

Start your own travel agency!

FabJob Guide to
**Become a
Travel
Consultant**



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1. Introduction

Welcome to the exciting world of selling vacations and travel! If you love the thrill of discovering new cultures and corners of the world, you have now discovered a career that will allow you to combine your passion for travel with a real way to make money.

Being a travel consultant offers a truly dynamic work environment. It's the next best thing to traveling yourself! In one day you can plan an itinerary for a Tahiti cruise, plot a trek through Kuala Lumpur, price an independent train trip through Italy, and then arrange to fly a client last-minute to surprise his fiancée in California.

A travel consultant is someone clients turn to for their advice and expertise. You will be respected, trusted, and admired as someone with exclusive information and skills. When your clients return home from their cruise or tour and call you to say what a great time they had, you'll know you had a part in making their dreams come true. People are genuinely glad to see you or hear from you because you represent their ability to get away from it all, relax, enjoy life, splurge, and reunite with family and friends.

Being a travel consultant is also a job that offers a tremendous amount of flexibility and freedom — and if you're a travel lover, it's easy to guess that those things are important to you. Many travel consultants work from home and set their own hours, so you can create a job that works with the rest of your life. You can also choose to specialize in selling a travel product close to your heart, such as nature-watching cruises, backpack tours of Europe, or pilgrimages to India. It's up to you!

Successful travel consultants are also the recipients of a number of industry benefits, ranging from discounts on travel products to all-expenses-paid vacations. At the very least, you'll save money on each vacation you take by earning a commission selling the trip to yourself. And you can save even more by shopping around for the best deals that only industry professionals get wind of.

So pack your bags and get ready! This guide is your ticket to a fabulous new career. And with rising household incomes, smaller families, and affluent baby boomers on the verge of retirement, the number of people taking vacations is on the rise. In fact, there's never been a better time to become a travel consultant.

1.1 What is a Travel Consultant?

Travel consultants, as they'll be called in this book, are also referred to as travel agents, travel professionals, travel planners, and travel counselors. There's really no difference — they all sell travel products for a living. However, the recent trend has moved away from the term "travel agent" towards titles that imply more of a personal, one-on-one service.

As a travel consultant, you will help people plan vacations, trips and tours to locations across the country or around the world. You'll help clients determine the types of trips that are suitable for them, and then arrange to sell them travel products that best meet their needs. Travel products you will sell to your clients include airline tickets, hotels, rental cars, travel tours or packages, cruises, rail passes, and more.

In most cases you are not the direct supplier of these products, but a "middleman" who arranges the sale between a supplier and your client. In exchange for arranging this deal, you are paid a service fee or commission by the supplier and/or the client. (This guide will explain in detail later on the different ways travel consultants make money.)

A day in the life of a travel consultant might include:

- Speaking with clients about their travel needs
- Researching destinations, accommodations and fares
- Getting clients' approval to purchase travel products
- Booking travel products by computer, fax, or phone
- Developing itineraries (travel schedules) for individuals and groups
- Sending confirmation to clients with travel details
- Traveling to new places to learn about their amenities and attractions

Travel consultants may work as independent contractors, or as employees of travel agencies. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 3 of 5 travel consultants work for an agency, and about 13% are self-employed. There are pros and cons to each of these options, and this book will teach you how to do both.

While many travel consultants work in an office at an agency, technology has now made it possible for the travel consultant to work out of his or her home.

1.1.1 Why Travel Consultants Are Needed

Many people wonder if travel consulting is a fading industry, since people can now book airline tickets and make hotel reservations online. While it's true that the Internet has allowed consumers better access to travel information, many still look to travel consultants to ensure reliability and accuracy, as well as save them time and money.

According to the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA), travel consultants are the leading distributors of travel products and services. Their most recent research shows that travel consultants sell:

- 87% of all cruises
- 81% of all tours and packages
- 51% of all airline tickets
- 47% of all hotel stays
- 45% of all car rentals

Those are impressive numbers, especially when you consider that the big-ticket purchases that top the list (cruises, tours, and packages) offer travel consultants the best commission potential. So why do clients turn to travel consultants when they could make travel arrangements themselves? Here are some key reasons.

