

To the Ends of the Earth

GETTING CLIENTS PLACES WHERE OTHERS FEAR TO TREAD FUELS THE SUCCESS OF AVIA INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

The folks at Avia International Travel have never been to most of the places they send their clients. And that's okay because the firm—headquartered in The Woodlands near Houston—sends people to places most don't want to go.



Avia serves the travel needs of the oil, gas, and marine services industry. The firm moves not just executives, but the people who work on oil rigs and ships. Avia gets drillers, derrick hands, geologists, and engineers to some hard-to-reach places.

A typical morning might include routing a Ukrainian rigger to Luanda, Angola; an Irish machinist to Port Harcourt, Nigeria; and a Saudi engineer to Malabo, Equatorial Guinea. No basking on beaches or sipping pina colodas for these travelers.

When Antonella Ballatori, president, launched the firm in 1997, oil was \$10 a barrel and the travel industry was in turmoil. Online booking sites had shrunk ticket commissions. Moreover, many travel agencies were merging, shrinking, or closing.

Yet Avia flourished. Staff went from two, to more than 50 people today. And, during the last three years, revenues have increased by 30 percent. So how did the company succeed?

EYE ON THE PRIZE

For one, the company chose its specialty area wisely. The firm resides near one of the busiest ports in America. A concentration of oil-and-gas businesses reside nearby. Getting people to oil rigs and ships around the world requires an expertise not easily duplicated. Crews regularly cycle on and off rigs and ships.

From the Bay of Campeche to the South China Sea, there are 3,500 drilling rigs and oil platforms around the world and millions of ships. Crews must often get to areas where flights are limited, governments are unstable, and visa restrictions are complex.

"We know the market; we know the logistics," explains Matthew Forestieri, COO. "We've been asked to do leisure travel, but we won't do it, period. If you're going to focus, then focus."

The company, which also has a London office, follows the sun and provides service 24 hours a day around the world. An executive in a comfortable Houston office can wait an hour for a callback, but someone who has trekked through a monsoon to a payphone on the Bay of Bengal cannot.

An affiliation with the Hogg Robinson Group (HRG), which has offices in more than 120 countries and a staff of 12,000, expands Avia's global reach. It allows Avia to better serve its international clients, and deliver lower costs through combined buying power.

"Making the hardest, most difficult travel possible demands a high degree of precision in business systems, processes, and personnel," Ballatori says.



Antonella Ballatori

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*Antonella Ballatori
Avia International Travel*

GLOBAL BOOKING, TRACKING NO NEED FOR “SOS” WITH ISO

STAYING AHEAD

Productive and efficient tools are essential to move people to and from challenging locations. So Avia turned to Sabre from the start.

“Sabre allows us to create routes and issue tickets easily no matter where our customers are or where they need to go,” Ballatori says.

All the agents are Sabre-trained and often beta test new Sabre solutions. Avia was one of the first to use *GetThere*® and *Sabre Red*™ *Workspace*, for example.

Ballatori had worked at other travel agencies and was familiar with other global distribution systems. She felt Sabre excelled at bookings across multiple countries and airlines. She has stayed with Sabre as business has grown. Here’s how Avia’s clients benefit:

- **Seamless booking.** The corporate booking tool *GetThere* allows clients to save money and make their own reservations, yet gives Avia access to all client reservations.
- **Minimizing risk.** Political instability, strikes, and typhoons are business as usual for the oil, gas, and maritime industries. With *Sabre Traveler Security*, Avia agents can instantly locate and alert customers who are currently in danger zones and can make alternate arrangements for them.
- **Adhering to travel policies.** With over 3,500 customizable fields in the application, Sabre lets Avia recreate clients’ travel policies—such as necessary approvals, who flies first class, or how many executives can fly together. An alert pops up with any deviation.
- **Comprehensive accounting.** Avia relies on *Trams*® *Back Office* to track payables and receivables, to reconcile commissions, and do financial modeling.

“We live by our processes and procedures,” Forestieri says. “We started our business with quality control systems and service measures in place.”

Early on, the agency sought certification from the International Organization for Standardization. Many of the clients had it and wanted to work with vendors who did as well. Winning the ISO stamp involves proving compliance with ISO standards.

“We passed with zero defects the first time and won approval within six months—an industry first,” Forestieri says. “It has made us a better company.”

Avia employees know what processes to deploy if something goes wrong. They can quickly determine the source and make sure it doesn’t happen again.

INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS

All Avia agents have a minimum of 15 years experience in international travel. Their expertise goes beyond booking tickets and hotels. Agents can advise clients on the right visas; whether yellow fever vaccines are necessary; and which malaria pills work best in various countries. Agents also track world events to make sure crew workers can avoid a natural disaster or political uprising.

“Our employees are the Special Forces of the travel industry, and our clients are the Special Forces of their industries,” Ballatori says. They understand the crews of rigs and ships make huge sacrifices, leaving their families for extended periods.

“We all take our jobs very seriously,” Forestieri says.

And there’s one aspect they take more seriously than all others: getting workers home safely.

1. PINPOINT FOCUS— THE AGENCY SERVES THE OIL, GAS, AND MARITIME INDUSTRIES.
2. 24/7 SERVICE—CUSTOMERS CAN REACH AGENTS AT ANYTIME FROM ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD.
3. COMPETITIVE PRICING— THE AGENCY HAS NEGOTIATED SPECIAL RATES WITH OVER 50 AIRLINES AROUND THE WORLD.
4. EFFICIENT BUSINESS SYSTEMS— SABRE SOLUTIONS ALLOW SEAMLESS INTEGRATION OF BOTH FRONT AND BACK OFFICE WORK.
5. PARTNERSHIPS— AN AFFILIATION WITH HOGG ROBINSON GROUP ALLOWS AVIA TO TAP INTO HRG OFFICES IN 120 COUNTRIES WHEN CLIENTS NEED LOCAL ASSISTANCE.
6. SEASONED STAFF— ALL AGENTS AT AVIA HAVE AT LEAST 15 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL.



Matthew Forestieri

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