

5

Managing Service Encounters

'At Your Service' Spotlight: Marcos van Aken, Ten Travel in Tenerife



Marcos van Aken: Photo courtesy of Ten Travel

Running an incentive and conference travel agency in Tenerife (Canary Islands) – a Spanish-owned island off the northwest coast of Africa – involves daily customer service dilemmas for Marcos Albornoz van Aken. As Director of Sales & Operations for Ten Travel DMC, he is in charge of both wooing businesses and keeping delegates happy during their visits. “We make personal service an absolute priority in an age when despite social media and new technologies governing the interaction with clients, the personal, tangible, on the ground security is an added value not every company is willing to invest in.’ Clients love ‘hands on’ personnel and this is what we are all about.”

Owned by John Lucas Sr, the company began over 40 years ago with a package holiday focus but quickly diversified into the corporate group and incentive travel market. “Business and incentive travel require a very high level of specialization. We segmented into that and were approached over time by various cruise companies too. We aim for the top end of the market,” explains van Aken, who,

although born in Tenerife, studied for his Masters in Hotel Management at the University of Surrey, England. "Times have changed enormously in a relatively short space of time. I can still remember using the Telex, then the good old fax; email, websites and social media interactions have definitely changed the way we approach clients and it has also changed the perceived idea of efficiency. I am of the opinion that quick response nowadays drives profits; it is not about who has the most thorough information or detailed information; it is about who can get it faster. There is an element of 'overkill' in the social media world and I am finding saturation creeping into some of the attitudes and responses from clients. They would rather be left alone... if the business relationship is solid, they know when to find you when potential projects arise."

Van Aken spends a considerable amount of his time solving problems for customers. A dilemma presented itself when a German company wanted red carpet treatment for their clients at the airport. "They insisted on them leaving the plane and getting on to the coach without touching a suitcase," van Aken remembers. Although he appreciated the desire to offer this kind of top end service, he marvelled at the amount of paperwork, lobbying and money it required to make it happen. "I can understand why the client wanted the service: he wanted his guests to be taken directly to the cocktail area at the hotel and while they were having cocktails, the luggage would be delivered to their rooms." van Aken thinks that this type of service is what quality is all about, making something difficult happen smoothly.

"Often the client does not have the technical know-how and does not want to know either. He/she wants things to work and is not really bothered how. We organized a large gala dinner recently at a Banana Plantation location. The complexity is enormous because the venue requires intensive AVL rigging and also generators for sound, lighting and catering to be able to work. We had a main generator to take us through the event but also included a backup generator just in case. We ended up needing the backup due to unstable working of the main generator. This was built into the costs without the client knowing; on the night no-one noticed we used the backup!!!"

Although Ten Travel DMC employs multiple staff members, freelance personnel and regular tour guides, the key accounts are van Aken's personal responsibility. As middle man between tourism and business industries, he is in a prime position to elevate service standards in Tenerife. Part of his job is to make sure that the service levels seen on inspection visits are translated literally to the galas and conferences when guests eventually arrive. He has the perfect multi-cultural background for this, with a Dutch mother and Spanish father, British and German schooling, two years travelling in South America and South East Asia and experience in the hotel industry. "That's my edge," he says. "I speak five languages which gives me the means to reach the Dutch market as well as UK, German and Spanish businesses; relating to clients in their own language creates empathy, by extension confidence and ultimately profits. I constantly strive to be ahead of