Information Overload

Travel consultants help clients choose from an increasingly overwhelming selection of travel products. There are thousands of vacation packages and airfares to choose from, schedules to accommodate, and a massive amount of travel information out there. In the course of planning a trip, the selection can be more frustrating than exciting.

Clients trust that their travel consultants are informed about the best options. A travel consultant is able to sort through and understand the information (including the fine print), assess their clients' needs, and make the best possible arrangements for them by offering travel alternatives. The client is happy because they still ultimately make a

choice, but from limited, pre-screened options brought to them by the consultant. In this way, using a travel consultant becomes a welcome convenience.

Saving Money and Time

Travel consultants can save their clients money by booking them in early, or with special rates. They are expected to be able to find the client the absolute best price and value for their trip. The idea is that using a travel consultant should be something that saves you money as well as time.

Travel suppliers, such as major cruise lines, resorts, and specialty travel groups also rely on travel consultants to promote their packages to the millions of people who travel every year. They may make special deals available to your clients through you that make booking more attractive.

Cruise lines, for example, pin their hopes on consultants to sell the bulk of a year's bookings during Wave Season, which starts in January and runs through late February or early March. They launch advertising campaigns, reference February as "National Cruise Vacation Month," and market to travel consultants to recommend their products to consumers.

You should always remember that your clients put a great deal of value on their time as well, so you should be trying to make their travel arrangements as quickly and efficiently as possible, using the techniques explained in this guide.

Expert Advice

I have learned over the years that people don't always know what they want out of a vacation. This seems strange when you consider that travel is directly connected to each person's interests, desires, and lifestyles. Even if they do not directly ask for it, humans need guidance and reassurance. So long as you can offer your clients a benefit they can't get themselves, they will use your services. As you'll read later in this guide, choosing a travel specialty is a great way to become an expert whose advice people will seek out.

To read an article with all of ASTA's reasons why people should use a travel consultant, visit www.travelsense.org/tips/whyuseanagent.cfm. Note that this industry data will be useful for your marketing materials should you decide to go into business for yourself.

1.1.2 The Travel Industry

According to the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA)'s most recent data, the travel industry contributes \$1.3 trillion annually to the U.S. economy. Direct spending on travel in the U.S. is estimated by TIA at \$703 billion.

They also estimate that Americans take 1.16 billion person-trips a year, defining one "person-trip" as one person taking one trip 50 miles or more from home, or staying one or more nights away from home. More than 80% of this travel was for pleasure.

Travel is relaxing, fun, and important for people to be healthy, well-adjusted individuals. Joe Robinson writes in his book about work-life balance, *Work To Live*, that vacations reduce the risk of heart attacks by 30% in men, and 50% in women.

Travel is as much an emotional concept as a physical one. The feelings attached to a vacation — those sentiments of escape, adventure, reprieve, and a reconnection to yourself or another person — are what make travel so appealing.

Over the last eight years the travel industry has overcome challenges such as the World Trade Center terrorism attacks, the SARS virus, the devastating 2005 hurricane season, the war in Iraq, and skyrocketing gas prices. Travelers have demonstrated that they are resilient, though — it seems that travel is an inherent part of our freedoms and nomadic nature. Recent Bureau of Economic Analysis data revealed that travel spending in 2007 grew by more than 2 percent, and that there is optimism for continued growth of the industry.

Certain destinations are also increasing in popularity in response to changing world conditions. Europe, Baltic and Mediterranean cruises are back on the radar and are selling extremely well. The Caribbean's

close-to-home travel benefits (in addition to the reasonable prices) have them continue to be a hot seller, as does Alaska's land-sea combination trips.

There are two distinct trends today in how people make travel plans. They a) know better where they want to go on vacation through their own research and b) often make plans based on personal interests and hobbies. This has changed the role of the travel consultant to someone who must offer personalized service to be competitive.

The Importance of Specializing

Many travel consultants are carving a niche for themselves by offering a service or specialty that is important or interesting to people. By specializing you make it viable to charge fees for your services. Developing a specialty based on a hobby or favorite destination of yours makes your job more interesting, and increases your productivity as well as commissions.

