

Tips and Suggestions from the Fee Masters

- **Consistency Is Critical**

This is perhaps the most often given recommendation from the fee masters. If you only charge some fees, sometimes for some things to some clients, you risk creating suspicion about your real value. *“If you’re worth paying for now, were you NOT worth paying for last time, but you WERE worth paying for last year?”* Confusing, right?

Of course, low-margin or non-commissionable travel products frequently dominate the reason behind many of these fee-charging variations. The fee masters strongly caution against this approach. As they say: *“If you are worth it every time, charge for it every time or don’t be surprised by the client suspicion that results.”*

Along the same lines, if some advisors in your agency do, and some do not charge fees, you’ll risk creating the same suspicion and mistrust mentioned above. Travel agency owners and managers: this is a policy-level decision worth consideration. With Independent Contractors, there may be legal limitations on what you can and cannot require, however others have incorporated such things into their agreements.

- **Transparency is Essential – Be Loud and Proud**

It’s very common to look for opportunities to build-in agency fees in ways that are not so obvious to clients. The fee masters say this is also a risky idea (should the client ever find out) and does nothing to demonstrate that you believe in your own value.

As one fee master put it: *“if you’re so ashamed of your fee that you have to hide it, you’re not ready to charge for your value. Be proud of what you charge! You are worth it, but until you believe it, they never will.”*

- **Tell Your Whole Story and Give it a Great Name**

What you call your fee does make a difference. A *“cruise fee”* hardly has the marketing appeal or confidence building punch of a *“Cruise Experience Retainer.”* Take the time to really think through what you intend to do for your fee, then get creative with how you describe it, and don’t leave out what you do behind the scenes.

One fee master said: *“your clients have no idea what it takes to work all your magic. For all they know, you’re just clicking on the same websites and apps they use. Tell them: I spent 3 hours speaking with suppliers, researching options, and meeting with my colleagues to find you the perfect recommendations and prices. That’s what my retainer is for, and I think you’re going to love what I have found.”*

- **Offer a Money-Back Guarantee for Your Fee**

You can’t promise any supplier will be perfect, but you CAN guarantee the quality of your own work. The fee masters say offering a money-back guarantee if a client is not happy with your consultation, support, advice and more, makes any fee you charge a risk-free proposition. Some say this is the best way to reduce your own fees fears.

Our Travel Excellence Retainer is not just a booking fee. It is a comprehensive approach to total travel research using our 6-point consultation plan and detailed comparative analysis report. We pinpoint the perfect destination, experiences and accommodations that perfectly fit your desires.

We pair the purpose of your trip (such as a romantic getaway, a family gathering, relaxation or high adventure) with the right atmosphere, social scene, food and dining, activities, cultural experiences and more. All of it, is designed to create a vacation as unique as you.

This appointment-only service is not for everyone, but it is the ideal way to ensure travel excellence and create only the best of memories.

Also, our personal connections with the best suppliers in the industry, allow us to leverage our influence to help make that happen.

We are so confident you'll love our program, that we offer an unconditional guarantee. If you are not 100% satisfied, we will gladly refund your Travel Excellence Retainer, yet still handle every detail of your trip.

Programs start at only \$150 per trip.

What should I say and how should I say it?

This simple question above represents one of the biggest obstacles to fees success. Until you have well-crafted, and frequently practiced statements and responses for fees issues and questions, the confidence needed to sell fees can suffer. This lesson is intended to help you overcome that by providing you with ideas for responding to the most common challenges.

Use your own words and phrases that are in alignment with your agency's goals, clientele and product focus. Do not wait until you are faced with a tough question about fees to figure out what to say. Do it now, practice until it sounds natural, and express it in a way you can say with confidence and conviction.

- **Be honest**
Avoid clichés or obvious marketing message. Just tell the truth but, put the spotlight on how fees are a beneficial arrangement for your clients, not just for you
- **Don't be punitive**
Avoid saying things like: *"we don't make enough commission on the kind cruise you want so I'm going to have to charge you a fee for that."*
- **Never be defensive**
Watch out for a defensive tone in your words: *"we just can't compete with all these web deals so now you're going to have pay a fee to make up for it."*

Challenge #1: When should I mention my fees in the conversation?

It's happened to almost every travel advisor! They'll spend hours, days or even weeks putting together details, researching options, and preparing price quotes only to have a client say: *"thanks, we've already booked what you suggested elsewhere."* It's an experience that frequently pushes them to more seriously consider fees!

Still, when the time comes to implement fees, even those who have had these frustrating experiences can struggle with when to bring them up.

The simple answer is: before you do the work! The more qualified and helpful answer is: before you do the work, but only after you have demonstrated that you will be worth paying for.

There is some finesse required to do this well and effectively. Just abruptly stating: *"I charge \$75 to tell you anything at all"* is not an approach that usually works. As you learned in the lesson on Marketing, that hardly tells enough of the story of your value to make any fee seem logical, let alone a desirable option.

