

A Guiding Force

An Interview with Valerie Ann Wilson, Founder, Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer; Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg, Co-President and Co-Owner; and Kimberly Wilson Wetty, Co-President and Co-Owner, Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc.



Kimberly Wilson Wetty, Valerie Ann Wilson, and Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg

EDITORS' NOTE Valerie Ann Wilson initially moved to New York City to pursue a fashion career. Within two years, she was hired as Vice President to start the ladies division of Gant. Beginning in 1967, she spent the next 13 years serving on numerous committees and boards of directors, and played a part in a multitude of fundraising efforts with not-for-profit organizations in Westchester County, New York City, and London. In 1977, the Wilson family moved to London where Valerie became a founding member of the Junior League of London. Her three years in London fostered much of her passion for travel and on September 8, 1981, Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc. (VWT) was born, opening in the Pan Am Building in New York City. In 2001, Valerie became a published author with Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels & Resorts. Ten years later, and as a part of the 30th anniversary milestone, she wrote the second edition. On February 2, 2012, the book, Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels & Resorts, Second Edition and the 30th anniversary campaign were unveiled at the Astor Library at The St. Regis New York with industry leaders and high-profile travel, business, and lifestyle media.

Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg joined Valerie Wilson Travel in February 1991. She manages the corporate division, as well as the meetings and events side from sales to operations, and oversees the IT and technology functions of VWT. Her passion is new business development for the company. Jennifer serves on the ASTA CAC Board, and was honored with the ISTA/ASTA Barbara O'Hara Advocacy Award in 2010. Jennifer graduated from Haverford College with a B.A. in History and a minor in Political Science, and received her Executive M.B.A. from the Owner/President Management (OPM) Program at Harvard Business School in 2004. Jennifer began her career as a Corporate Sales Manager of the Westbury Hotel in New York.

Kimberly Wilson Wetty joined Valerie Wilson Travel in February 1995, and has been instrumental in developing the company's cruise division. Three years in, she took on the management of all leisure business. In addition, she is responsible for all branding and marketing, as well as overseeing VWT's membership in Virtuoso. Kimberly was selected as a family travel specialist for the "A-List" by Travel +

Leisure consecutively since 2009, and by Condé Nast consecutively since 2005. She is a member of the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO). A graduate of Bucknell University with a B.A. in Sociology, Kimberly began her career as a store manager for Ann Taylor in New York City. She left retail to join the travel industry as marketing coordinator for the Americas for CIGA Hotels.

COMPANY BRIEF With high regard for personal attention to detail and customer service, Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc. (www.valeriewilsontravel.com) is one of today's largest private, women-owned, debt free, and family managed travel consulting firms in the United States. Headquartered in New York City with a diverse client base, there are currently 15 offices nationwide, stretching from Maine to Florida, in the Midwest, and on the West Coast. VWT's team consists of a highly specialized and knowledgeable network of 290 Travel Consultants and Associate Agents. Valerie Wilson Travel handles the travel management needs for companies and organizations in industries as diverse as fashion, publishing, finance, new media, pharmaceuticals, and not-for-profits. All of the Valerie Wilson Travel locations are proud members of Virtuoso®. VWT's Power of Access™ guarantees clients exclusive rates and amenities, VIP treatment, and exceptional service with preferred partners. Every year since 1998, the agency has been counted among Travel Weekly's "Top 50 Travel Agencies," and most recently as the 25th largest in the United States.

How critical has it been to avoid losing that innovative culture?

Valerie: For VWT to be successful, it's mandatory for us to look outside of the box, to change internally, and create new ideas because it's a constantly changing business world.

We will always remain in the luxury end of travel, but we need to be strong in other markets too.

Kimberly: What I'm most proud of is that we continue to find young talent who challenge us to reevaluate how we do business every day. It's three-fold for us: how we communicate with our true customers – the traveling public, how we communicate with our suppliers, and how we communicate with our team internally.

When you bring in the younger generation – and this has been going on for 33

years – they challenge us to flip things upside down, so much so that had somebody asked me five years ago about our social media strategy, I never would have anticipated the depth and success we have today.

We won the Tweeting award at Virtuoso Travel Week 2013 – most people wouldn't think of us as Tweeters. It shows we're touching customers at many levels.

Valerie: When we created an Intranet, most people were barely getting into e-mail. So we have always loved to be innovative but it's great to have young people who run with it.

How have you consistently led within this industry?

Jennifer: VWT has a place and a seat of authority at every table where there are opportunities to meet with top executive teams.

People look to us as a benchmark and a guiding force.

There is a mutual respect that dictates that we don't ask for something unless we need it, and we have multiple relationships that we have to nurture as all of our supplies change on a regular basis.

We know people at the account management level and also at the senior level where we know the Presidents and Chairmen, and we honor those relationships.

