

Virtuoso has to debunk certain perceptions to grow in Asia

By Raini Hamdi / Posted on 24 May, 2018 10:47

Asia is a missing piece in Virtuoso's plan to be a fully global company but the American company's attempt to plug it may not necessarily be an easy ride despite its storied name and a burgeoning number of luxury travel agencies in the region.

After 15 years of setting up an Asia-Pacific office in Sydney, Virtuoso has 60 members in Australia/New Zealand and 16 members in Asia. It is seeking to increase that paltry number and has **appointed** an Asia regional director based in Singapore, Evan Pierce, to lead expansion in the region, including China.



Country Holidays' Jess Yap (fourth from left) and other Virtuoso award winners with Virtuoso's Matthew Upchurch (third from right) and Michael Londregan (second from left)

In other eager signs, Virtuoso held its APAC Forum in Singapore just ahead of the opening of ILTM Asia-Pacific on Monday. Its founder and CEO, Matthew Upchurch, was present and was at his evangelical best in inspiring Asian luxury agents to share knowledge, improve their game and create a positive impact on someone's life through delivering best-ever trips.

But when preaching to the not-yet-converted, Virtuoso may hit a wall.

Another network of travel designers, Traveller Made, based in Sion, Switzerland, has made some inroads into Asia, claiming 45 members in Asia. Virtuoso is still widely perceived as "too American-centric", and being established (over 30 years in operation) has its disadvantages.

For one, many Asian luxury travel agencies are younger entrepreneurs who are anti-establishments. Many are also small players who perceive Virtuoso as being too big for them. Many have been able to handcraft journeys with research on the Internet and finding suppliers at luxury shows such as ILTM.

One of these owners told *TTG Asia* he found Virtuoso's annual show in Las Vegas "kinda old fashion" while another said being a small company, she would prefer to be in the company of same boutique-style agencies, although she met a Virtuoso vice president last year and "was very impressed by the solutions he was able to suggest even for smaller companies like mine".

Some agency owners, like Justin Moxley, CEO of Lumphoric Malaysia, are just too busy chasing dollars. Moxley said he never got around to completing the registration to join Virtuoso. Business is booming and Lumphoric is opening an office in Jakarta to tap high-yield Indonesian clients.

"It (joining Virtuoso) is something we're looking at; it's not priority at the moment as there's just so much to do. Every tour is handmade, the time involved is enormous and when you finish one, two others are waiting," said Moxley.

But those agency owners in Asia who have joined Virtuoso, including Charlotte Travel Hong Kong, Goldman Travel Corporation Australia and Country Holidays Singapore, said it's the best thing they had done for their company.

Of-cited benefits include better treatment showered on their clients by a wide range of luxury hotels worldwide in the Virtuoso network, including room upgrades, early check-in/late check-out, free breakfast, even spending money in hotel; getting to know good and trusted on-site providers through Virtuoso; the ability to grow new business segments, such as cruise, through Virtuoso's strong direct partnerships with cruise lines; and the ability to learn not only from other agencies in the region but globally.

The best measure is growth: Country Holidays picked up Virtuoso Asia-Pacific Luxury Award, Hotels & Resorts Growth 2017, while Charlotte Travel's head of sales & marketing, Charlotte Harris, said the company's revenues have been growing around 16 per cent year-on-year since joining Virtuoso four years ago.

"Virtuoso has also become less Americanised," added Harris. "They are very open to how they can do things differently from a culture point of view."



Upchurch: aims for Virtuoso to become a truly global company

So it looks like Virtuoso has its work cut out for it in debunking certain myths. Founder and CEO Matthew Upchurch, in an interview with *TTG Asia* at ILTM Asia-Pacific Singapore, acknowledged the view that Virtuoso was too American-centric but said it was correct if it were four years ago. He said he had been "deconstructing" Virtuoso to be a global company, opening up in Latin America, Europe, Australia and now, Asia.

But more than just having a global footprint, Virtuoso had also evolved its core infrastructure to be more global, he said. "We didn't want to be the typical American company that comes in with an American product and say, here, take it. Part of the evolution of our company has been to purposely make ourselves flexible, that we can create certain core values but allow those values to be localised," Upchurch added.

In a step further, he said the US team is now becoming just a region while Canada would be split from the US with its own head in Toronto, just as Asia-Pacific now has a director of Australia/New Zealand, Cristina Magni, and Asia has Pierce, both reporting to Virtuoso's managing director, Michael Londregan based in Sydney.

"As we grow the membership and volume (in Canada, Asia, etc), we basically start to build the local infrastructure and have people that wake up everyday in the market and think nothing other than that market," shared Upchurch.

