

Creating Exceptional Experiences

An Interview with Erina Pindar, Chief Operating Officer and Managing Partner, SmartFlyer

EDITORS' NOTE A traveler dating back to her earliest childhood days spent in Jakarta, Erina Pindar combines her rich multicultural background with a fervor for brand building in the luxury space. Pindar grew up with Southeast Asia as her backyard, but following schooling in Singapore, she relocated to the United States. After receiving her degree in marketing, she settled in New York City and, in turn, set the path for her multifaceted career in the travel industry. Around the



Erina Pindar

same time that Pindar identified a lack of fellow millennials in the travel agency community, she met Michael Holtz, founder of SmartFlyer. Together, they saw an opportunity to build a company – backed by a powerful brand – that appealed to fresh talent with a knack for creating exceptional client experiences from start to finish. As a brand ambassador for a lifestyle rooted in seamless travel, Pindar has worked tirelessly since 2010 to create a globally diversified footprint for SmartFlyer. Its affiliate community has blossomed to include over 200 SmartFlyer travel advisors based across the United States, Europe, and Australia under her leadership. Today, she also manages strategic partnerships, and proprietary technology builds. In an effort to drive a better booking experience for all advisors, as well as a frictionless user journey for its clients, Pindar is the Chair of Sion's Advisory Board and sits on the Board of Advisors for Lucia, two innovative technology companies revolutionizing the travel agency space. Pindar was the first SmartFlyer agent to be named to the Travel Agent 30Under30 list and has since been honored by Forbes as one of the Asian-Americans Who Are Shaping the Travel Industry. She is frequently quoted as a travel expert in CNN Travel, Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, and Forbes. Pindar sits on the Travel + Leisure A-List Travel Advisory Board, Virtuoso Marketing Committee, ACCOR Travel Agent Advisory Board, IHG Global Sales Advisory Panel, and is the Founder of EQTR, a nonprofit mentorship program developing future BIPOC travel leaders and entrepreneurs.

AGENCY BRIEF SmartFlyer (smartflyer.com) is a full-service luxury travel agency built for curious travelers. It specializes in creating exceptional experiences around the world

through curated recommendations and continuous boots-on-the-ground research activated by decades of trusted relationships. SmartFlyer was founded in 1990 by Michael Holtz to offer clients a better, smarter way to book air travel. With several hundred SmartFlyer travel advisors based across the U.S., Europe, Asia, and Australia, today SmartFlyer is recognized as an Inc. Best in Business 2020 company.

Will you highlight your career journey?

Though travel has always been a part of my life, working in the travel industry was not something I instinctively knew I wanted to do. I spent a large part of my childhood in Southeast Asia, moved to the States during high school, and eventually found myself in New York after university. I took advantage of an opportunity to work at a public relations firm that specialized in luxury travel, and it was then that it all started to crystalize that the travel

industry is a viable career option. Soon after I transitioned into the travel agency space, I was working with a few large agencies when I met SmartFlyer's Founder and CEO, Michael Holtz. Michael not only provided the arena for me to build a solid foundation in the industry, but has also consistently acted as a mentor throughout my career. 2024 marks my fourteenth year with the company and my second as a partner in the business as SmartFlyer's COO – the best part is we are only at the beginning of this journey.

How do you define SmartFlyer's mission and purpose?

SmartFlyer is focused on building a community of the best talent in the industry, focusing on the partners and destinations that our clients care about by embracing data-driven decision-making and providing thoughtful services that go beyond the transaction. Our purpose is twofold; as an agency, our role is to take our clients' invaluable resource – their time – and provide for them a seamless journey

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from start to finish that hopefully will become a memory that lasts a lifetime. With more than 250 travel advisors around the world, we're able to leverage not only the collective buying power of our community, but also the personal expertise and relationships that make all the difference. As a platform for advisors, our role is to continually build an ecosystem that encourages stakeholder growth and freedom to create the kind of businesses that they envision for themselves. We understand our part within our advisors' businesses and that is to support and empower our community with a best-in-class platform that allows a holistic work experience.

Will you provide an overview of your role and areas of focus?

I oversee our overall operations, brand strategy, partnerships, affiliates, and marketing efforts. On any given day, I get to wear many hats and shift my area of focus across our multiple verticals. And, from time to time, I get to work with a handful of our clients – conceptualizing trips large and small – collaborating with our incredible advisory team to execute their travel. In addition to my daily roles within SmartFlyer, I maintain an active presence on the *Travel + Leisure* Travel Advisory Board, ACCOR Luxury Collective Advisor Board, while also advising for Sion and Lucia, two innovative technology companies that are truly revolutionizing the travel industry.



Erina Pindar speaking at CORE 2024 (lower left), and with CORE 2024 Gala attendees (above)



What have been the keys to SmartFlyer's industry leadership and how do you define the SmartFlyer difference?

Our advisors are our clients in that they share the same values, high expectations, and attributes of those they advise. They take tremendous pride in high-touch client service and treat each planning experience as if it were their own; crafting luxury experiences through vetted recommendations, cultivated relationships, and firsthand research. This approach allows them to support clients in uncovering new destinations and adventures that enhance their travel experiences. One of our biggest differentiating factors is the access we provide to our executive team – it demonstrates our dedication to maintaining a prominent leadership presence in the day-to-day. Advisors have the ability to reach our executive team and ownership at any time for recommendations to elevate the planning and travel experience, which adds another layer of client service. This approach has allowed us to successfully grow the business over the years and proves that accessibility is key to doing so.

How is SmartFlyer addressing a lack of millennials in the travel agency community and appealing to fresh talent with a knack for creating exceptional client experiences?

When I joined SmartFlyer at 24, there was a serious lack of fresh talent in the industry. So, one of the questions that we aimed to answer was two-fold: how do we bring in advisors who care about travel as much as their travelers? And how do we showcase this incredible travel advisory space so that the next generation – or, at the time, my contemporaries – sees it as both a viable career option and also one that's

dynamic, exciting, and with plenty of growth opportunities? Fourteen years later, SmartFlyer has established itself as not only the agency that some of the most elite advisors in the industry call home, but also a well-rounded one, with employees and advisors across all age ranges. I'm so proud to say that we are doing our part to grow future advisors and industry leaders.

What has made the travel industry so special for you?

The relationships and friendships built through the travel industry have been the most rewarding part of my career. There's truly no other industry so globally connected and similarly focused as this one.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women to grow and lead in the industry?

I wouldn't be able to do what I do every day without the support of our leadership team, which is made up entirely of incredible female leaders who both grew up within the SmartFlyer ecosystem or joined us from agency, hotel, and consortia spaces. There are fantastic opportunities available for women in this industry, more than ever before. On the advisory side, the entrepreneurial spirit of the space also encourages the creation of powerhouse agencies, the majority of which are female-owned.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in pursuing a career in the travel industry?

This advice is true for just about any career path. Fail fast to learn faster, and be flexible and open-minded – sometimes opportunities come from unexpected places, and shoot your shot because you don't get what you don't go after. ●