You can separate yourself from the competition if you focus on special interest tours and target a specific group of people that can be served in a unique and exciting way. For example, Sylvia Berman, owner of Post Haste Travel, www.posthastetravel.com, in Hollywood, Florida, turned her love of Africa into a specialty agency that produces \$10 million in annual sales. Lee Kissner owns Players Travel, www.playerstravel.com, in Las Vegas and specializes in casino cruise marketing. His entire business is structured around gaming, exclusively on Carnival Cruises.

What is your hobby or interest? What do you like to do on vacation? Do you have a special connection to your community in some way that you can translate into a fulfilling (and profitable) niche? There are so many ideas for specialties, such as:

- Spa vacations
- Wine-tasting tours
- Educational or eco-travel

- Gambling and casinos
- Adventure trips
- National parks tours
- Nature/bird watching
- High-end or luxury travel

...and so many more! The possibilities are endless. Perhaps you have an interest or a lifestyle that you want to develop into a travel niche, such as African safaris or scuba diving. There are specialty tour companies devoted entirely to kayaking through the Everglades and the Florida Keys, whale watching in Alaska, or bird-watching in the Galapagos.

The luxury travel market is growing as the population ages and wants to spend their earned wealth on extravagant, immersion-type vacations. Discriminating travelers have discriminating tastes. You might charter a helicopter to a secluded island for brunch, arrange private swims with dolphins, or book a luxurious cruise in a penthouse suite onboard the Queen Mary 2.

This guide will focus in on some common ways travel consultants choose to specialize in section 5.3, to help you choose a specialty of your own. In particular, the concepts of eco-tourism, luxury travel, and adventure travel will be emphasized in this guide as hot markets you can tap into if you choose.

1.1.3 Benefits of the Career

I like to experience new things all the time. Creating travel excursions for my clients lets me live vicariously through them, until I'm able to get away on another trip myself. Here are some other attractive benefits of being a travel consultant.

Get Discounts and Rewards from Travel Suppliers

Have you ever paid just \$25 a day for a cruise, stayed in a hotel for next to nothing, bought Walt Disney World tickets at half price, or been invited on a ship's inaugural cruise? Now you can!

Travel industry professionals can take advantage of lower prices for travel products than what the general public pays. You can expect to receive a regular discount on hotels, rental cars, cruises, and more. In fact, travel suppliers actually like to reserve their best discounts for travel professionals, because they want their personal recommendation.

In addition to getting the best value for your money, travel consultants can offset a portion of their travel costs with the commission they earn by booking the trip. While the percentage is usually small, if you travel frequently the savings can add up. In fact, there are people who become travel consultants “on the side” strictly to sell to themselves and friends. (This guide, however, focuses on making a living selling travel.)

If you are a top-producing consultant you may be rewarded with free trips. Holland America Line, for example, rewards its 100 top-producing cruise sellers annually with an all-expenses paid cruise. A few years ago it was a seven-night Caribbean voyage onboard the Oosterdam. HAL flew 100 consultants (and one guest each) roundtrip, provided suite accommodations on the ship, and included free drinks as well as an onboard credit for a massage or complimentary shore excursion. Not a bad way to spend a week!

Go on Familiarization (“Fam”) Trips

“Fams” are special trips only available to travel professionals who can show appropriate identification. Travel suppliers offer discounted trips to a given destination, hotel property, or cruise ship. The purpose of these fams is to allow travel consultants to understand a product better and be able to sell it more effectively to potential clients.

During fams you are expected to balance your time between sightseeing and learning about the products you can sell (viewing different rooms, public areas, etc.). Fams are a key to success in today’s environment of specialization.

Fam trips are offered all over the globe. Here are a few real-life examples, although be aware that what is available is constantly changing.

