

The Power of Access

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



Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg, Valerie Ann Wilson, and Kimberly Wilson Wetty
at the opening of the New VWT headquarters at 605 Third Avenue in Manhattan

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, as a part of VWT's 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 Board of Directors, is incoming Chair of the CAC and Co-Chair of the ASTA PAC, and was honored with the ISTA/ASTA Barbara O'Hara Advocacy Award in 2010. She firmly believes in the importance of speaking in one unified voice for the industry. 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. 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. (ValerieWilsonTravel.com) is one of today's largest private, women-owned, and family-managed travel consulting firms in the United States. Headquartered in New York City with a diverse client base, with offices nationwide, stretching the Eastern Seaboard, in the Midwest, and on the West Coast. VWT's team consists of a highly specialized and knowledgeable network of 315 Travel Advisors 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."

Will you discuss the history and heritage of VWT?

Valerie: The most interesting fact about starting Valerie Wilson Travel is that I had never considered opening a business. However, we were living in London and none of the travel agents in London or New York City wanted to talk to me or help arrange trips for my family.

I started arranging my family trips on my own. As was common in those days, we wrote letters and sent Christmas cards telling our friends and contacts about what we were seeing and doing. When we returned, some of my very good friends had kept my Christmas letters and they asked me to book their trips for them. I told them to call their travel agents, but they wanted me to do it.

I started the business planning to do a tiny business with just a few friends and affluent travelers who loved what I called customized,

personal service where I could share my knowledge and the sites I loved. Our growth happened by accident because, as Jennifer reminded me, my clients then asked me to handle their corporate travel needs.

In those days, the corporate side did not feature a high degree of customer service. I often forget that, 37 years ago, we did not have a luxury travel industry – it was in its infancy. It started out as more of a consulting function.

As the company has grown in size and scale, how critical has it been to keep the personal touch at the heart of the business?

Valerie: I do not think any one of us or our associates would want it any other way. This is a large family and the relationships we have with the clients of Valerie Wilson Travel as well as with our preferred suppliers are paramount to the trust and integrity we have established.

Kimberly: Having just led a panel discussion we recently conducted, I asked the panelists on the stage to explain the “why” behind their brand, and that is also at the core of Valerie Wilson Travel. It’s based on our deep belief in the value of relationships and personalized customer service. Everything we do threads through those elements.

It is truly one of the things that sets us apart. As we have advanced as a company, no matter the changes that have gone on in our industry, we have evolved with the changes but we never wavered on who we are as a company.

Some companies become different versions of themselves as a result of outside changes. While we have adapted, we have never changed who we are. We stay relevant and maintain the relationships with our employees, associates and clients and always elevate the customer experience. That is true whether we are doing it through technology or face to face. I love how we have blended our reach to maintain that relevancy.

How challenging is differentiation when services can sound so similar?

Jennifer: We not only have the clout and the bells and whistles to play in this space, but they are backed by our core values. We also have the passion to show up and be present. Our style is not to bait and switch – I am still going to be here when that client joins us and we will have someone on the ground to do a quarterly review. It shows the commitment from Valerie, Kimberly and myself as owners on the corporate side.

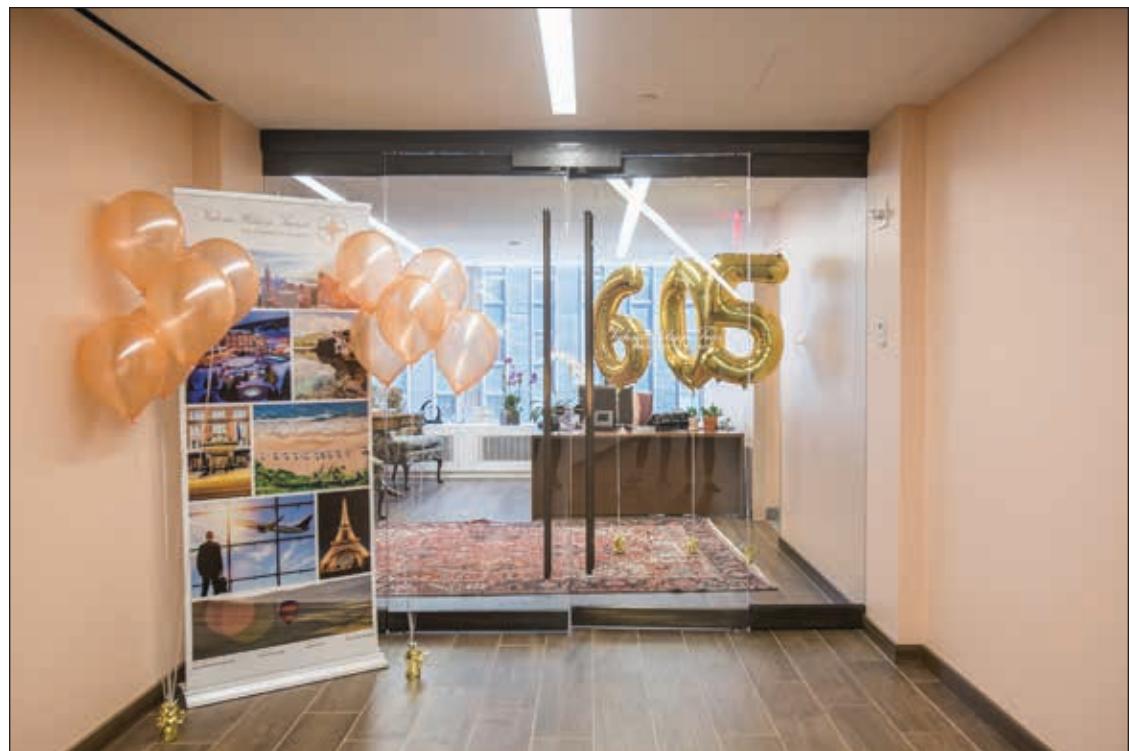
On the leisure side, the differentiation comes through when Valerie, Kimberly, myself and our team send VIP e-mails to our partners on a regular basis. It goes back to that thread of relationships – we get almost an instantaneous reply that our customers will be greeted upon arrival and certain amenities will be extended to them.

