



TOP 25 ALL STARS



By Joe Pike | December 15, 2014

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With our all-new **Top 25 All Stars**, Travel Agent magazine has designed a program to recognize those travel advisors who have been the mainstays of our industry for more than a decade. The elite All Stars you see on the following pages have served as travel consultants for at least 10 years and can boast at least \$1 million in annual sales. In some cases, they're producing three or four times that volume, but their one common link is they have been working collaboratively with suppliers for years to diligently delight their clients with one marvelous itinerary after another. Making this list even more special is that the majority of All Stars on these pages were nominated by their agency managers, who singled them out for their productivity, attention to detail, ability to problem-solve and to think out of the box to craft unique vacations. In some cases, advisors who work independently made a case in nominating themselves; their presence on this list was supported by consortia or managers who could verify their skills and annual sales volume. The editors of Travel Agent then culled through the entire list of nominees to select the best of the group. It wasn't an easy task, but we narrowed it down and here they are—Travel Agent's 2014 "Top 25 All-Stars."





Top 25 All Stars: Diane Bower



Diane Bower Agency
An Independent Agency of Avoya Travel
Huntersville, NC

Scott Koepf, senior VP of sales for Avoya Travel, says that Diane Bower, an independent advisor with the network who generates more than \$3.2 million in sales annually, “is a consummate business owner and travel expert. Diane runs her independent agency with integrity and professionalism, provides personalized customer service and creates extraordinary vacations for travelers. I’ve known Diane for years and she’s an ‘All Star’ by definition.”





Bower consistently wins top honors with Avoya annually and is a top producer for Crystal, Oceania, Seabourn and Silversea cruises, says Koepf.

Bower, who is also a river cruise expert and specializes in Europe, South America and the South Pacific, says that a good travel advisor should listen without interrupting. "I don't ask for the sale. It's a given. I have a 'shut up, stupid' philosophy. If you talk too much, you talk yourself out of a sale."

For that reason, Bower never says, "no," when a client asks if it's a good time to talk. She's taken calls even while on horseback ("It's never a bad time!"), and isn't afraid to tell a client they're asking her to book something she doesn't feel is right for them. "I've traveled extensively and don't sell anything I haven't done. I confidently advise clients because I've been there, have insider tips and off-the-beaten-path recommendations," she says.

At press time, Bower, who loves animals, was gearing up for the annual event benefit she hosts on behalf of the Humane Society. "We sell tickets to 100-plus attendees and guests bring donations, such as dog food and crates, to the event. We typically raise around \$10,000 and fill a tractor-trailer with Humane Society donations."





Top 25 All Stars: Sue Ratliff



Sea the World Cruises & Tours
An Independent Agency of Avoya Travel
Athens, TX

“All Star” Sue Ratliff is a designated specialist for nearly every major cruise line, as well as the South African Tourism Board, German National Tourism Board, Baltic Association and Tourism Australia, and in 2013 she received Avoya Travel’s highest honor, the Chairman’s Club.

“Sue always goes the extra mile for her clients and her travel agent peers, and she is most certainly an All Star,” says Scott Koepf, SVP of sales for Avoya Travel. “I know Sue personally and Avoya Travel is extremely fortunate to have her and her independent agency in our network.”





True to the praise she has received, Ratliff once made a Crystal booking while in pre-op for surgery. But her results speak for themselves; in 2013, Ratliff produced over \$4.1 million in sales, landing within the top 1 percent of agencies.

To achieve this, Ratliff says she works on the relationship aspect of the business in order to build trust, making the act of selling easier down the road. Ratliff focuses on the soft sell, giving clients what they initially ask for before upselling gradually.

“My business model is the reason I’m successful,” Ratliff says. “I’ve incorporated technology and high-touch service to stay connected to clients. I’ve purchased in-flight Wi-Fi to make a booking while at 30,000 feet. However, technology never replaces personal relationships; I take time to form a friendship with clients. I’m available anytime they want to talk, and want them to think ‘I’ll call my friend Sue.’”

Top 25 All Stars: Susan Wolfson



Go Astro Travel LLC
An Independent Agency of Avoya Travel
Allentown, PA





Susan Wolfson doesn't consider herself a sales person "and I never feel like I'm selling," she says. "My choice to care more about their happiness than the sale has made me successful. I'm diligent about listening to clients, taking time to understand their wants, and working to create a great experience." She backs her service with expertise, by taking training courses and otherwise continuing her education to thoroughly know the products she sells. An industry veteran of 13 years, her annual sales volume is more than \$2 million.

In addition, "Susan is always building on her success and is an active participant in our Avoya Mastermind program, where she even helps other travel professionals grow their businesses," says Scott Koepf, Avoya's SVP of sales.

Her personal "masterpiece" is the "Tulips & Beer" cruise she created. "After taking a seminar on wine cruises, I thought, why not beer?" She suggested it to the folks at AmaWaterways "and I'm now planning a beer cruise for March." She secured award-winning reporter Don Russell (aka Joe Sixpack), founder of Philly Beer Week, as host.

"We've included five brewery tours in the itinerary, including Heineken and Cantillon, plus a beer pairing dinner onboard. I've already sold half the ship and AmaWaterways has added a December 2015 Danube sailing for a 'Christmas and Beer' cruise," she says.

"Susan's success is a testament to her skills as a travel professional. Her relentless enthusiasm, knowledge and forward thinking make her an asset to any team," says Kristin Karst, EVP and co-owner of AmaWaterways.

Wolfson's charitable involvement is close to her heart. When her father was in an assisted-living home before he passed away, she says, "He wasn't able to come home for the Jewish holidays, so I decided to bring the meals to him and told him to invite friends. This tradition grew and now seven years since his passing, I still prepare meals during Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah and Passover." She uses her own money and cooks the meals at home. "For me it isn't work, I love cooking for them," she says.

**Complete story and list of travel agents available at www.travelagentcentral.com*