Valerie: The three of us sit on every major focus group or advisory board or at every roundtable discussion because they want our opinions. We're not afraid to honestly give them within their strata of business, and we do the same with our customers. This is one of the things that helps set VWT apart from our competition.

Kimberly: The secret to our success is we're authentic. We're true to ourselves. We lead by example. We're honest to a fault. We're reliable. It's the way we communicate with our suppliers and employees. It's a true family business. We're real people.

Has the meaning of hospitality changed? Are we losing that personal interaction?

Valerie: I'm not concerned, because true hospitality is about relationships; it's not about going on a computer and booking something, where you have no idea what you're booking or getting.

If anything, those relationships are developing more so.

Jennifer: Speaking from the corporate side, and in meetings and events, our customers want to meet face-to-face. Once or twice a year, I try to meet with our largest customers in person to thank them for their business. They like to know there is still a Wilson involved.

I think technology can help us, but it will never replace human interaction.

How do you define true luxury and is the meaning still the same?

Kimberly: Luxury is personalized. It's defined by the beholder – and it's what is important to him/her: time, a bigger room, personalization, the meet-and-greet or access to the GM.

Hoteliers are figuring out how to be less rigid in their client experience – this, in a sense, is a form of luxury.

Jennifer: I want to connect and be met differently than I want my client to be met. I would expect them to know I'm arriving, that I prefer white wine over red wine, and that I like water by the side of my bed. Regardless of where in the world you go, there are some fundamentals that make you feel at home, be it for one night or several nights, business or leisure.

The hotel should have enough information on a client so they know what is important to that person, at that moment in time.

Is food and beverage an area where you can be successful in this industry, and how challenging is that for a hotel?

Kimberly: It depends on the brand. In some cases, hotels can be successful if they take an unknown chef and create an experience at their own property – and bring the locals to the hotels, because travelers want to feel they're part of the community. Some hotels have had success with famous chefs and name brands.

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We've all become foodies and wine enthusiasts, so culinary has to be important. I have also encouraged hotels to look at how to redo their room service, because when you travel, it's not always about eating out – there needs to be a way to make room service more inviting.

Hoteliers have to look at culinary, because it is a revenue source if they do it the right way.

Jennifer: If someone gives me an app to order room service on my way to the hotel, it's a better use of my time.

So there are many ways to have a more flexible environment.

Is the value you provide truly understood by the customer?

Valerie: Absolutely, our customers trust us. They depend on us to guide and help them.

Kimberly: Each generation sees the value of the travel advisor, but you can always use more education on what our profession brings to the table.

Jennifer: Prior to 9/11, security didn't exist at the level we talk about today. Even though we are high-touch and face-to-face oriented, this doesn't mean we don't have the technology that lets us know via a program with a graphical interactive screen who exactly we had in Boston when the bombs went off, or to assist us when we have had to get clients out of Egypt three different times.

We push information to our advisors and clients, and we accommodate them. None of this occurs without the technology that has changed everything.

We utilize the technology, but in our VWT way and style; and it will continue to evolve. The client knows we are genuinely concerned where they are and how we get them into or out of a place because of whatever natural or manmade issue has occurred.

Valerie: It's always wonderfully important to have an advisor who is calm and concerned, and will make sure the changes are made.

In hiring talent, do you look for education or is personality more relevant?

Kimberly: It's a bit of both. Hands down, the young professionals we're bringing in are just out of college or have had a job, and what strikes us are their dynamic personalities and enthusiasm. You can teach them the product side of the business, but they have to pick it up quickly. In today's world, with the amount of information out there, we are pushed to the extreme more than ever before. You need to have that balance of knowledge, as well as that steady and enthusiastic personality.

Jennifer: Culture is key. Our new recruits are people looking for "a home," and VWT is a great place to be since we're a privately owned company. When so many careers are transient, longevity plays a huge role for me.

How do you maintain the family feel to the business?

Valerie: We treat all of our people as part of our family, and everyone enjoys having a conversation with any one of us. With the young people, we will work with them on our own clients as we mentor them. You can't always be right, but you hope with the combination of their personalities and the business, they will grow and find it fulfilling as a career – because it's not just a job.

Jennifer: Many people think a family business is small, but at the end of the day, it's about what you can scale. We can scale policies and procedures, but you never trade off the integrity, trust or loyalty, and that is a huge difference.

We have a global clientele, and we want to work with our partners on a global basis. We are not looking to be a billion dollar travel company, but we would never trade off an acquisition, client or employee. We would make sure to hold on to our VWT core values.

Why makes travel so much fun?

Valerie: Wherever I travel, I still find something new. So that passion is with me forever. I love being able to share it, be it with a customer, with staff, or through a photo. ●