

Travel Advisor Success Story: Jason Hedrick, CI Azumano Travel

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Travel Advisor Success Stories focus on veteran advisors and how they achieved success. Here's a look at Jason Hedrick, director of operations and international travel specialist at CI Azumano Travel.

How did you get your start as a travel advisor?

Growing up in Egypt, where my father worked as a contractor for the U.S. government, I developed a deep interest in travel that soon became a true passion. Due to the distance and expense, our family would only return to the U.S. once a year; the rest of our travels consisted of side trips from Egypt. Among the many incredible places I visited, a few standouts were Cyprus, Kenya, Israel, Germany and France.

After graduating from high school in Egypt, I pursued a degree in college focusing on history and international affairs, with a plan to earn a master's in history and become a history teacher. However, to support myself, I sought work after college. A friend suggested I consider becoming a travel agent, given my extensive travel experience from living abroad. I applied to a small, family-owned agency with just two other new agents, and was soon hired.

This relatively new agency fostered an entrepreneurial spirit, encouraging us to pursue any new business that came through the door. The supportive environment and hands-on experience helped me grow quickly in the field. Within my first year, I had the opportunity to travel to Fiji on a familiarization trip – which was an incredible experience that solidified my love for the travel industry. I decided to pursue this career path fully, setting aside my graduate school plans.

Now, over 26 years later, I look back on a fulfilling career in the travel industry, one that continues to inspire and energize me.

How did you build your business over the years?

As an entry-level travel agent, I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to already explore a variety of destinations, particularly those in more remote and exotic regions, such as Africa and the Middle East (Egypt). While many of my colleagues focused on more conventional markets like cruises or popular destinations such as Mexico, Hawaii, Florida, California and Las Vegas, I was tasked with handling more distant and complex locations, including Europe, Asia and Africa.

This challenge quickly became something I truly enjoyed, and I found myself gravitating towards FIT (Fully Independent Tour) programs, which others often shied away from.

Over time, I developed a loyal following and began to build a strong client base. However, I believe it was by narrowing my focus and specializing in select areas that I achieved greater success. I became known as an Africa specialist and an adventure travel expert, offering unique and customized experiences for those seeking more exotic and intricate itineraries. Through my

affiliation with our consortium, Signature Travel Network, I also earned the designation of destination and lifestyle specialist.

A key driver of my success has been the combination of client referrals and repeat business, which has allowed me to continue growing and enhancing my expertise in these specialized areas.

What characteristics make you a successful advisor?

I make it a priority to listen closely to clients, gathering all relevant information about their travel plans, including their motivations, interests and preferences. My goal is to create a vivid picture of their destination or cruise, helping them envision the experience and ensuring it aligns with their expectations.

I believe in being straightforward with clients; setting the right expectations is essential for a positive experience. I avoid sugarcoating any details in pursuit of a sale, as honesty fosters trust and leads to greater client satisfaction.

Additionally, I view each client interaction as part of a long-term relationship rather than a one-time transaction. If a client isn't ready to proceed right away, I focus on thoughtful follow-up, understanding that today's 'no' may become tomorrow's 'yes.' Building strong client relationships is at the core of my approach.

What have been your greatest challenges?

The most significant challenges I've faced in my career as a travel agent were the events surrounding 9/11 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Both crises brought global travel to a halt, and there was a prolonged period of uncertainty about how and when the industry would recover.

Another ongoing challenge is staying relevant in an ever-evolving market. This requires a commitment to continuous learning, professional development and staying informed about industry trends and new offerings. It's essential to differentiate oneself and maintain a unique value for clients.

What have your greatest accomplishments been?

In 2023, I earned the Signature Sales Excellence Award for top sales.

What tips can you provide advisors new to the industry

Transparency with clients is essential for establishing trust and building strong, lasting relationships. By providing a clear picture of the trip and setting accurate expectations, clients are less likely to encounter negative surprises, leading to a more enjoyable experience.

Demonstrating confidence is equally important; it not only builds trust but also reinforces your expertise as a knowledgeable professional in the field.