

Six Ways to Master Product Knowledge and Why It's Important

by [Steve Gillick](#) / June 22, 2018



According to the Ensemble Agents Make a Difference Survey, product knowledge is the number one trait that travellers look for in travel agents. Photo: Shutterstock.com.

The results of Ensemble's Agents Make a Difference survey appeared in the travel news recently. When asked about the skills and services customers most appreciate from travel agents, product knowledge took the top spot at 65 per cent, with destination knowledge at 53 per cent. Rated way down the list was the price, at 11 per cent.

One might rightly conclude that a travel agent is perceived as a value provider rather than a transaction facilitator. And it's no wonder, based on:

- An overwhelming number of products on the market.
- Internet information overload affecting clients.
- Tour operators tuning in to special interest travel and thereby adding to the products they are already marketing. For example, with more than 16 million DNA test kits sold, ancestry/genealogical tourism is making great strides.
- Social media creating a demand for selfie venues (try Ernie the Turtle, in Turtleford, Saskatchewan), and for boasting rights (travel one-upmanship – if you ride a camel in Rajasthan, I will ride a water buffalo in Vietnam); and for unique travel ideas (I just read about the cave in Kumamoto, Japan, where the legendary Swordsman, Miyamoto Musashi, retired in 1643 to

write the Book of Five Rings. As a student of Japanese culture, I have now added a visit to this cave to my upcoming trip).

- The proliferation of advertisements like those for Waterways Cruises, with the accompanying small print of the conditions related to the services. Travellers want a professional to explain the heads-and-tails of what all those conditions mean for them.
- Geopolitical concerns (Skift.com refers to this as “permanxiety” – the constant state of worry afflicting travels) with the result that safe, comfortable, ease-of-mind alternative destination suggestions have attached themselves to the expectations of many travellers.

It's not that the job description for career travel agents has been radically revised, but it's a matter of adapting to the times and understanding the needs of travellers. It's a matter of being creatively resourceful, managing your time, fine-tuning your relationship with the suppliers who provide the products you need to master, and setting out an action plan for acquiring and storing the immense volume of knowledge that is your bread-and-butter. Here, then, are 6 ways to master product knowledge.

1. Product mind-mapping.

It sounds over-simplistic, but you need to define all the products you sell in terms of their relation to each other. At conferences, you've probably done mind-mapping exercises where, on a piece of paper, you start with one idea and then draw a line to a consequence of that idea; you circle it and then draw other lines, each of which raises questions or concerns about the original idea. Take a simple idea as a team exercise, such as the client's desire to go on a safari. Then, map out all the products you need to contact/know about that product. For example:

- Tour operators who feature safari
- What kind of safaris are available? (group, customised, adventure, luxury)
- Accommodations/lifestyle options? (tenting, tented, lodge, hotel, luxury)
- Destination options? (Namibia, Botswana, Tanzania, South Africa, etc.)
- Tourism activities when not on safari (city tours, villagers, culture, foods, wine)
- Transportation options (flights, transfers, rail, cruises)
- Insurance and emergency preparedness

But the mind-mapping continues as you break down all the different products and – what makes you the travel expert – you identify critical differences between each product regarding client needs.

2. Supplier relationship management (SRM).

SRM is a first cousin to CRM (Customer Relationship Management): it's an astute way of managing your agency's or home-based business's assets. Every supplier and every product you work with is treated as a treasure chest of resources to provide you with information, help you customise an experience for a client, and enhance your revenue-generation skills. While this is particularly true with preferred suppliers,

all suppliers in your database are part of the secret of your success. They will be there when you need them.

3. Role-playing.

While you may know about a product when a specific need arises or a special promotion occurs, the product may offer many more behind the scenes. A cruise company may be offering a trip along the Irrawaddy and Mekong Rivers, but what other destinations and experiences does the company offer? Learning about products has been likened to studying for an exam – except you can't forget everything the day after the exam is written. An effective way to practice your product knowledge is to role-play with another travel professional, friend, or family member. Pretend they want to visit the Galapagos. Tell them to be picky about details, ask many questions, and act like they are going on this trip. Practice is the key to articulating the goods when in a client situation. Think of it as a rehearsal of your selling script.

4. Many suppliers have specialist programs to build your confidence about knowing and selling their products.

Usually, a certificate of achievement is provided upon successful completion of the program. Often, there are perks, too – which could be in the form of travel discounts, contests, family opportunities, commission incentives, referrals and more.

5. Sun Tzu was a travel agent?

No, he was a Chinese philosopher in the late 6th century B.C., famous for his treatise on The Art of War and the legendary advice that "you should keep your friends close but your enemies even closer." In the language of travel, we can embrace the idea of keeping your friends close, but the reality is that you should keep your suppliers even closer. It's been said so often that a travel agent's digital Rolodex, with all their supplier contacts, is one of the bits of magic that an experienced travel agent can produce, seemingly out of thin air, when a client wants something special.

6. 24/7 availability.

A travel career is a 24/7 mission to become the most knowledgeable, confident, and client-supportive advisor possible. Therefore, if you see a billboard or a television commercial for a cruise or train excursion, if you're into the tennis matches in France, the darts championships in England, the soccer matches in Russia, if you're watching Star Wars: The Last Jedi, partially filmed on Skellig Michael in Ireland; these are all subliminal suggestions for you to ask yourself if you know enough about sending a client to the destination and the products that complement the trip. Add this to your research list. This is also why family trips are so crucial to learning about suppliers. Before you embark on any fam, make a (very) long list of what you need to know from the suppliers they have included on the fam, as well as those NOT included (the wedding specialist, the winemaker, the museum curator, etc.) Mastering product knowledge comes from initiative and experience during your travel agent career – and depends on your keen sense of curiosity and the need to know everything for the sake of your current and future clients ... but also for your satisfaction. Now, that's a pretty exciting action plan.