Our customers know this and really appreciate it. The ones that have not tried it, usually hear about it through word of mouth as a referral.

On the corporate side, we try very hard to have them learn about it from the first time they meet us.

Our new clients are not just a number to us – they are the start of a valued relationship.

I recently met with one of the very first million-dollar accounts we developed back in 1991. This customer has since sold his business,



The entrance of the new VWT headquarters

started two others and wanted to return and use us again. To walk into his office as someone I had initially been intimidated by, and give him a bear hug, was almost like doing business with an old friend.

This goes back to the core values that Valerie taught us, not only as daughters, but as business leaders; never burn a bridge, always follow up and remain true to our business principles. For me, as a salesperson, it also involves remembering that everyone is always a lead.

Have the services or solutions changed or evolved from an innovation standpoint and will you discuss the emphasis VWT has put on being an innovator in the industry?

Jennifer: This requires understanding what the customer wants and looks for. In this world, where we are now getting bombarded by e-mails and apps, it is important to have a conversation with any and every customer, be it corporate or leisure, to ask them what they are really looking for.

At the end of the day, we are a service provider – we just happen to do it in the space of luxury travel.

We need to recognize that our customer may want an app to read an itinerary, a bound itinerary, or a digital e-invoice. Once we understand what their preferences are overall, it becomes much easier to manage things.

On the corporate side, one of the changes taking place is around security. It is not important weather or not someone is signed up for it, but rather how we are seamlessly aware of where our travelers are and our ability to get them out of a place where there may be manmade or natural disasters.

There are some great products out there and we are testing and trying all of them. We tell our team and clients to trust us and let us try new technology. We need to test things quickly and find the best in class. It is not about trying

new technology forever but finding what is good right now and being willing to move on from it if something better comes up later.

Services and solutions are about what the client wants to use and they come to us as their partners in guiding them through this.

Kimberly: Our clients see us throughout their entire planning process working on all aspects affecting the business traveler, the leisure traveler, or those in the meeting and incentive space. Our clients truly love the opportunity to work with us one on one. We have invested a lot of time into hosting client events and are proud of the relationships we have with our supplier partners, and we want to introduce those relationships to our customers.

Our approach brings a unique level of transparency and dialogue to the planning process. This is one of the solutions we have identified to make our service more personalized – it is not just doing research on an iPad in bed at night, but rather, meeting the president of a cruise line, a tour company or a major airline who tells me what is changing in the industry. This speaks to the Power of Access that we have created in our tagline.

Another solution is our Suite Access by Valerie Wilson Travel. We have clients who play in the suite and first-class space, so creating a program that meets both our clients' and suppliers' needs is a key differentiator.

Is there potential for growth across all parts of the business or are there stronger opportunities in certain segments?

Valerie: We are lucky that 2018 is proving to be a great year. Last year was also good, I was happy we were at 4 percent growth, although a great year always meant we were at 8 percent or higher. The environment today is great because we are experiencing double digit growth in almost every phase of the industry.

How ingrained is the Power of Access in the company and how has it impacted your business?

Kimberly: What I love about the Power of Access is that it's something we stumbled upon in a brainstorming session. For our 30th anniversary, we were trying to figure out what was true to Valerie Wilson Travel. Through words on a white board, it came out – we deliver the power of access. We are all about opening doors that other people can not. This can be through an experience where we have created an amazing opportunity for a client when things are going well; it can also be when we must help a traveler out when things are not going well.

