

Virtuoso Debuts Innovation Award for Best Agencies

by [Matt Turner](#) | Oct 5, 2017 9:00am

Twenty years ago, many businesses were going from “bricks to clicks,” shifting to an online-first approach.

At this year’s **Virtuoso Travel Week**, **Erik Qualman**, a digital speaker and author of *Socialnomics*, *Digital Leader* and *What Happens in Vegas Stays on YouTube* made the point (despite being an advocate of a strong online and social media presence) that people need human interaction. He reserved the term: “clicks to bricks.” It was an apt introduction for Virtuoso debuting its Innovation Awards.

This year’s awards included Best Agency Office and Best Client Service Experience. The former was the brainchild of **David Kolner**, senior vice president, global member partnerships for Virtuoso. “When the idea happened for me, I was in Peru visiting [**Viajes Rosario Flórez**’s] new office,” he tells *Luxury Travel Advisor*.

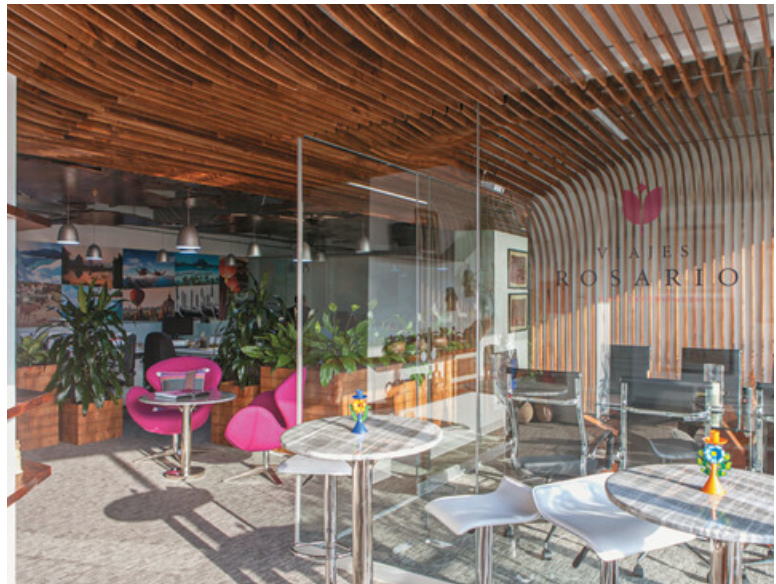
When you walk into the agency you’ll find a custom “floating wood ceiling,” designed by an architect who studied with **Zaha Hadid**. It flows through glass walls that create small meeting rooms. In the back of the office there’s a second floating ceiling, this time cut in the shape of the continents. All of this is tied together by modern furniture and Peruvian accents. The goal was to make travelers feel that their vacation started as soon as they walked in the office.

“It is such a spectacular space...I was like, ‘Something is happening here in the industry that we need to actually celebrate and champion,’ because these people are investing in the space,” Kolner says. “The other thing that’s amazing about it is that they’re proclaiming that travel advisors still exist.”

From there, the idea of rewarding innovation took off.

Kolner says Virtuoso received over 40 applications for the award, with representation from all continents. The agencies had to fill out a questionnaire that included when they renovated, how much they spent, what their goals were, and client testimonials.

Departure Lounge in Austin, TX wasn’t the first in the new wave of agency offices to offer more than just a place to sell travel, but they quickly became one of the most well known for doing so. Located on one of the city’s busiest corners, the original Departure Lounge (it has since moved to a more affluent neighborhood) was very much that — a lounge, with a bar, snacks, touch-screen TVs and hosted events. As a pioneer of the revival of “Main Street’s” travel agency, Departure Lounge owner **Keith Waldon** was one of Kolner’s choices for his five-person panel for determining the winner of the Best Agency Office award.



Viajes Rosario Flórez in Lima has a custom “floating wood ceiling,” which flows through glass walls that create small meeting rooms.

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The remainder of the team comprised Stephanie Anevich, executive vice president, leisure travel of Vision Travel Solutions; Ann Chamberlain, senior vice president membership & strategic partnerships with ASTA; Alexis Romer, vice president-sales, luxury travel industry of Marriott International Luxury Brands; and Sarah Honeywell, Virtuoso’s office and facilities manager — all of whom are Virtuoso board members.

The finalists were Viajes Rosario Flórez in Lima, Peru; **Atlántida Viatges** in Barcelona, Spain; **Charlotte Travel** in Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong; **Pique Travel Design** in Excelsior, MN; **Tafari Travel** in Denver, CO; **The Local Foreigner** in New York,

NY; **Travelcall, Part of Goldman Travel Group** in Victoria, Australia; **Travel Design Lounge by Travel and Transport** in Omaha, NE; **Viajes Palacio** in Colonia Los Morales, Mexico and the winner, **Select Collection** in Stockholm, Sweden.