So, much like selling a car, it's wise to give prospective clients a bit of a test drive! In other words, give them a much better idea as to what a full consultation is like without actually doing a full consultation. Here is a sample script that demonstrates this well:

"Oh, I'd love to help you with Jamaica. It could be perfect for you. On the other hand, it might not be a good fit at all. My job is to make sure every trip is one you'll love. During my consultation, there are several things we'll discuss that can make a big difference.

Things like the main purpose of your trip. For example, are you hoping to relax? Are you looking for some high adventure? Is this a romantic getaway, a family trip, a special occasion, educational – that sort of thing. Not every resort or destination is good at all those very different experiences.

What sort of social scene do you prefer: having lots of people around, something quiet and private, a kid-friendly place or something more adult oriented?

We would also chat about the kind of food and dining experiences you prefer. That too, could totally change my recommendations. And of course, I'm sure there are some things you are especially hoping to see or do. My job is to be certain you'll get those things, and good quality versions of them, or find somewhere else that you can.

We'll even discuss things like being around a language you don't speak, being IN the village, near it, or far away. Now that you know what's included in my consultation, we only charge \$100 for it. Would you like to get started or just see what you can find by yourself online?

Notice that in this sample dialogue, the travel advisor never provides advice, prices, or details, but does clearly demonstrate that he or she knows what matters. They are the things that few travelers think about when they are in “*price shopping mode*” or browsing online. Bringing these issues up can cause them to realize, that they might indeed be better off with a pro on their side!

Challenge number 2: What do I say to my long-time or repeat clients?

This is one of the most often voiced concerns for those just getting started with fees. It is especially difficult for travel advisors who may have spent years developing and nurturing relationships with clients for whom no fee was ever (or rarely) charged.

In many cases, it is those same clients for whom they may have offered the highest levels of service and attention. Some will say: *“these are the people I have ALREADY given the best I have to offer. How can I start charging them since there's not much more than what I already do for them now?”*

These are completely valid concerns and almost every fee master interviewed faced exactly the same dilemma. Most also reported that even with all the anxiety around speaking to long-time repeat clients, they usually ended up be the easiest of all in the end. The reason is quite simple: if they ARE long-time clients, it's because they already know you're good, and they trust you.

They might not remember they didn't pay before! Many travel advisors who simply mentioned their fee in a matter of what way, found that their repeat clients just ASSUMED they had always paid it before! For the few who do question it, use the value of the relationship you've developed.

So, mention any past savings, upgrade, problems solved, disasters you helped fix. In other words, remind them of your value. Then: *“if you don't agree that what I do for you is worth it, I will happily give the \$100 back, but I'll still support you for your trip.*

The fee masters suggest using that trust, and honoring your relationship by having a genuine, honest, and meaningful conversation about fees. In other words, tell them the truth about why you are adopting fees.

Note: remember that many fee masters started with OPTIONAL fee programs they OFFER to their best clients first. You don't have to suddenly charge fees for all clients.

Here's a sample dialogue illustrating one way to mention fees to a long-time client:

“Hello again! It’s wonderful to hear from you and I’d love to help you with your cruise. As one of my most important and favorite clients, there is however, something I’d like to chat with you about first.”

I’m sure you know the Internet has created some amazing deals for travel. What you might not know is that a lot of them are not quite what they appear to be, and many are priced assuming self-service with no human assistance or support involved.

Sadly, a lot of travel agencies have gone out of business by trying to offer those do-it-yourself deals while still providing valuable human service. Others have survived by ramping up their volume and selling as fast as they can, which can have a very negative impact on quality and service.

We just don’t think that’s why you’ve used us all this time. So, we’ve chosen a different path. We now charge a professional fee of \$100, but I truly believe you will find it is well worth it. In fact, I will go out of my way to make it so.

And, if you don’t agree that what I do for you is worth it, I will happily give the \$100 back, but I’ll still support you for your trip.

Frankly, if I can’t save you at least \$100, in real savings, wasted time, avoiding getting the wrong room/cabin, fixing problems, sifting real information from advertising come-ons and more, then something is wrong. That’s how confident I am that you’ll find it’s worth it.”

It’s not uncommon for the fee masters to report their clients saying things like: *“honestly I’ve always wondered how you did it without charging a fee before.”*

Will you win everyone over with this approach? Of course not. But those who do choose to go elsewhere, or try doing it on their own will become very mindful of the issues you brought up. Should anything go wrong along the way, they’ll remember you. This explains why so many of the fee masters say that most of those who said: *“no thanks,”* eventually returned.

Challenge #3: What about competitors that have no fees or lower fees than me?

It’s a near universal reality that applies whether you charge fees or not: there will ALWAYS be a lower price (or fee) somewhere. The other universal law is: there is ALWAYS a reason, and it’s not necessarily a good one.

That is not to imply that every agency (or website) not charging a fee is doing something wrong or bad. Still, think carefully about what has caused YOU to consider fees yourself. What pressures were you facing? What things would you like to do for your clients that you don’t (or can’t) because there is not enough revenue to make it worth

the trouble? What new services would you love to offer, like appointments, extra time and personal attention, concierge services, etc.?