It is our access throughout all the segments in which we do business. Our employees know this as well as our associates and our suppliers.

Our tagline has become more ingrained in our day-to-day training, our lingo and philosophy over the past eight years, but it has been instinctual since day one.

Jennifer: We all live and breathe VWT's Power of Access. It's not just internal – this is what our clients expect.

Kimberly: We have an ability to blend relationships, dialogue, and communication, to collaborate on what we are all trying to achieve in the industry and take it to the next level.

We should pinch ourselves sometimes because we have that kind of brand culture. In the current world, it is even more special than ever that there is a passion, familiarity and sincerity behind who we are as a company, with our employees as well as with those we work with.

Jennifer: We do not work with a PR firm. We find that people are generally interested in knowing what is going on in our firm because the bar is high.

Do you find that being thought leader in the industry is a responsibility for VWT?

Valerie: I do not think there has ever been a time when we have not believed that, partially based on having been heavily committed to volunteer work prior to opening VWT, no matter where we were living.

Part of leadership is being able to share and collaborate with many different types of people and companies, particularly once we had decided to work in the luxury market.

The years of my commitment to the luxury travel industry have put a lot of gray hairs on my head, because our thought process is always focused on how we can improve. The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company had not even launched as a company until three years after I started in the business. I was involved in this company from the very beginning, always promoting consistency, customer service and excellence.

I recently ran across a letter from Isadore Sharp that discussed how we share the same philosophy of creating the best for our clients. This is a part of our legacy, commitment and responsibility. We all honor this legacy differently, but we all recognize the importance of it.

Over the past 20 years, we have helped to elevate the luxury industry as a whole.

Kimberly: I had the opportunity and honor to be asked to moderate the President's Panel at CLIA Cruise360, which is the number one section of their entire conference. It was the first time that they had someone who was not the director of CLIA moderating the panel in front of an audience of 2,500 people.

Many of the cruise executives talked about being publicly traded and said there were questions that I had asked them that they were uncomfortable answering. I challenged them to answer those questions anyway and the audience applauded that. These questions addressed issues affecting our industry and the cruise space,

and raised the level of conversation that we, as a community, need to be having.

Jennifer: I had the privilege of serving as chair of ASTA's Corporate Advisory Council and National Board of Directors, not only as the only woman on the executive committee, but also to serve as co-chair of our industry PAC. One hundred and fifty people attended our annual Legislative Day when four years prior, we only had 35 attendees. This year, I was so humbled to have six separate meetings with Congressional leaders. We are getting close to instituting airline travel disclosures that every traveler can read. We are changing the game by reinforcing that being a travel advisor is a successful and viable career.

Valerie Wilson Travel, as a leader in this space, has given me the opportunity to hold these industry roles, but I am doing this as part of the overall industry. Fortunately, I can communicate and speak well, and to do this on behalf of far more than one organization. We can represent competing consortiums and it does not matter whether someone in Washington is a Republican or a Democrat – we are looking to recognize how important travel and tourism is to the United States in general.

Overall, I am incredibly proud to fill this role within ASTA. It shows, as a thought leader, how we are trying to make a difference.

What was the reason behind VWT's recent corporate headquarters move in New York City?

Valerie: We could have stayed in the same location where we had been headquartered for 33 years. However, Jennifer and Kimberly did not want to, so we started exploring new locations. We covered all the neighborhoods and in the end, decided on 605 Third Avenue. We have 20,000 square feet housing all the people who interact with; from suppliers, vendors and clients, all in one place. Initially, I was very worried about this, however it has been phenomenally successful.

Part of this success is because, we involved the management team and some key people early in the process. This raised their emotional level and commitment to be more successful.

Jennifer: This experience has acted like a reset button in many ways. Kimberly and Brian spent a lot of time spearheading the floor plans, the furniture, the layout, and the space, but change is hard. Deciding on who was moving and where they were going were tough decisions. However, having the people here versus working remotely is huge. Having three or four conference rooms and open floor plan workstations for corporate leisure meetings and incentives has been exciting.

Despite change being hard, once people got settled in, everyone was very energized.

Kimberly: We tried to look into a crystal ball as best we could. Just making the decision to move was powerful because we were signing an 11-year lease. As a family-owned business, this required that we make a decision that we wanted to stay in the business. When we look at our competition, with so much consolidation going on, this served as a marker in the sand for us emotionally and professionally.



A conference room at the new VWT headquarters

We were then able to plan for the future and determine what the space should look like. We wanted to honor our legacy and create elegance in our space, but also wanted a more modern look. We tried to have more collaborative space, brighter colors, etc.

