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A Bright Forecast for USTOA

ALL THE ASSOCIATION'S MEMBER TOUR OPERATORS ARE PREDICTING HIGHER SALES IN 2019

by Harvey Chipkin

With just 55 corporate members that represent 165 brands, USTOA is a small organization that packs a big punch. Member sales reached \$18.7 billion last year, representing 9.8 million individual travelers, according to the association's fourth-annual PriceWaterhouse-Coopers (PwC) survey.

1 BRIGHT FORECAST

Furthermore, 100 percent of member operators are predicting higher sales in 2019, with more than half saying it will be a boom year and others saying there will be small to moderate increases, according to the PwC survey.

"Since the first PwC study was commissioned in 2012, it's the first time we've seen such a bullish response with our entire membership projecting growth ahead," said President and CEO Terry Dale. "It's even more encouraging that more than half of members (56 percent) forecast growth of sales ranging from seven to 10 percent or more in 2019, indicating a potential boom year."

Speaking to AGENTatHOME

during the 40th anniversary conference in Phoenix late last year, Dale said that when he joined USTOA eight years ago, there was little in the way of programs for travel professionals. With his background at CLIA, he realized agents are key to the success of tour operators and has aimed to do more for them from Day One.

2 TRAVEL AGENT EDUCATION

One important initiative was the creation of the Travel Agent Academy USTOA Specialist Graduate program, in partnership with travAlliancemedial.



There are now 2,600 graduates and 5,700 enrollees. There is also a quarterly newsletter for agents, as well as Travel Together Month in September, aimed at inspiring clients to book tours.

Dale said he also hopes to make the USTOA review system, which already includes reviews by verified travelers, an important tool for agents. In an ideal world, he said, a client would call an agent and ask about a destination. Agents would be able to check reviews and find the appropriate product for customers.

3 CONSUMER PROTECTION FUND

USTOA long ago achieved consumer credibility when in

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1976 it became the first travel organization to establish a consumer protection fund, followed by a \$100,000 per member bonding requirement to protect consumers’ tour deposits and payments in case of bankruptcy or cessation of business.

Today, the USTOA \$1 Million Travelers

Assistance Program – which requires each member company to set aside \$1 million of its own funds specifically to protect consumers’ deposits and payments – is the strongest of its kind in the industry.

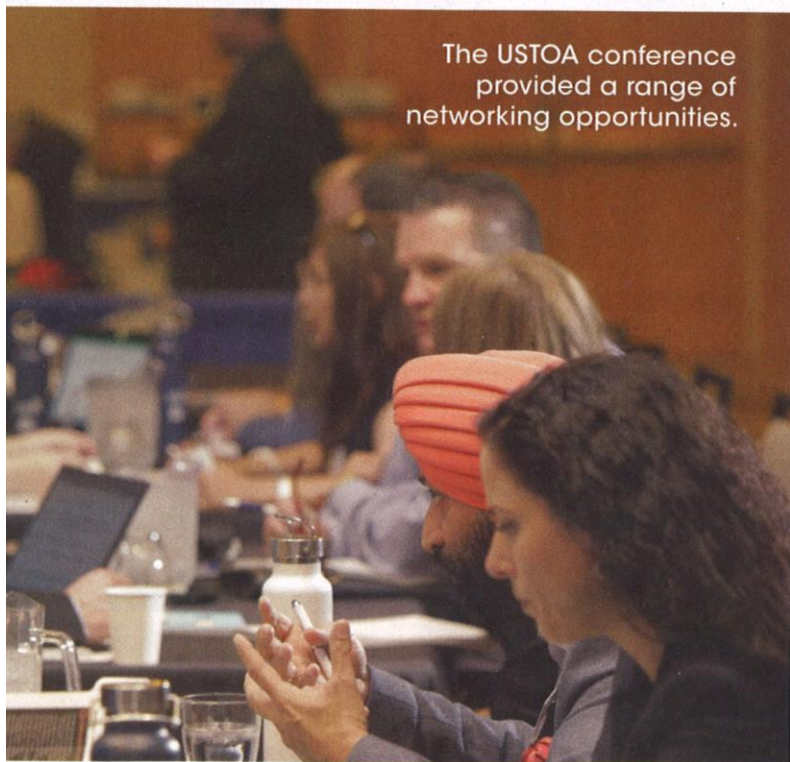
4 NEW USTOA MEMBERS

USTOA, founded in 1972, is growing steadily. Two new members were added last year: Authentic

Vacations, offering tours of the United Kingdom and Scandinavia; and Yankee Leisure Group, a specialist in rail tours. There are also 118 new associate members.

In the end, Dale noted, USTOA is not about numbers. “If you’re a member or associate member, you can reach me or a member of our board easily. There is great value in being a small organization.”

The USTOA conference provided a range of networking opportunities.



AGENTS TAKE CENTER STAGE

→ The importance of travel advisors came up repeatedly at the USTOA 40th anniversary conference in Phoenix late last year. During one session, Elizabeth Crabill, CEO of CIE Tours, said that agents will continue to be relevant “long into the future.”

They are crucial in three areas: knowl-

edge of product, advice to clients and services after booking, she added.

Crabill said agents make travelers aware of the tour product, adding that when a client who has booked through an agent later tries to book direct with CIE, the booking will revert to the agent.