

Pair found travel magic

Agency specializes in vacations at Disney destinations

SMALL BUSINESS Q&A

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A mutual love for vacationing at Walt Disney World Resort in Florida and taking trips to other locations put two Long Island mothers on the road to starting a business that now produces up to \$3 million a year in revenue.

Ellen Volpe and Tori Tomasheski are the co-owners of ET Family Travel, a travel agency specializing in Disney vacations that is based out of Volpe's Garden City home. It began with the two doing all the company's bookings. Today it has nearly 400 agents working in more than 40 states, with the duo's success happening despite widespread predictions for the virtual extinction of personal travel agents.

"Our biggest competitor is the internet and large booking sites like hotels.com," explained Volpe, a 44-year-old mother of four who met Tomasheski on Facebook. "But the internet suppliers don't have firsthand experience at the resorts like we do, and they won't provide concierge-level service the way our agents will."

Planning a great Disney vacation can be more involved than one might think, the pair said.

"When we initially started the company, the majority of our clients were traveling to Walt Disney World," Tomasheski, 40, a mother of three who lives in Glen Head, said. "Using a travel agent for this type of trip is extremely valuable as there is also a great deal of information and tips our agents provide for their clients to use to enhance their vacation. Our agents have experienced the resorts, theme parks and restaurants, and are able to guide their clients on which experiences are best for them, as well as assist with park reservations and dining reservations."

A lot of clients who went on Disney vacations have returned to the agency when they want



Ellen Volpe, left, and Tori Tomasheski of ET Travel began their business in 2016 out of their shared passion for planning Disney trips.

AT A GLANCE

ET Family Travel, Garden City

What it is: Worldwide travel agency specializing in Disney vacations

Leadership: Co-owners Ellen Volpe and Tori Tomasheski

Annual Sales: \$2.5 million to \$3 million

Number of agents: About 400 independent contractors

Founded: 2016

to travel to other destinations because making arrangements with an expert you can speak to and meet makes things easier and more personal than online bookings, Tomasheski noted. Like most travel agents, ET Family Travel's services are free since agents are compensated by the hotel or vacation suppliers they book through.

"Travel agents are able to assist their clients if something comes up before their trip or while they are on their trip,"

Tomasheski said. "We are problem-solvers and able to plan and modify as needed, taking the stress out of travel planning for our customers."

What led you to start your own business?

We started the business in 2016 after we met and discovered our shared passion for planning Disney vacations.

How did you come up with the name?

We wanted something unique that conveyed family travel — our main focus. We chose the letters of our first names — E for Ellen and T for Tori.

Did anything in your backgrounds make you want to become entrepreneurs?

We both grew up with fathers in the sales industry and admired their work ethic. We also both come from competitive sports backgrounds (Volpe playing field hockey at Columbia University and Tomasheski playing field hockey at the University of Maryland). We always strive to be the best and

will work as hard as we can to achieve our goals and are constantly setting new ones.

How did you get your startup funding?

As a home-based business, our startup money was relatively low. We needed to pay for licensing fees and legal documents to establish a company, but other than that, we were able to maximize our business out of the comfort of our own homes.

How do you get your customers?

For many agents, business initially starts with family, friends and co-workers, which leads to future referrals. Our agents are using various platforms to showcase the value of using them as a travel agent, such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

How do you find the agents who work for you?

Social media has been a huge tool in finding potential agents to sign on.

What major challenge is facing your company now and how

are you meeting it?

One of our biggest challenges right now is rising airfare costs and meeting specific budget requirements for our clients, but we are able to assist in being creative and as cost effective as possible.

What's the biggest mistake you've made along the way?

Not taking the leap into expanding our portfolio to the rest of the world destinations sooner. We had so much knowledge with Walt Disney World it felt like a safe space. Now we feel comfortable sending our clients anywhere in the world.

What's the best thing about owning your own business?

The ability to design a company where we can meet like-minded people from around the country and surround ourselves with the positivity and joy that booking travel brings.

What do you hope your business will look like in five years?

We hope to be a major player in the national market and become a household name.