Not all of the offices followed the same blueprint — in fact, they are all unique — which makes their individual successes even more exciting when considering the future of agencies. Virtuoso, however, found several similarities in the reasoning for renovations:

We wanted “to create a place of escapism; a place where you walk in the door and leave the city behind and enter a different culture, a different world,” Select Collection’s application says. Outdoors, a carpet and velvet ropes lead clients through the doors to find a lobby furnished like a living room you would find in Paris. There are also communal meeting spaces with tucked-away office space. But they didn’t want it to be overwhelming — after all, it still needs to be a relaxing place where clients “could get into the holiday mode.”

The result? A three-treatment room day spa with exclusive use of the Swiss cellular skincare brand, Valmont.

“I just want to move in,” Kolner says.



(Charlotte Travel’s “The Traveller’s Suite” photo added for reference)

The theme of escapism continues throughout the other agencies, as well.

“Our vision was to have a blank canvas for our clients who would be able to enter into the office and have us help them paint their holiday picture,” Charlotte Travel says.

With a limited amount of space, Charlotte Travel had to create a multifunctional space. For instance, the office has special-order tables that fold to fit in a closet and glass walls that open and close. However, a top feature might be the walls covered with photos taken by the staff while they were traveling. It brings a personal, familial feeling to the space.

Another way to inspire creativity? An agency set in a 200-year-old gallery, where the works of Picasso, Dali, Miró and Chagall were on exhibit. “We wanted to embody an air of modernity and innovation,” Atlàntida Viatges says. But the goal wasn’t to entirely renovate the space; Atlàntida Viatges kept the original flooring and forged iron columns.

Pique Travel took a similar approach as Departure Lounge and converted a retail warehouse into an agency / events space. They note its “primary goal was to build a creative environment that reflects [its] culture.” And with the new office came a new series where Pique Travel hosts travel speakers to draw crowds from the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

Get This: They even host weddings on the weekend when the office is closed — and sell the couple on a honeymoon!

Tafari’s innovation starts with its name. “Translated, ‘Tafari’ means ‘awe-inspiring.’ Our goals of the renovation were all geared around that single aim,” they say. The open-floor plan is intended for advisors and clients to have the feeling of “luxury, relaxation and inspiration.” In the back of the office, clients will find a wine and coffee bar with a seating area. We particularly love the mural on the back wall, which is very unique, to say the least.

“I think it really reflects that whole idea of, ‘Wow, I didn’t know a travel agency could look like that.’” Kolner says.

Despite the small space, New York’s The Local Foreigner “wanted to create a comfortable, residential atmosphere to suit our collaborative approach to travel planning.” And by looking at it, you might think you stumbled into an elegant studio apartment. Yes, there are desks and computers where advisors work but there is also a dining area where everyone eats lunch everyday to decompress, catch up and get away from their desks. The meeting room — couch, chairs and coffee table included — better resembles a living room.

Travelcall's newly renovated top-floor office takes a traditional office to the next level. The entrance is marble, the "cubicles" are open (to facilitate collaboration), and an outdoor patio space can host barbecues, wine tastings and other events.

Located in Omaha, Nebraska is Travel Design Lounge. "Innovation happens everywhere," Kolner says. Travel Design Lounge is a full-on bar and events space, with happy hour and a "Get Tripsy" sign on the wall.

"We wanted to create an environment completely different from the traditional 'business type' design for our new location," Travel Design Lounge says. "One with a more comfortable setting from a visual, seating, food and beverage standpoint...to encourage relaxing while exploring travel destinations." Like Pique Travel, Travel Design Lounge launched a series of monthly travel-themed events. The office is even open on nights and weekends.

Within El Palacio de Hierro, you'll find Viajes Palacio. The Mexican chain department store rivals that of Neiman Marcus and Harrods, and mixed within the stores is the agency. When clients step inside, they will find travel books, art and electronics. The renovation's goal was to "create an innovative space, adapted to the needs of the current traveler," says Viajes Palacio.

It's a modern space with a palette of white and yellow. Local art in cubbies brings authenticity to the office without cluttering the space. The best part: The office connects directly to the luggage department.



Viajes Palacio, done up in a palette of white and yellow, houses travel books, art and electronics.

As for the winner of this year's Best Client Service Experience, **Brownell Travel** took home the hardware for its "Discover More" collaborative resource program. It's not an entirely new process — they've actually been using it for years — but its functionality made it a clear choice for the award. "It's one thing to have a great idea. It's another to actually implement it and stick with it," Kolner says. "It's not just the spark of the innovation, but it's actually carrying it through all the way."