

New Ovation Sales Program Courts VIPs Served By Other TMCs

By Jay Boehmer

Ovation Corporate Travel launched a new sales program and service offering to handle VIP travelers for accounts served by other travel management companies.

Ovation's proposition to managed travel administrators goes like this: Mega TMCs and other agencies handle most of your travelers fine, but your VIPs and C-suite would better be served by a high-touch specialist. The program, Ovation Reserve, will integrate with the primary TMC and "plug into your existing travel program for reporting, duty of care and vendor negotiations," according to the Ovation website.

Ovation's niche long has been handling business travel for lawyers, hedge fund managers, entertainment executives and what Ovation chairman and CEO Paul Metselaar called "prima donnas."

Executive vice president Michael Steiner said Ovation Reserve grew out of requests from clients, some of whom had left Ovation for other TMCs only to be "underwhelmed" by executive support. "At this point, it's mostly being driven from the corporate clients saying, 'We need a different solution for VIPs. We're happy with 90 percent or 80 percent of our travel, but we have a headache with the C-suite.'"

The New York City-based agency has dedicated sales resources to Ovation Reserve and has "identified approximately 600 corporations" that are ripe for this type of service, said Steiner.

Mega TMCs operate their own VIP desks and provide their own executive services. What sets Ovation apart? Like other high-touch agencies, Steiner talked up the quality of Ovation's frontline agents and their training for "service excellence." He said Ovation prides itself on lightning-fast response times for VIP travelers, whether

they're reaching out by phone, email or another mode, and the agency provides commitments around those. Further, Ovation provides exclusive perks and special services programs—some based on relationships with suppliers—to deliver waivers, favors, specials and upgrades to VIPs and executives.

The agency already has partnered with The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co., Park Hyatt and The Peninsula Hotels, as well as Duffl—which provides suitcase delivery, clothes laundering and storage—to extend special services through Ovation Reserve.

As for connecting Ovation Reserve with a client's broader managed travel program for reporting, traveler tracking, expense management and monitoring supplier deals, "We'll integrate everything that's needed" with the primary agency, Steiner said.

Some clients already operate under this type of structure. Ovation is an affiliate of BCD Travel and has administered global programs in conjunction with them for years. "This is nothing new, where we're integrating our content with other TMCs," said Steiner. "This stuff is pretty standard fare at this point."

Each program would look different based on the structure and requirements of the clients.

Metselaar and Steiner said Ovation has discussed its new program with some megas. On the one hand, a specialty provider like Ovation could offload servicing of the most finicky travelers. On the other, its program could carve off the most lucrative travelers from an account.

Metselaar viewed it as "a mutually symbiotic relationship, where we feed off and help the larger entity."

Steiner added: "Most [TMCs] would agree that they would rather partner with someone to get this right than have major risk issues with existing clients."