most Innovative Advisor award from Virtuoso®. She is also a member of the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO). A graduate of Bucknell University with a B.A. in sociology, she is the President of their Alumni Board of Directors. She began her career as a Store Manager for Ann Taylor in New York City and left retail to join the travel industry as Marketing Coordinator for the Americas at CIGA Hotels.

COMPANY BRIEF With high regard for attention to detail and customer service, Valerie Wilson Travel (ValerieWilsonTravel.com) is one of today's largest women-owned and family-managed travel consulting firms in the United States. Headquartered in New York City, VWT has a diverse client base and offices nationwide, stretching across the Eastern seaboard, the Midwest, and the West Coast. VWT's team consists of a highly specialized and knowledgeable network of 315+ Travel Advisors and Associates. Valerie Wilson Travel handles the travel management needs of companies and organizations

in industries as diverse as fashion, publishing, finance, new media, pharmaceuticals and not-for-profits. All Valerie Wilson Travel locations are proud members of Virtuoso®. VWT's Power of Access® guarantees clients VIP treatment, exceptional service, as well as exclusive rates and amenities with preferred partners. Every year since 1998, the company has been counted among Travel Weekly's Top 50 Travel Agencies.

Valerie Wilson Travel's tagline is "The Power of Access®." How does VWT define access and is this a key differentiator for VWT?

Kimberly: This was not initially a tagline when Valerie started the company in 1981. We were all at a two-day team management branding session and recognized that, as we came up on our 25th anniversary, we really needed to figure out what differentiates VWT from our competition.

When we discussed this, the differentiating elements we listed on the white board all came back to one central concept – access. The people we know, the experiences that we can create and the suppliers we have relationships with made us the powerhouse we truly were at the time. As we sat around the room discussing this further, the tagline was born – The Power of Access.

Almost 15 years later, as we come up on our 40th anniversary in 2021, this tagline has led to a shift in our mindset within the culture at the company. It is now how we think. We make decisions based on what is true to our tagline. It guides our thinking on whether we are delivering the right service and the right experiences to our three constituencies – our customers, our employees and Associates, and our suppliers.

The word "access" penetrates everything that we do and is embedded in our philosophy and strategy. It's part of our mission. It's a part of everything that we touch and is definitely what differentiates us as a company.

Will you highlight examples of how The Power of Access has guided your business strategy?

Jennifer: One concrete example is our development of Air Access. We created a fulfillment department in 2000 and saw an opportunity for VWT to provide services to other travel companies that didn't have our same skill set or our clout. We went to some of our competitors that had large \$50 million or \$100 million corporate accounts. We explained that we didn't

**Almost 15 years later, as we come up on our 40th anniversary
in 2021, this tagline has led to a shift in our mindset within
the culture at the company. It is now how we think.**

want to encroach on that business since that's not where our sweet spot is. However, we could certainly elevate their level of service if they outsourced their C-level leisure travelers to VWT.

Today, our air programs remain as competitive as anyone's in the marketplace. While we are a \$325 million family-owned powerhouse rather than a billion-dollar company like some of our competitors, we still have programs that match or exceed theirs.

This has allowed us to also help smaller agencies when it comes to both skill sets and revenue streams and has given us the opportunity to partner with other Virtuoso® agencies. The Power of Access has helped us to recognize and leverage what we do well.

Kimberly: The Power of Access also led to the development of VWT Suite Access™. About seven years ago, we started holding regular owners' meetings to have strategic discussions about where we wanted to go as a company and how we would build our business.

As we were brainstorming at one of these sessions, we decided that creating a hotel program was something that could be very valuable to us. We wanted to make sure that it wasn't just a discount or a loyalty points type of program. It had to really speak to who we are as a company, and who our clients are. We recognized that we play very much in the high-net worth, high-touch realm, and that providing suites has always been an important element of our hotel packages. So, we thought we should create a suite program, which became Suite Access.

