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A next-gen who 'gets' top-end travel

Her parents named the agency after her and now Charlotte Harris is working side by side veteran mum Jackie Harris to make further strides into Hong Kong's luxury travel market. **Raini Hamdi** finds out how



Has it always been the idea that you'd join the company one day?

Not at all. I studied international development, did a master's in anthropology, and one day as I was doing my job in risk management consulting in Hong Kong I thought, 'this is boring'.

Travel has always been in me. My mum took me in a pram around Amandari (Bali) when it was a construction site. Even while I was doing risk management consulting, I would sneak in a suitcase at the office to travel during the weekends without telling anyone and scout out new cool places. My friends asked me for all the travel recommendations and I thought, 'wow, there is a business in this and it's my mother's'.

So one summer's day (about four years ago), I asked my mum if there was an

opening and she actually discouraged me. I think it's reverse psychology; she said, 'don't do it, it's a lot of hours, you get blamed for everything, the money is not what you'd get if you were in banking or law, go marry someone good' (laughs).

We talked about it and eventually she asked me to write a cover letter, update my CV and come up with a three-year business plan. Two weeks later after dinner she brought up a very thick business plan, while I had only a two-page, written back-to-back, business plan. Somehow we integrated the two. We've now completed 98 per cent of the plan.

What's the core aspect?

Focus on the absolutely top-end clients. Then we joined Virtuoso and we became preferred partners of hotel groups. We

realised what we were doing was right. Our clients are not necessarily price-sensitive, they want the experience, they want to know they are VIPs.

Repeat guests of ours and of the hotels want to walk into the room and be welcomed by the term, 'Welcome back'. The word 'back' could mean the next booking into that hotel.

I'm sure you have staff that have been with the company for over a decade and did not handle luxury. How did you pivot?

It wasn't instant. We were doing a lot of training. We had some system changes and, yes, it did require a switch of the mindset. But we brought staff to shows like this (ILTM Asia Pacific in Singapore last May) and Virtuoso Travel Week, have luxury hotel partners come to the office and explain this



Charlotte Harris & mum Jackie Harris

new concept to the team, getting them to stay at these hotels, and so on. Then they start to understand it's not just about booking one room category but the next one. How can we upsell, encourage clients to stay in suite because, for an additional \$120 a night, they will get all those amenities and benefits like the Club Lounge and it enhances their experience.

What revenue growth as a result, or has there been a substantial rise in revenue per client?

We have grown a lot. I can tell that you our room bookings are no longer entry-level category, and the experiences clients get are not just handpicked from a brochure. We're really encouraging a dialogue between our team and clients to understand what their likes are and how we can surprise them during their trip.

We've had double-digit growths year-on-year in the last four years. Last year it was about 16 per cent. It's never gotten below 12 per cent in the last 17 years.

Are all your clients from Hong Kong?

Hong Kong and a bit of mainland China. We group the Hong Kong market into



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two, Hong Kong locals and Hong Kong internationals. Hong Kong locals are multi-generational travellers who would go to, say, Africa once. Hong Kong internationals are people like me and my friends, maybe they attended an international school, were born elsewhere but Hong Kong is their home. For them, getting on a plane is like getting on a bus. (They) always want to travel (and do) a lot of short stays.

We split the market because the language and mentality are different. That's where the master in anthropology comes in handy! It's about matching the client to the right advisor as well. Language, culture and having the same lingo all create a comfort level, which builds trust and relationship.

You mentioned 98 per cent of the business plan is completed. What's the two per cent?

We wanted to change and enhance the branding, but midway through we decided we didn't want to change it too much for cost reasons and historical reasons. We realised we could lose the identity with clients, having built the name for 17 years.

The name Charlotte Travel, to be honest, was the one thing I questioned. The heart and soul of the company is Jackie my mum and I didn't want to overshadow her and for Charlotte Travel to be the name.

She named it after you, her only child!

I had no say, I was at school!

So are you running the company now?

My mum and I work really well together. A lot of people ask how I work with my mum because lots of mums drive their kids mad. At points she does but we work well together. My mum has built a very successful career. She's very reputable; she works well with clients and gets them what they want. I come in with building relationships with partners (and with sales & marketing drive).

How are you different from your mum?

I try to look outside the box. Mum's very focused on operations, on getting the clients what they want, making sure they are happy. I come in with no clients, but with a new perspective on how we can reshape the industry. There are over 1,000 agents in Hong Kong itself. In Hong Kong everyone is comparing with online players, Ctrip or any OTAs, retail agencies, and even though I say our clients are not price-sensitive, they still compare prices. Everyone, even if you are a luxury traveller, wants a great deal.

I come in with the thought of building a really structured training programme for new staff, and not only hiring from within the industry but outside, people who just get luxury travel and are able to translate that to clients, people who show empathy but are switched on enough to close a sale.

Any regrets?

No. I was born to do this.