



Pitch the Travel. Sell the Goods.

By Garrett Lai

In the classic holiday film, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” Jimmy Stewart goes to the store before embarking on his grand adventure, inspired by a lifetime reading *National Geographic*. He’s shown a fancy new suitcase, and is completely nonplussed. “I want a big one! I don’t want one for one night, I want one for a thousand and one nights. With plenty of room here for labels from Italy, Baghdad, Samarkand, pretty big...” he exclaims, with arms outstretched. He leaves with a giant secondhand case he loves not for its size, but for the possibility it holds.

That's the difference between a product sell, and a travel sell. "An empty coffee cup is just a cup full of hope," says Annslie Bigbee, South Pacific sales executive for Briggs & Riley, recalling a phrase she'd seen etched on a coffee house chalkboard, which she loved and twisted into something of her own. "An empty suitcase is full of hope. Hope for a vacation, a successful business trip, a reunion. I'm not selling a suitcase, I'm selling things that go into that suitcase, and that facilitate an enjoyable experience."

No one who steps into a travel goods store is actually coming for luggage, or travel items. They're coming because they're about to travel, and what they're looking for isn't a product, it's the solution to a travel problem: How do I take my belongings to Europe? How can I get by for two weeks with just 40 pounds of stuff? It just so happens the best travel products solve those exact problems.

Putting travel foremost in your store's identity cements your place as a solutions provider, establishing you as a travel expert instead of a product showcase, and plays on people's excitement. It shows authenticity and puts you into the travel conversation, and can also provide salvation from the bruising low-price marketplace that is the Internet by giving your store real differentiation with genuine value.

It's smart to put travel into your travel goods pitch. And it's surprisingly easy.

Traveler's Depot – Be Authentic

When asked about stores that weave travel storytelling into their identity, longtime industry rep Patti Falvo didn't pause for thought, quickly citing Traveler's Depot in San Diego. "You walk into the store, and you see it right away. Everyone there travels, they'll cover each other's shifts so they can travel, and they come back with real-life stories, real situations. It's all about the love of travel."

According to owner Kay Thayer, the store's feel isn't the result of anything deliberate. "I come from travel enthusiasm. My dad, travel was his favorite word. He was a school principal and he had summers off, he took people with him all over the world. It's always been a passion. As soon as I could afford it I went, and I'd do it more, until I started to run out of money."

London, anyone? Travel- evocative props give Traveler's Depot a global feel, and spread owner Kay Thayer's infectious wanderlust.



Owner Kay Thayer works the counter at Traveler's Depot, surrounded by maps, posters, flags and other signs of obvious travel love.



Where to next? Posters and books inspire travelers, and spark return visits to plan future adventures.



Google "map store San Diego," and Traveler's Depot comes right up. This amazing selection is why. "The battery on your map doesn't die. People love spreading out the map and really studying their trip." – Kay Thayer, owner



PHOTOS BY HEATHER THAYER PHOTOGRAPHY

"It's just a natural thing. The people who work for me have traveled, that's a requirement. They have the bug, and it's contagious if you come into the store. I'll ask where people are going, and it's because I'm interested, not because I'm following a script. It's a very real store, and people get that. It's a mom and pop shop, it actually has a brick wall in front."

Thayer's store is a reflection of her own wanderlust. "My heart has always been in interior design. I create an atmosphere, because I like a good atmosphere. There is a romance to travel, and I've just played into that romance because I like old travel posters and the golden age of travel. And we have everything. Everything except the tickets, literally."

"We're the only people who sell maps; when you Google 'maps' we come up. I think the map department adds a lot, even though it's not really a moneymaker – it's \$10.95 a map, and there

are a lot of countries in the world – but I've hung on tenaciously, even as the map companies themselves go away. Streetwise is gone, or going. But maps have a romance all of their own. The battery on your map doesn't die. People love them, they love spreading out the map and really studying their trip, and it's fun to see."

Portmantos.com – Tell a Travel Story

A visit to Portmantos.com (a play on portmanteau) lands you on what looks like a fashion magazine or travel publication, with big lifestyle images where luggage is almost shown as an afterthought. This doesn't feel at all like a product store. Scroll down, and in place of the usual "suitcases," "carry-ons," "backpacks" and "business cases" tags are the words, "Compliment your personality with a travel companion," and categories labeled "Business

Continued on page 36

Continued from page 35

Basics,” “Iconics,” “Modern Metro” and “Carry-It-Alls.”

“A luggage piece is a box, a box on wheels,” says Moses Berger, company president. “You have to think outside that box. You have to get to a level where you aren’t just selling a piece of luggage in the store.”

“When I started Portmantos I knew

I wanted to differentiate myself from other online stores, not just luggage stores – I wanted this to be a fashion-forward travel site. It’s not just luggage, it’s a handbag, a traveling jacket, it could be from Porsche Design, it could be Ted Baker.” In February 2013, Berger launched Portmantos from a 10,000-square-foot warehouse/office in South Plainfield, NJ. By March

this year the operation moved into a 40,000-square-foot facility in neighboring Metuchen, NJ.

Significantly, Portmantos completely avoids the race-to-the-bottom pricing strategy most vendors use to compete online. In fact, nothing on Portmantos is discounted. Ever. “Because we tell a travel story, we’re not a direct competitor,” says Berger. “Everyone else is trying to attract the people sitting all the way in the back of the plane. We’re trying to attract the majority of people who travel in first class – they’re not going to Google or Amazon for pricing, they want to get a good piece of luggage.” (The company deals with closeouts on luggageonline.com, which it also owns.)