We identified the hotel partners that we had done a lot of business with and the markets in which we wanted to develop deeper relationships. We also identified a small selection of up and coming hotels that we wanted to be a part of the program.

After an immense amount of preparation, we invited a select group of hotels to join the program with a two-year commitment. We are very excited to announce that next year marks our fourth anniversary with Suite Access, and we have already reached more than \$8 million in new hotel sales because of the program. We're now able to offer benefits to the customer that are above and beyond those offered by Virtuoso® and other hotel programs.

In 2019, we realized that this program shouldn't be limited to land, so we opened up a Cruise Access component of the Suite Access

program. We invited four inaugural cruise lines – Seabourn, Silversea Cruises, Regent Seven Seas Cruises and Celebrity Cruises – into the program. It has been exciting to see cruises being blended into our hotel program over the past six months.

Did your hotel and cruise partners quickly understand the value of these programs or was there an education process?

Valerie: They quickly understood what we were creating because, from the beginning, I have never been afraid to pick up the phone and call the general manager of any hotel around the world. I have never hesitated to tell them who our clients are, when they are staying at the property and to request that the general manager personally take care of the client.

In many cases, when our clients return to hotels around the world, they have already established a relationship with the management of that hotel. This is becoming the case now on the cruise side as well, even though it's relatively new. Our clients feel totally confident that they will not be treated like just another guest in someone's hotel, but as a guest in the GM's home.

That is a far more welcoming, far more friendly and far more personal way to travel. We have always tried to have our clients feel – whether they're traveling for leisure, business or meetings – a special empathy and warmth about where they're staying and the experiences that they will have.

Are you more focused on bringing in new properties and cruise lines to the program or on enhancing and building on VWT's current partners?

Jennifer: A little of both. This industry is constantly changing, so some of the partners that we started with five years ago may not be the same partners that are the right fit moving forward into the next five years.

We're constantly vetting the suppliers that we work with to make sure that they're still delivering the customer service that stands true to our high standards.

We keep our eye on new hotels coming into the market. We also watch geopolitical trends so we can understand what is happening in different parts of the world. A few years ago, Turkey was hard hit, and now it's coming back. We wanted to continue to support our partners there, so we offered a discounted rate because we knew they needed help to rebuild their room night volume.

We know that we need to bring value as well. Part of that includes the marketing element tied to the Suite Access program. We produce blogs and video content. We have a program called Suite Talk that is a playoff of "if these walls could talk." We pretend that the suite itself is telling the story of who has stayed there before and giving some fun tidbits about the hotel.

Do hoteliers today spend more time focusing on financial issues and technology and how important is it that they do not lose the personal relationship and human touch?

Valerie: All three of us sit on various advisory boards and focus groups, and we are not afraid to tell hoteliers that we feel the most important elements are fostering those relationships and making your guests feel important.

Even if the major focus is on the financials and technology, since they all have to think about the numbers more than ever, it's still a hospitality business. I always remind them that if you don't have the right guests, you're not going to get the right numbers. To get the right guests, you need to treat them with all kinds of TLC and respect and make sure that, even if you're seeing them a day or two after they arrive, you contact the guest and ask, "How's it going? Are you enjoying your stay and the experience? Is there anything I can do to make your visit better, and do you have any suggestions for us?"

It's amazing how many clients will offer a very simple suggestion that can be executed to make their stay even better.

How important is it for VWT to maintain its family culture even at the size of the business today?

Valerie: That feel certainly sets us apart because so many family businesses don't always make it into happy second generation or third generation relationships. Fortunately, Jennifer, Kimberly and I have worked together for more than two and a half decades and Jennifer's husband, Brian, is our CFO.

I wanted VWT to have the feeling of a small company no matter what size we became and to retain the intimacy of the ownership and management. There is a shared pride in being a part of the big VWT family.

We really want to work with people that we enjoy working with and help them have a viable career in the travel industry. ●