- **London**

This five-night trip includes a tour of Christchurch and the Bodleian Library in Oxford, a trip into the Oxfordshire Cotswolds, an

update on Blenheim Palace's plans, and entrance to the British Travel Trade Fair, among other things. The cost covers all hotel accommodations with breakfast daily, daily transportation for site visits, some evening dinners, and all educational and seminar arrangements, including the cost of admission to the trade show. *Rates: \$429 per agent double occupancy. The single supplement is \$250.*

- **French Canal Cruise**

Agents will spend six nights onboard L'Abercrombie visiting a number of destinations in the Burgundy region, including Dijon, Meursault, Ouche Valley and Beaune. The price includes train and motorcoach transfers, sightseeing and entrance fees. *Rates: The cruise-only rate is \$995 per person, double occupancy.*

- **Portugal and Spain**

The five-night trip includes roundtrip airfare from New York; five nights' accommodations at four-star hotels; breakfast daily; four dinners; tours of Lisbon, Sintra and Fatima, Portugal; visits to Salamanca, Avila, Toledo and Madrid, Spain; destination and product knowledge seminars; services of a tour director and local guides; transportation; entrance fees; and local taxes. Visitors spend two nights in Lisbon, one night in Salamanca, and two nights in Madrid. *Rates: \$499 per person, double occupancy.*

I have been on a number of fam trips, but I think the most exciting was my trip to Rome. I took a trip through ItaliaTours with roundtrip airfare, five nights' accommodations in a 3-star hotel, daily breakfast, transportation from/to the airport, and all applicable taxes. The cost was only \$599, and my agency kicked in \$200 as part of my annual education, so I was only out of pocket \$399!

Plenty of money was left over for fun tours (all at a reduced cost) and great food. I toured the Coliseum, Pantheon, Vatican City, St. Peter's Basilica, witnessed a papal blessing in the Square, tossed a coin into Trevi Fountain, and walked up and down the Spanish Steps. All while I was enjoying the most exquisite pizza in the world, and creamy gelato every night on the steps of the Santa Maria Maggiore cathedral, which neighbored my hotel.

Run Your Own Business

Do you dream of working from home? As a travel consultant you most certainly can. There is a tremendous amount of flexibility in selling travel, and technology makes it possible to be in business on your own.

There are a couple of different ways this can work. Most commonly, consultants work as independent contractors who are affiliates of a particular agency. You are in business for yourself, but the affiliated agency, called your “host agency,” does the actual booking through their system in exchange for a commission split with you, the consultant.

The reason why consultants hook up with a host agency is to get their businesses started more quickly, and for less money. It is possible to work without a host agency and be 100% independent, but then you need to either apply for agency status by getting an IATA number (or another valid industry identifier), or limit the kind of travel products you sell. This guide will explain your options, but it is generally believed that your easiest route as a home-based consultant is working with a host agency, especially when you are first starting out.

The benefits of self-employment are tremendous, and range from tax deductions, to setting your own hours, to taking your business in the direction you choose. You can work part time or full time, keep your kids at home with you, and even take a week off to travel without checking in with your boss. You do not need to be a full service agency. You can be cruise-only, cruises and tours only, specialty travel business... it's your choice.

Help People

Helping clients is the name of the game. In fact, philanthropic-minded travel consultants might say that simply helping people realize their dreams is enough for them. You can tickle their fancy about a particular trip: “Imagine standing above a lava flow on Hawaii’s Big Island coast. You’re watching the island grow right before your very eyes!”

Or, try appealing to their love of nature: “The Hawaiian Islands are wintering grounds for the humpback whales. If you’re lucky you can spot them from shore, but a sure bet to see them is to take a cruise around the islands, in the waters they swim in.”

As a travel consultant you can make new and exciting things happen for people, and in the course of planning their travel develop long-term relationships with them. You create for them a daydream in the middle of a dull work day, and keep them focused on a holiday in Tahiti next year, a ski trip in February, or lifelong memories of their family reunion cruise to the Caribbean. Here's a personal example:

I once received a warm note from a client thanking me for something that I thought was a very routine task at the time. He had contacted my office to buy a last-minute airline ticket for his younger brother to go north and visit for the weekend.

I researched the fares, found a fairly good price for such short notice, and because the traveler did not have a car I arranged a shuttle for transportation to the airport. All told, the sale was about \$450. Great! Thank you for the business, I look forward to assisting you again in the future.

Well, as it turns out, this older brother had been arranging an 80th birthday party for their mother. The traveling younger brother had not been home in more than three years, and he was the 'big birthday surprise.' When he walked into the party, his mother and the rest of the family burst into tears of joy. Everyone reconnected and shared stories of years lost without one another, and it was a fantastic weekend.