The thing that he had found ironic was the perception Virtuoso was big and nearly monopolistic. "There were two things that drove me to build this organisation. One is my love of travel...Travel is in my blood; I worked on multiple sides of the business, as a tour operator, agency and I opened the Hong Kong office of our company back in 1984. The other reason was there were these amazing boutique agencies and I wanted to create an organisation that could bring entrepreneurs together. To be called a big, giant organisation that's a monopoly does not make sense to me (laughs).

"Here's the stats: we're only 450 agencies in 1,000 locations in 50 countries. The reason people think we're big is our annual networking Virtuoso week (in Las Vegas). When I set it up, we had only 98 attendees. Today, nearly 6,000 pax. There are other organisations in the world that have 5,000 locations but only 2,000 pax show up at their annual meet. The secret is engagement.

"We're not only an organisation that helps entrepreneurs come together to create solutions, we're an organisation with a greater purpose: to enrich lives and human connections," said Upchurch.

He said he was not concerned with growing numbers in Asia. Yes, he wants to grow in relation to the growth of the market, but most importantly the fit has to be right. "We will only grow as large as our values allow us to. That means we're not going to take people who don't match our values.

"If, for example, you don't believe that sharing ideas and information with one another is actually more powerful than to keep something to yourself, than we're probably not the right organisation for you."

Upchurch also debunked the perception Virtuoso was only for the bigger guys. "(Aside from big members), we have members that own practices, agencies with just five people – but how well designed and exclusive they are. Same with hotels. We have 1,300 hotels worldwide; yes we have the Mandarin Orientals and the Four Seasons, but 48 per cent of our partners have 100 rooms or less; 25 per cent 50 rooms or less," said Upchurch.

TAGS

ILTM Asia

Virtuoso

Previous article

IHG looks east in Thailand, signs eight hotels at one go

Next article

New hotels: Dusit Princess Moonrise Beach Resort, DoubleTree Resort by Hilton Penang and more



RELATED ARTICLES

1. **Former agency owner joins Virtuoso as business development manager**
2. **Virtuoso steps up Asia focus with two key promotions**
3. **Sabre begins roll-out of next-generation GDS**
4. **Switzerland opens nine more visa application centres in China**
5. **Rich Chinese millennials show spending firepower but Asia stands to lose**
6. **'Made in China' luxury takes off with the Nuo Hotel Beijing**
7. **'Bling is out, experience is in' for China's super rich**
8. **Four Seasons takes luxury up a notch with Extraordinary Experiences, private jet**
9. **STB partners Felivway for exclusive F1 race experiences targeting Chinese**

You Might Also Like

Sponsored Links [i](#)



Great drives with Avis | TTG Asia



A new opportunity for luxury travel in Asia | TTG Asia



Oakwood raises the bar in Singapore | TTG Asia



Why the travel industry needs to embrace NDC together | TTG



What you missed at Digital Travel APAC 2018 | TTG Asia

Sponsored Links [i](#)

LEAVE A REPLY

Comment:

*Comment moderation is in use. Please do not submit your comment twice.

Name:

Email:

Website:

POST COMMENT



TOP DESTINATIONS

Most Popular

- 1 Minor International ups stake in Europe's NH Hotel Group
- 2 Kempinski to open first Singapore hotel at The Capitol, unveils Asian ambitions

- 3 Myanmar goes from undersupply to oversupply of hotels
- 4 Travel industry urgently needs to tackle overtourism, disaster resilience
- 5 Hotel investment sentiment on the upswing with Mahathir in PM seat



Latest Issue



TTG ASIA MAY 2018
Asia-Pacific's Leading Travel Trade Business Resource Since 1974

TTG Asia Luxury



TTG ASIA LUXURY MAY 2018

Read by
48,640
Travel Trade
Professionals
Across
**India And
Beyond**



TTG

TTG SUBSCRIBE HERE!

Sponsored Post



What you missed at Digital Travel APAC 2018



Tried and
Tested



Rosewood Phnom Penh

Hot Deals



New World Millennium Hong Kong offers airline, travel agent rates



New hotels: Dusit Princess Moonrise Beach Resort, DoubleTree Resort by Hilton...

SISTER PUBLICATIONS ▾

SUBSCRIBE TO



ADVERTISE WITH US



GET OUR APP



Asia-Pacific's Leading Travel Trade Business Resource Since 1974

[About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [TTG Travel Awards](#) | [f](#) [t](#) [i](#) [e](#) [r](#)



A Business Group of **TTG Asia Media**



