

Twelve months that will change the world.

Presentation abstract

Twenty-one years ago, I established the UK specialist tour operator, Accessible Travel. I set three principle objectives. To redefine the market in terms of accessibility and not disability. To create accessible travel opportunities across all product sectors. And to establish a brand that would sit alongside mainstream tour operators in the UK's high-street travel agencies. It took seven years, but all objectives were achieved.

But by then I had recognised that the specialist nature of such tour operators was simply serving to define the market as niche, disability-specific and restrictive in its capacity to reach beyond a limited customer audience and product offering. Scalability leading to the profit required to secure or attract investment to grow was virtually impossible. It still is.

So, specialists remain as 'cottage industries' facilitating holidays and travel to thousands of customers, when millions if only they believed they could. So, the specialist tour operator sector continues to be perceived as unworthy of any meaningful investment by the mainstream tourism industry. Starved of what it needs to develop.

That's a problem. As in my view, to make travel accessible, everywhere and to everyone, the future can only be driven and shaped by a major global, non-specialist, thought-leading travel organisation. One that embraces the 'accessible opportunity' and embeds equality and travel without limits into its ethos. Making it cultural. A key pillar in its corporate social responsibility and strategic objectives.

But who? The majors are easily identifiable, but all retain the perception accessible travel is niche and unworthy of serious consideration, is too challenging and risky, so best left to the specialists and charitable sector.

Well, nearly all. UK based Travel Counsellors, is perhaps the worlds most successful 'unheard of' travel company. With a UK-wide network of 1100 home-working travel professionals and some 2000 across its seven international operations, Travel Counsellors will turnover close to a billion dollars this year and yet spends not a penny on advertising.

It's growth (15% + year on year for the past 16 years) has been built on the principles of a 'with us it's personal' business model. Where success is achieved through close relationships and not remote transactions. Where establishing customer requirements and exceeding them, is the norm. Where trust and security are everything.

So, when in 2007, I discovered this unique organisation I knew instinctively that, for the first time, it would be possible to realise my long-held ambition of being able to create travel opportunities for anyone, driven by the imperative of 'where do you want to go' and not a customer's condition. That all the resources and support I might need – technological, marketing, commercial, operational were available 24/7.

That was ten years go and now, established as a 'Gold' Travel Counsellor (within 10% of high-performance counsellors in the world), and as the newly appointed 'Accessible Global Lead', I'm tasked to embed what I know and what I do into the company's 'DNA'. Taking what has always been 'specialist' and wiring it into the mainstream. Empowering and educating a global workforce to recognise that creating journey's and servicing customers with additional requirements, is just what we do already. And that through expert training, mentoring and support, all TC's can acquire new knowledge and

understanding that will neutralise the myths, misconceptions and fears that stop us (and the rest of the industry) being confident, fluent and effective in making travel accessible to everyone.

It's a big task but the education and training model (two years in the making) is now in place in the UK. A combination of 'classroom' and remote modules is transforming the ability for already seasoned travel professionals, to seek and service customers with even the most complex access, mobility, sensory and cognitive requirements. Inspiring and expanding the horizons of those, previously disenfranchised, to experience the unique pleasures and rewards that only travel can deliver.

So, with the UK programme established, I am about to embark on our 'Making Travel Accessible World Tour' project. This will see me working across our operations in Australia, South Africa, the UAE, Netherlands & Belgium and Ireland to inculcate the same thinking and practical approach that will transform the future travel opportunities of those who may believe they have none. It will also change the way the wider industry views the sector. It will begin to pay attention in a way it never has before. It will seek to emulate the Travel Counsellor strategy and try to see what we see. Aim to do what we do.

So, I have a message for the Summit, which I believe is different and important. This could be a seminal moment in defining the future trajectory of fortunes of accessible travel and tourism.

Lead speaker : RICHARD THOMPSON

Organisation : TRAVEL COUNSELLORS

City (Country) : MANCHESTER(UK)

Biography : 2017 marked my fourth decade in the travel industry. In 1986, I was already an established travel professional when I met with catastrophic injury that changed my perspective on the travel, tourism and hospitality business. And I believe this route – industry experience before disability, is important. Seminal. It means that I have always viewed the development of accessibility and inclusion in the context of the industry's capabilities at any moment in time and when found wanting, have pushed to innovative, educate and influence, in order to facilitate travel everywhere, for everyone, however complex an individual's requirements.

2nd speaker :

Organisation :

City (Country) : ()

Biography :