



Jill Curran, owner, Maxxim Vacations

# Competitive to the maxx

Small, local travel company offers lessons in how to make your mark in an ultra-competitive online world

By Sandra Phinney

**T**he biggest newsmakers of 2010 were undoubtedly the earthquake in Haiti, the scare (and subsequent happy ending) when 33 miners were trapped in Chili, and Vancouver's Olympic red carpet rollout. For Jill Curran, however, it is an unforgettable year for an entirely different reason: in December 2010, Curran bought Maxxim Vacations in St. John's, N.L. The company had been founded by local entrepreneur Judy Sparkes-Giannou about 15 years earlier. It's difficult to imagine how Curran's timing could have been any worse.

## Back for more

Hailing from Denver, Colorado, Nancy Hansen Zuschlag has completed six trips to Newfoundland. An educator and wildlife ecologist, Zuschlag has arranged all her travel through Maxxim Vacations. She doesn't care for group travel and prefers to travel on her own or with a friend.

"It's not easy to find a travel planner who provides friendly service, flexibility, professionalism, and promptness in fielding concerns [but] this company does it all," Zuschlag says. "They cater to my interests, from outdoor experiences to music and theatre. And I'm a pretty tough customer. Thanks to Ivy [Tobin] at Maxxim's, Newfoundland is like a second home." Labrador is next on her list.

It was a period of extreme turbulence for the global travel industry. American travelers were still struggling with the notion of needing a passport to get into Canada. Global security issues translated into longer waits to get through security at airports and border crossings. Baby boomers were still reeling from the recession; many had deferred their retirements, and were exceedingly cautious about spending money on travel.

For people who continued to be on the move, there was more on offer. The cruise industry had expanded; there were exotic places to visit including Eastern Europe and China. As well, the Internet had exploded with destinations, offering the world online bookings which drastically changed how consumers researched and planned their trips.

Top this off with volatile currency exchange conditions whereby the Canadian dollar relative to the U.S. dollar made Canada a more expensive place to travel, and it's easy to understand why some of Jill Curran's friends and associates thought she was setting herself up for failure.

Curran says, "I remember back in 2002 when I opened Lighthouse Picnics in Ferryland. Everyone thought I had lost my mind when I said that people would walk 2 km to sit on a blanket and overlook the ocean for hours and enjoy food, the endless view and each other's company. But 12 years on, that is exactly what we are still offering at Ferryland."

Curran's strategy for Maxxim was an extension of the lessons learned from her Ferryland experience: provide something unique, compelling, memorable and authentic; ask visitors about their experience and how to make it better; respond by incorporating your client's suggestions; then, go a step further. Keep ahead of the game

by being in tune with what's new: not only what's new in attractions, products and services, but also what's new in market research, technology and business practices. Parcel out what you can't do or don't have time to do. Hire experts in the field.

For example, shortly after Curran took the reins at Maxxim, she hired consultant Gordon Phillips, a partner at Economic Planning Group of Canada who specialized in the tourism sector, to conduct a survey and landscape review of the state of affairs in the travel industry. It came as no surprise that people were looking for travel companies with a depth of knowledge and proven expertise in the regions they were selling. This, thought Curran, was the opportunity she needed to ultimately put her company ahead of the pack.

Although she felt no need to depart from the company's original tag line ("Creating memorable experiences"), Curran scaled back from offering a Canada-wide travel product to selling Atlantic Canada only. "We still continue to sell all the components of travel — flights, accommodations, car rentals, attractions, etc..." says the feisty business owner. "But our real distinguishing characteristic is our expertise in customizing vacations that match our client's interests and expectations related to why they chose Atlantic Canada as their vacation destination."

By becoming the on-the-ground experts, Curran and her team have sliced a nice hunk of the tourism pie. Of note: approximately 20 per cent of Maxxim's income comes from referrals and repeat business — indicators of the respect and trust the company has earned.

For Curran, it's all about relationships and managing expectations. And she's bucking the trend to do online bookings for every aspect of travel. "Our vacations start with a conversation. Yes, an online tool may help us find out more about the specifics of what a client is looking for — room types, number of people, and some facts — but in a conversation we can find out what inspires people, what they love about travel, and what their vision is for their vacation in Atlantic Canada. It is through conversation that the relationship develops."

Several factors come into play to create these successes: team meetings, internal staff training, consultations,

attending conferences, learning from experts, and working with agents in other parts of Canada and the U.S. to educate them on what Maxxim Vacations has to offer. Tuck in direct marketing campaigns, publishing printed material, doing an overhaul on their website (not once, but twice), attending trade shows, and hosting client events in various provinces — and the to-do list just keeps growing.

“Everyone has a movie in their mind of what they want to do on vacation. We want to make sure that we are designing days that will bring them to that moment,” Curran says. Like directing clients to the best beer selection in Halifax, or the warmest beach in Atlantic Canada or how they can go berry picking with Alan Doyle on Fogo Island.

Naturally there are goofs, and continual “lessons learned.” For example, last spring Curran and her team invested a lot of time setting up a major client event in Oakland, Ontario. Everyone who was invited thought it was a great idea — only the majority couldn’t attend. Why? Some were snowbirds and would still be in Florida. Others were on cruises or over in Europe taking advantage of spring specials. “So we often go back to the drawing board to figure out the questions we should have asked before proceeding with a plan of action.”

Mercifully, there are more successes than goofs. The greatest compliment is when clients come back to say that their trip exceeded their expectations because Maxxim was able to suggest the things they would not have found on their own — everything from finding the perfect place to propose, to an amazing view that was just a few short steps off the beaten track.

“My goal has been to have businesses with heart, businesses that give back and a place of work where people feel valued,” says Curran. “And if you can’t have a laugh every day, it’s time to go home. Sometimes when we meet in the mornings, I feel that life at Maxxim Vacations could be an episode of *Codco* in the making.” •

#### FEEDBACK

✉ [dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com](mailto:dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com);  
[Stephen.kimber@ukings.ca](mailto:Stephen.kimber@ukings.ca)  
🐦 @SandraPhinney; @AtlanticBus;  
@ABM\_Editor; #MaxxedOut

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