To stand in the elevator lobby in front of our New York City staff and associates, as well as the press and our suppliers, and state that we have built this new home for them, was so special and rewarding.

Jennifer: We also have a training lab that can easily accommodate 50 people, so we can do webinars from remote offices with our home-based advisors. We have built this in order to be ready for the future.

When you're hiring new talent, is cultural fit the most important consideration?

Valerie: Culture is hugely important to success. We want people who want to be a part of the big family of Valerie Wilson Travel. We must have mutual respect for each other. We do not all think alike or agree on everything, but we do have an integrity in working together that unites us collectively. We are there always to watch their backs and help them.

Kimberly: We do have some more seasoned independent contractors and some of them are nervous about technology. We try to be clever mitigating this so we created a jeopardy style boot camp to teach them. We have done these five times and it has sold out each time. They do not want to learn in a seminar fashion but they will learn with their colleagues in a game show fashion.

We are engaging them in a different way and we are constantly looking for the way that works best.

Jennifer: One of our greatest assets is our brand and it is something that we take very seriously. There has to be brand integrity in all things we do and that comes down to our people.

When we are looking for new talent, this is part of the assessment when we are hiring someone. I recently met a new candidate who was very nervous because she said she was just blown away by meeting with me. This puts our brand and our people into perspective.

Valerie, was the family dynamic within the firm cultivated early on and how special is it to have your daughters working with you?

Valerie: It is remarkable because I probably would have remained a small company and would not have created this huge collective business without my family being involved. I give credit to both Jennifer and Kimberly. Jennifer wanted to come on board for only a few years to grow the corporate side. I also asked Kimberly to help me come up with a cruise department and grow leisure. Together, we have created a company that all three of us are very proud of and we are willing to stand up and be counted for who we are.

Unfortunately, we cannot please everyone all the time and I regularly say, I did not go into business to sell \$799 packages. I wanted to make sure that our clients had memories to last a lifetime and, hopefully, their children and grandchildren as well. This is the way we always look at our purpose. This



Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg greeting guests at the launch of the new VWT headquarters

comes from years of developing those memories and experiences, both for clients and for those of us who work together.

Jennifer: Recently, the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business Smith Family Initiative asked if I would be a guest lecturer. I was hesitant, and asked them why. They said that so many thriving businesses are grandfather/father/son and they really wanted to feature a mother/daughter business because there are so few that have great success stories.

I put more effort into this presentation than I have put into any other recent business presentation. They really wanted it to be authentic and to discuss the good and the bad. One of the lessons that I shared is that we learned through family counseling and family business counseling that family comes first and family business comes second. We must recognize the different circles of a family business and ownership. Kimberly and I text each other as sisters and e-mail each other as colleagues. We do not second-guess each other and we need to remember that each one of us has the other's best interests at heart, even when we get frustrated or frazzled. We always need to remember how lucky we are.

The feedback from the Cornell students was hugely gratifying and humbling. It was incredible to mentor a group of young students on family business.

How important is it to appreciate all you have built and take the time to recognize special moments?

Valerie: It's hard, but it is important because it reflects who we are as leaders.

Kimberly: Part of our success comes from seeking counsel and learning from it. One of our business advisors acknowledged that one thing we do not do well is celebrate our successes. She forced us out of our comfort zone at a time when we needed it most and counseled us to step back and appreciate what we are doing. We have so much to celebrate. We also hand-sign cards for our

associates for birthdays and anniversaries to show our appreciation of them.

While the world is working at a pace that I fear is not sustainable, it's one of the things we challenge ourselves on. It is about staying true to ourselves but also continuing to evolve and plan for the future.

Are you ever frustrated that the message about the great work this industry does isn't widely known or recognized?

Valerie: We are all frustrated by this. This industry provides an incredible career opportunity for those just starting in business out of college and shapes them because it is not just about hospitality – it's about how to treat people, discovering how one wants to grow and how one can give back. We have all done heavy volunteer work. We love sitting on advisory boards because they want our opinions. However, the most rewarding is that we have helped develop individual companies. We have been instrumental in assisting them to determine how to have community and charitable components in their businesses that help other people around the world.

Has the industry done an effective job at providing opportunities for women?

Kimberly: I was raised by Valerie in a way that my gender was never a barrier to entry. My daughter is surrounded by that same level of confidence. The travel industry is a unique one in that we have come a long way when I look at certain segments of leadership. There are now more female general managers. The airline space is somewhat lacking in this area. Cruise lines have been a mix. We have many female leaders, but not as many at the president level.

In the travel management space, there are far more women than there are in other segments of the travel industry. Valerie has always challenged me to go after anything I desire and that the only person who can get in my way is myself, so young women should go for it. ●