You are not alone. Every travel agency – both traditional and online – is faced with the same challenges. The online, do-it-yourself model works for agencies that don't want, for whatever reason, to get deeply involved in human-to-human service.

Increasing transactional or individual sales volume works for those agencies that prefer to market their “no fee” approach. It's a common-sense idea that can be very effective by focusing on commission enhancement and/or overrides, and productivity.

Charging professional fees works for those who prefer to make superior service, and human-to-human assistance the cornerstone of their competitive advantage.

For some agencies, everything is still working as it always has... for now. But will it always? Then what?

Finally, for many others, they just may not have looked at the issue at all, and are simply hoping for the best.

Once again: there is a reason some charge fees and some do not.

The fee masters usually say that when you are challenged, it is OK to mention reasons why others may NOT charge a fee, but the focus should be one why you DO.

“...but, the other agency I spoke to doesn't charge a fee!”

“You're absolutely right. There are still SOME travel agencies that don't charge a fee, and there's a reason why. I'd be happy to explain why we do.”

Only you know the reasons you, or your agency is considering or charging fees now. Take the time to develop customer-friendly, non-defensive scripts that explain why you do, and make your fee something desirable, with a sensible, and honest description of what makes you worth it. It has to be real. If you don't believe it, “they” never will.

Challenge #4: How I can compete against apps and websites that have no fees?

This challenge is perhaps the most common of all. It's happening every day, and may or may not be voiced to you by a client or prospect. Almost all travelers today look online and/or in travel apps at some point, or even throughout the travel planning and shopping process. Many travel advisors report that it even happens right at their desk as clients look up alternatives immediately, challenging the prices and information they just provided.

This frustrating experience has become so commonplace, that it is understandable why so many advisors ask: *“if they can see and book the same things as me, why would they pay me to do it instead?”*

In reference to a point made several times throughout this program, if you continue to think your value is centered on making bookings, you will probably struggle with fees of any amount. If you remember (and believe) however, that you provide so much more than a booking, you’ll be on the right path to dealing with this challenge.

This is the reality: apps and travel websites are in a different business than you. They are in the business of nearly or completely automated travel transactions. You are in the business of helping people to have the best possible travel experiences for whatever price they may pay.

To repeat this point one last time: fees are not for bookings, they are for you.

Even if you have completely (or partially) bought into that concept, it can still be challenging to express it to a client or prospect, who may themselves think that all they need is a booking.

“But I could book this myself online and not pay a fee!”

“Oh, you’re absolutely right – you can book almost any travel product online these days, or use one of thousands of travel apps. Honestly, you might even see something that looks cheaper for the same resort we’ve discussed.”

There’s always a cheaper price or lower fee somewhere and there’s always a reason. Even the best hotel has rooms nobody wants that they liquidate them online. Tiny rooms overlooking the dumpsters are cheaper than larger ones with a nice view. It’s the sort of detail apps and websites usually gloss over.

Again, there’s always a reason. But, if you don’t mind risking it, and if you’re sure you read all the fine print, and that you understood the cancellation policies and the international document requirements, and that you didn’t overlook unexpected add-ons like taxes, surcharges, resort fees and such, and that you didn’t miss some tiny detail that could ruin everything, you might save a bit. Some people do.

Otherwise, I think that explains why we DO have a fee. It’s not about you paying more. Our fee might save you more than you ever imagined. We have it so we can do everything necessary to protect you and make sure you get a great trip.”

Challenge #5: How can I charge a client who already knows what they want, or just keeps returning to the same place over and over?

These are similar but separate issues. First let's talk about clients who already know what they want. It can be very tempting to simply book it! After all, those "easy sales" save you valuable time and contribute to your revenue and productivity. Think it through however. What if they were wrong?

As referenced in the previous challenge, almost everyone is using the Internet or apps to some degree in their travel research. They'll be sifting through highly-biased offerings and displays, looking at professionally "photo-shopped" images and carefully chosen angles of only the best rooms and views.

They will read descriptions and promotional messages designed not to tell the whole story, but to focus only on the positive aspects of a product. They won't see any fine print that could change everything until they get to the buying part of the process, which – if they've called you – they haven't done yet. Even if they do, very few people read it.

Then, many will think they are doing their due diligence by reading reviews and looking at star ratings. The false assumption is that if someone else liked it, they might too.

You know these things. You think about these things. Someone in the middle of shopping for a deal doesn't. If you simply book what they asked for, you're taking the risk that none of the things above were off in any way. And if something isn't quite what they expected, you'll still be the one they turn to for fixing it.

Can you really afford to "just book it" these days? Always consult. Always ask questions, always research. Your reputation depends on it.

For the other kind of client that returns to the same place year after year, there are at least two issues worth considering:

- What if something important has changed since they were last there?
- Won't they still expect your help if something goes wrong?

From hurricanes, to strikes, to snowstorms and overbooked hotels, there is no shortage of examples of how travel advisors help beyond just making bookings. And for all of those things, and the other things we discussed throughout this course – THAT is what your fee is really for.