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Travel Agencies Get Reimagined as Social Hubs

Linda Humphrey, Skift - Nov 19, 2019 10:00 am

Skift Take

Travel agencies are thriving by replacing offices with lounges, complete with drinks and parties. By setting up shopfronts on busy streets, they're also convincing travelers that they still exist.
— Linda Humphrey

Brooklyn's Tafari Travel opens to the historic Dumbo neighborhood with four windowed garage doors, drawing passersby to a Midcentury Modern lounge stocked with coffee, wine, and vintage Holiday magazines.

Most catch sight of the resort photos posted in the windows, and think the converted warehouse is a real estate office.

"A lot of people come in and ask us what we are. They've never used a travel agent before," said co-founder Leah Smith, who designed the year-old agency with "a nostalgia for the glamour of travel in the '60s."

FRONT AND CENTER

Patterned after Austin's Departure Lounge, the travel-agency-and-bar mix created by Keith Waldon in 2013, Tafari, which includes a sister agency in Denver, serves up complimentary drinks in a glossy lounge that often shifts into an event space. Both agencies sit "front and center on the street," as Waldon says, where locals are likely to stumble upon them.

Most people think travel agents don't exist anymore, said Waldon, founder of Departure Lounge, adding that 90 percent of the people who pop into Departure Lounge have never used a travel advisor.

"We have to explain to them how it works and then assure them that there's no catch," Waldon said. For those who had been wrangling their own holiday plans, "it's an eye-opening experience."

"No catch" means that Departure Lounge and Tafari do not charge fees for their custom-made trip plans. The agencies differ in one key way. Departure Lounge matches its clients with independent-contractor travel advisors booked by appointment, while Tafari mixes independent contractors with staffers, who can usually start devising a trip right away.

FACE-TO-FACE CONNECTION

Departure Lounge can bustle on weekends, drawing in five to eight new clients per day. Over 80 percent of people who meet with a travel advisor end up booking a trip, Waldon claims. "There's a reason we don't use the word office," Waldon said. "Because it is definitely a lounge. And that makes it a lot more fun to work in."

Customers bond with their travel advisors over Departure Lounge's signature coffee blend. Clients mingle at events such as a recent tequila tasting that showcased four Los Cabos resorts.

A face-to-face connection is so much stronger than anything that's done by phone and email, said Waldon, who formerly worked as a vice president of business development at Virtuoso.

The original Departure Lounge blended a travel agency with a public bar. After four years in downtown Austin, Texas, Waldon shuttered the space and moved to a shopping center in West Lake Hills, an Austin suburb. This year, a second Departure Lounge took root in San Antonio.

The new versions scrapped the bar, as the social scene tended to clash with client meetings. “I was afraid they would be forcing me to book travel,” wrote one Yelp reviewer, who raved about the original Departure Lounge bar.

“We still provide a glass of anything the client wants, from champagne to cappuccinos,” Waldon said, “but we do it with our compliments, and no one can come in and just use us as a bar anymore.”

The remake kept the Departure Lounge coffee blend (Balinese and Peruvian coffee beans roasted together) but swapped out interactive touchscreens in favor of old-fashioned face-to-face interaction.

“We learned that people were really not comfortable using the touchscreens,” Waldon said. “I think they felt on display.”

GET TRIPSY

Meanwhile, Waldon’s original bar concept has found a home in Omaha, Nebraska. With the slogan “Get Tripsy,” Travel Design Lounge, an offshoot of Travel and Transport, has doubled as a bar since 2015. It’s a neighborhood meeting spot that brings free live music to its patio on summer weekends. The space buzzes with events, from Italian wine tastings to bridal showers.

Despite this, 82 percent of its revenue comes from selling travel, said Jeff Cain, senior vice president of the company’s specialty divisions.

The mixture works, Cain said. Partygoers discover the agency at get-togethers and come back to book vacations. Families and bridal parties can gather at communal tables stacked with travel books.

“Instead of one person getting all of the information, your group of eight can all come in and plan together with an advisor,” Cain said.

LOOKING AHEAD

What’s next? Tafari and Travel Design Lounge are scouting new locations. Departure Lounge is eyeing Dallas for 2021, and plans to take the agency beyond the Lone Star State.

One other way Departure Lounge is unusual, Waldon said, is that his advisors “make really good money. I have several advisors that are making way more than I pay myself as the owner of the agency.”

For Waldon, though, the concept is not just a numbers game. It’s about creating an authentic travel experience by “getting more of a sense of the person. So much of what we do is stylistic,” he said.

He recently stopped going to a monthly travel executive dinner “because everyone just wanted to talk about their booking agent or their next round of funding. No one was actually interested in people selling travel to people.”