I was overwhelmed to read in the note the client sent that my simple actions had this effect. I have been in the travel business for more than a decade now, yet I am still surprised that the little tasks I do on a daily basis can have such an emotional impact on others. Helping others in even the smallest way just makes me love my job even more.

Income Potential

If you decide (like many travel consultants do) to work for straight commission, then your income is only limited by how much you can sell. Like many sales-related jobs, the more travel products you sell, the more income you will generate. There are certainly consultants who earn in excess of \$100,000 a year, and of course there are those who earn less than that. You set the pace.

Travel agencies earn a commission percentage on many of the travel products sold through them, such as tour packages, cruises, and hotel stays. This commission varies depending on the travel supplier and

their relationship with the agency, but it is usually in the range of 5% to 15%. In rare cases up to a 20% commission is possible. Imagining a 10% commission, the agency would earn \$200 on a \$2,000 cruise booking.

If the travel product was booked by a commission-based consultant, the agency then splits this \$200 with the consultant. Agency splits usually vary from 40% to 60%, and average out around a 50-50 split between consultant and agency. This means that \$200 earned on a \$2,000 cruise, your share as consultant would be \$100. If you are self-employed it is also possible to book travel directly with some suppliers (i.e., not through your agency) and get 100% of your earned commission (e.g., \$200 instead of \$100).

In addition, most travel consultants charge clients a service fee to book travel products that don't pay a commission, such as airline tickets. Some consultants also boost their income by selling travel-related products, such as maps and guidebooks they have hand-selected.

Another way to get paid with a lot of potential is by charging clients an hourly rate for your expert advice. If you know the best hotels, hottest day trips, and have tons of insider advice about a particular locale, you can charge your clients handsomely for your know-how.

The median annual income for salaried travel consultants in the United States is \$26,630, with a high of more than \$40,000. More info about getting paid as a travel consultant will be presented in sections 4.3.3 and 6.5.

You Can Start Right Now

You should know up front that you do not need any specialized training to call yourself a travel consultant. You don't need fancy software on your computer, or a pricey storefront location for your business. You don't need thousands of dollars in start-up capital, nor do you need to know all those cryptic airport codes.

Of course, having any of these things will help you out, and will add to your earning potential. But to get started the best things you can have are a true love of travel and belief in its value, and a willingness to learn.

Other things that will help you break in quickly are a wide circle of contacts, and a specialized knowledge of a destination or particular travel product. This guide will teach you ways to hit the ground running!

1.2 Inside This Guide

The *FabJob Guide to Become a Travel Consultant* initiates you into an exciting career that affords glimpses into the world beyond your own town or city. Follow the practical instructions in this guide and you will be well on your way to success.

Chapter 2 (“*Selling Travel Products*”) begins with a brief overview of how the industry works today, and explains the travel consultant’s role in how travel products are moved from supplier to consumer. This chapter also explains meeting with clients and assessing their needs, gives tips for travel research and reservations, and details the main travel suppliers you will do business with.

Chapter 3 (“*Developing Your Skills*”) goes over the personal skills that will assist you in excelling at travel sales and how to develop them.

Chapter 4 (“*Getting Hired*”) will prepare you to land your first job in the industry, with sections on where to find advertised jobs, how to find out about jobs through word of mouth, preparing your job-hunting materials, acing the interview, discussing salary, and how to achieve success on the job.

If you think you would prefer to go the route of self-employment, Chapter 5 (“*Starting a Travel Consulting Business*”) is for you. It covers evaluating the market for your business, choosing a specialization, naming and structure, licenses and registration, developing a business plan, legal matters such as insurance and taxes, and setting up/equipping your office. It also explains how you work with a “host agency,” developing supplier relationships, and getting paid by clients and through commission.

Chapter 6 (“*Getting Clients*”) will teach you how to define your target market, and how to market your business to potential clients. This chapter also covers marketing strategies, best practices for salesmanship, and retaining clients through exceptional service.

Throughout the book are insights and tips from travel industry experts, as well as ideas for checklists and forms you can adapt and use for your own business. So if you're ready, let's hit the road. Your new career awaits you!