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Destination-wedding specialist plans more direct marketing

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By Margaret Myre

Ask Me About Destination Weddings, a reservation and resource center for travel agents, is going to expand its reach by advertising directly to consumers in 2009, according to Marilyn Cairo, vice president of marketing.

"We're going to more of a consumer approach," Cairo said. "We've done very little consumer advertising. We go after the travel agent because the bride comes to them."

Beginning next year, the company will promote its 46 hotel partners in the Caribbean, Central America and Mexico in advertising directed to the consumer as well as in bridal shows and on the company's website. Currently, 20% of Ask Me's business comes directly from consumers. The rest comes from their company-trained travel agency specialists, dubbed Ask Me agents.

"I like that mix, but I also want to throw out my net farther with the consumer," Cairo said.

The idea is to grow the niche, but Ask Me isn't about to neglect the distribution channel that produces 80% of its business.

Under the new plan, media advertising will steer the consumer to Ask Me's call center in Miami, where a "romance expert," as members of the sales team are called, will try to route the consumer to an Ask Me travel agent.

"When a bride calls us, we're going to ask: 'Do you work with a travel agent?' If she answers yes, we redirect the business back to the travel agent so we can all stay in business far into the future. If there is no Ask Me agent within the client's geographic area, then we will service the client's needs."

The synergy that Ask Me has created with agents and its hotel partners in 12 destinations has created cross-promotion opportunities that benefit each segment, Cairo said.

For example, the company's summer promotion benefits hotels in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, but the focus is still on the travel agent.

"We tell them, 'If you want to market to the travel agent distribution channel, we have a great package for you,'" Cairo said. "We remind them that 68% of brides use a travel agent."

Participation in the summer promotion for hotels includes a profile of the hotel and its wedding/honeymoon packages displayed on the [Ask Me website](#), featured placement on the site's home page for one week, inclusion in the company's wedding brochure and the services of Ask Me's bilingual call center. The cost to the hotel is \$149 per month for one year.

Cairo said that having a bilingual sales team at its call center is a perceived value; agents who work with Ask Me no longer have to contact the hotel directly when booking a destination wedding.

"We market the hotel and close the sale," Cairo said. "The hotels see the value, and the agents see the value."

Proactive Ask Me agents, those in whose marketing plan Ask Me has had a say, earn co-op dollars based on their productivity with the company.

"We're doing a tag ad with Bahia Principe in the Texas market in the fall," Cairo said. "In the Bahia ad, the call to action will be the travel agent. So again, it goes back to them. Our logo is on the ad but not our phone number."

Texas is just an example, Cairo said. The company works with agents throughout the U.S.

Here's how co-op works: Ask Me goes to the hotel and presents the "opportunity," as Cairo calls it, to run an ad for the hotel, with the agent's name and contact information and Ask Me's logo included on the material. Ask Me supplies the advertising material and puts up a share of running the ad. The agency also puts up a share, as does the hotel.

Ask Me's co-op advertising dollars start off at 50%. Seventy-five percent is the highest percentage the company will give, and that goes to its most proactive agencies.

"We have agents that will bring opportunity to us," Cairo said. "We want to reward agencies who work with us."

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