

Admiral Travel: It's Not Just What You Know But Who

Mar 26, 2009 | By:
Dave Eisen |
LuxuryTravelAdvisor • 4
|



Admiral Travel's Malaka Hilton with her husband, co-owner Ryan, and their two children in Egypt.

Back in 2005 at **Virtuoso's** annual Travel Mart in Las Vegas, Matthew Upchurch, Virtuoso's CEO, made a remark that would ring more true than he might have ever expected at the time. "Create something that cannot be Googled," he told a roomful of luxury travel advisors. Meaning: In order to not only survive but grow, you need to manufacture something different that sets you apart from others. You can't be a cookie-cutter agency.

Admiral Travel, in Sarasota, FL, made a conscious decision then to separate themselves from the herd, led by owner and president **Malaka Hilton**, who was the subject of *Luxury Travel Advisor's* [April 2007 cover story](#). The light bulb went off: Create strong partnerships with other credible people or businesses. "After 2001, we realized that the industry was going to change," Hilton says. "So, we decided to try and find something completely different. We had the attitude of 'nothing ventured, nothing gained.'"

By 2005, the agency really got going with its partnership strategy. One of its first collaborations was with a local film festival that chartered a trip to the **Cannes Film Festival**. Others followed, including a now long partnership with **Chef Roy Yamaguchi**. In September, Admiral offers its **10-day Land Tour of Tokyo, Hakone & Kyoto**, in partnership with Yamaguchi, who will be the group's "personal guide to local flavor."

In 2010, famed Chef **Jean-Georges Vongerichten** will host a tour in Brazil.

There's more. Hilton was lucky enough to make the acquaintance of **Salvatore Ferragamo**, the grandson of the renown clothier, at a past Silversea gala. They hit it off, which led to Ferragamo hosting Admiral tours on his Tuscany estate.

Admiral clients have had the rare chance to stay at his property and enjoy the estate's wine. Upcoming: On July 16, Admiral conducts a day with the Ferragamo's in Florence. Salvatore will join the group on *Silver Wind* at the completion of a tour to spend the two days sampling his wines from Il Borro. This is the type of exclusivity Admiral has cultivated.



Salvatore Ferragamo and Chef Roy Yamaguchi.

"Exposure is key," says **Cemantha Crain**, Admiral's director of marketing. "Malaka is an excellent networker, she makes herself known and people want to hop on."

It doesn't hurt that her brother is the assistant athletic director for the University of Southern California. She likes to tap into his circle every now and then. "I look to expand partnerships with athletes," says Hilton, who also writes a travel column for *Moves*, an upscale magazine that covers professional athletes. She looks to also recruit from there. Case in point: Shannon Sharpe, former tight end for the Denver Broncos and now football studio analyst for CBS Sports. Sharpe's agent just so happened to know Hilton's brother. The rest is history. In May 2010, Sharpe will host a trip to Peru.

These types of partnerships have set Admiral apart, or at least given them their own niche to play in. "In this economy, it has played to our advantage," says Crain. "With bargains everywhere, commissions sinking, we are selling something that doesn't have a competitor."

Admiral's first quarter was tough, but now the phone is ringing off the hook according to Crain. "I think people are fed up and want to travel," she says.

Most recently, Admiral has launched partnerships with *Bon Appetit* magazine and SeaMiles, a cruise loyalty provider. With regard to the former, each year Admiral and the magazine will create a new "epicurean odyssey" designed by acclaimed chefs. The strategy is three-pronged: It's a way for *Bon Appetit* to gain potential ad revenue; Admiral is promoted by the magazine; and the destinations where the tours will be held gain exposure.

Admiral's partnership business has been such a success that, in some instances, Admiral has turned some potential ones down. "We make sure that the partnership is not just beneficial for us, but for the partner," Hilton says.

It's been such a boon that Admiral tells *Luxury Travel Advisor* it will, in the next four weeks, announce it is starting a new company focusing exclusively on its exclusive partnerships, what it calls "exclusive product."

All the success has been a "combination of luck and business sense," Hilton says. "Choosing the right partnerships is in the right market channels is key," says Crain. "That puts our product in the spotlight."

View Online

<http://www.travelagentcentral.com/luxuryta/agent-profiles/admiral-travel-its-not-just-what-you-know-who-571>