

## Travel Agents At Clia's Cruise3Sixty Express Strong Optimism For 2008

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With Lines Investing in New Ships, Destinations and Shipboard Innovations, Sellers Urged to be Proactive, Knowledgeable in Reaching Key Market Segments

The 1,500 travel agents at Cruise Lines International Association's 4th annual cruise3sixty conference and trade show in Fort Lauderdale March 7-9 expressed their strong optimism about sales in 2008. CLIA's 24 member cruise lines called on the sellers to take advantage of their companies' major investments in new ships, itineraries, destinations and shipboard innovations - as well as CLIA's training and education - to help build their business.

Delivering a snapshot of the industry today, Dan Hanrahan, CLIA's marketing committee chairman and president and CEO of Celebrity Cruises and Azamara Cruises, told the 2,200 total delegates, 'The travel agency community is bullish on the cruise industry,' according to travel agent surveys conducted as recently as mid-February. An immediate interactive poll of the audience, a new feature at this year's cruise3sixty sessions, drew an optimistic response, with more than 90 percent of agents expecting as good or better sales in 2008 compared to the past year, despite a weakening economy.

Providing a glimpse of new developments in the industry, Hanrahan said there was ample reason for the optimism. By 2012, the CLIA fleet will expand by 36 ships, an investment of nearly \$22 billion and representing a potential incremental increase in agent commissions of \$300 million.

Hanrahan joined fellow cruise presidents during a wide-ranging panel discussion about opportunities and challenges facing the industry. Hanrahan was joined by Gerry Cahill, Carnival Cruise Lines, Carol Marlow, Cunard Line, Rick Sasso, MSC Cruises and Mark Conroy, Regent Seven Seas Cruises. The theme was strategies agents can use to sustain the optimism and realize their goals.

Moderated by CLIA president and CEO Terry Dale, who frequently brought agents in attendance into the conversation through interactive instant polling, the discussion covered a number of topics, including the biggest changes in the industry in 20 years, the greatest challenge for cruise lines and ways to counter bumpy economic times. 'We're not recession proof but we've certainly proved to be recession resistant,' Hanrahan said.

The panelists urged agents step up their marketing initiatives, stressing the exceptional value of cruise vacations, really get to know their customers, and close the deal. 'You've got to focus on promotion, be proactive and go for the close, ask for the order,' Conroy said. Noting the great diversity of cruise products and experiences, the CEO's said the primary challenge was to convert land-based vacationers to cruisers. From the cruise lines' perspective, the panelists agreed that the biggest challenges were continuing to provide top quality service, including finding and retaining good personnel, and controlling costs, an issue made considerably more difficult with the cost of new ships almost tripling.

For many at cruise3sixty, one of the most popular panels was a look at the cruise industry from experts representing the future generation of cruisers. In a group discussion called 'Kidding Around,' six children aged seven through fifteen offered their opinions on everything from shipboard activities and food to favorite destinations. Moderated by Eileen Ogintz, whose syndicated column 'Taking the Kids' reaches 10 million readers, the kids debated whether spending time with family or time away from family was more fun, agreed that making new friends, doing new things and seeing new places were the best reasons to cruise and said that their personal choices and wishes were part of the decision-making process when their families planned a vacation.

Asked whether he would take cruises when he grew up, 7-year-old Brandon Abzug, veteran of 10 cruises already, said, 'I would do it when I'm an adult because I know my kids will love it.' And, searching for something she did not like about cruising, his 10-year-old sister, Brooke, provided the ultimate endorsement by saying, 'I can't think of anything. It would probably be getting off the cruise and going back home.'

On Saturday evening, CLIA hosted its annual Hall of Fame dinner where it inducted three cruise industry legends: A. Kirk Lanterman, chairman emeritus, Holland America Line, Joanie Ogg, former president of National Association of Commissioned Travel Agents (NACTA), and Donna Flora, vice president, travel industry relations, American Express. Entertainment for the evening featured four cruise line performance acts from Carnival Cruise Lines (G-Force), Celebrity Cruises (Solstice), Norwegian Cruise Line (Second City) and Royal Caribbean International (Invitation to Dance).

On the closing day of the conference, 10 cruise lines showcased innovative amenities and features of their new vessels such as private spa suite accommodations, new dining options, even the first real lawn at sea. The lines included: Azamara Cruises, Celebrity Cruises, Carnival Cruise Lines, Costa Cruises, Cunard Line, Holland America Line, MSC Cruises, Norwegian Cruise Line, Princess Cruises, and Royal Caribbean International.

Agents also were briefed on the rapidly growing small ship/river cruises market. Executives from four companies - Hurtigruten, Majestic America Line, Uniworld Grand River Cruises and Windstar Cruises - and three top producing agents pointed out the opportunities to earn high commissions and develop new clientele. Together, they called on agents to take advantage of training opportunities offered by the lines and CLIA to develop the knowledge to find and retain the well-educated, experienced travelers who gravitate toward small ships and the river cruise experience.

Peter Ueberroth, chairman of the U.S. Olympic Committee and founder of First Travel Corporation opened the conference on Friday with a keynote address that challenged travel agents to recognize change, be competitive and grow the industry, and 'make this country a little better.' Also during the opening session, American Express introduced its generous commitment to offset the carbon produced by cruise3sixty's hotels, local transportation and convention space by teaming up with Native Energy Travel Offsets. Concluding the first day's session, a panel discussion comprised of executives from luxury product companies and cruise lines discussed the changes in the industry and stressed the value of education and training.

Terry Dale concluded cruise3sixty 2008 saying, 'In all the change happening around us, the one thing that will never change is our need for you, our partnership with travel agents.'

CLIA's cruise3sixty will return to Fort Lauderdale April 2-5, 2009, and has officially announced that for the first time, CLIA will hold cruise3sixty on the West Coast, in Vancouver, June 3-7, 2010. Registration for 2009 will open to pre-registered delegates on March 10 and to the public on April 1, 2008.

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