Portmantos cultivates its image with a carefully curated website. The lifestyle photos come right from the manufacturer – so they’re free – and the company negotiates exclusive use. “There are so many images available, most are never used,” Berger explains. And each brand has its own landing page, with a manufacturer-supplied image guaranteed to be consistent with that brand’s identity.

Tellingly, “Luggage & More” is not the Portmantos site’s first link, but takes second place to “Travel Forecast,” a beautiful tiling of travel destinations ranging from Cape Town to Paris, Bora Bora to Las Vegas, Yellowstone to Zurich. Follow the links, and you’ll discover a brief story about the destination, with a suggested list of suitable travel items. The Travel Forecast is updated monthly, with new entries pushed out via social media, which definitely draws additional site traffic. “Facebook is, by far, the cheapest marketing, to be honest. You wouldn’t believe what you can do with Facebook for \$100. It’s very very very affordable, and effective,” Berger says, noting that Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn can provide extremely targeted marketing.

And while Portmantos includes original content in its social media posts, it also re-posts travel items from news channels, travel sources, “any place that tells a travel story.”

Index Urban – Be Modern. Be Cool. Get Social.

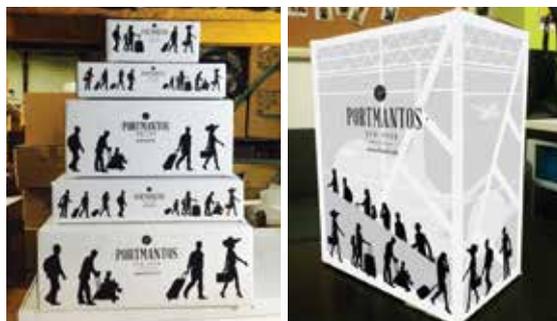
Index Urban is the second coming of John’s Fifth Avenue, a travel goods store founded in the 1950s in San Diego, CA’s

Continued on page 38

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PORTMANTOS



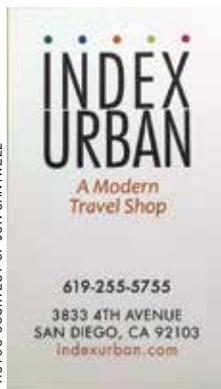
Moses Berger’s Portmantos.com is less than four years old, but it’s built plenty of momentum on the founder’s vision of creating a different kind of online experience. “We tell a travel story.”



The Portmantos travel experience extends all the way to the customer’s home, with shipping box graphics that feel like an airport concourse, a high-end travel pillow as free gift with purchase for large transactions, and a scented sachet inside every suitcase.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JON CANTWELL



“The original store started in the 1950s, we rebranded. It’s right there in the name.”
–Jon Cantwell, owner

A strong social media presence is essential for reaching a new generation of buyers, especially in San Diego’s hip and happening Hillcrest region.



Highlighting new items from Index Urban’s in-house leather shop gives customers reasons to revisit.



With two painters as staffers, Index Urban’s merchandising isn’t your run-of-the-mill cookie-cutter display. And the custom backgrounds make ideal Instagram fodder.

Continued from page 36

Hillcrest area. "It's been in this form for three, three-and-a-half years now," says Jon Cantwell, who worked 25 years in the store's previous iteration (his father-in-law is the original founder).

"It was hard to be an old-style luggage store," notes Cantwell. "We had to step out of that old mold, that was a surefire way to let the business go. We had to get a little younger, a little more creative, and think out of that very narrow box of being an older luggage store. What really helps, one of my sons is working for me, he's twenty-something. That's what you need, that perspective. That's the next wave, we've got to appeal to them."

"You have to create a reason for people to come in," says Cantwell, who hosts seminars with 50 to 60 people inside the store's modest 1,400-square-foot confines. "Seminars are great, but maybe not as easy as you think. You have to have the space, you have to move some fixturing to have a comfortable seating area. And you have to publicize the seminars. You have to put some energy behind it, market it, you've got to work it – it doesn't just happen."

For Cantwell, that publicity begins four to six weeks out. "We let every customer who walks in the door know that we're hosting a seminar, we put it on our social media – the younger generation really loves their phones – use our email list. We contact previous customers, put up signage, and hope it adds up to a good turnout. Eventually you'll build up a following – they're so good, and free for customers." (Cantwell hosts seminars by Annslie Bigbee and Angel Castellanos, see below.)

Seminars – Spread Travel Fluency

Some retailers create their own seminars, but you don't need any presentation skills to host one. Angel Castellanos, who bills himself as "The Travel Ambassador" on his website, angelstravellounge.com, conducts about 90 seminars a year for retailers, often working in concert with Eagle Creek, ExOfficio and other brands. And Briggs & Riley's Annslie Bigbee does seminars for her company's retailers free of charge, with 13 presentations this year alone – and on her own time.

A good seminar isn't overtly about

Continued on page 40

Feeding his fan base: Social media candy provides a quick refresh and spreads the travel bug to Castellanos' followers.



Self-branded as The Travel Ambassador, Angel Castellanos is adept at creating – and maintaining – an audience through social media that follows his globetrotting adventures. And to approximately 90 in-store presentations yearly.

Packing them in: Angel Castellanos proves that seminars will draw a crowd. And whatever he shows in his engaging audio-visual presentations sells.



Book Annslie Bigbee for a seminar, and Briggs & Riley will bring its marketing machine to bear, helping build publicity for your event.



Publicizing seminars is a must, if you want a successful event. The payoff: \$4,000-\$7,000 in accessories sales immediately following a seminar is pretty typical.



Briggs & Riley's Annslie Bigbee packs them in at Rooten's Luggage, Irvine, CA – one of the dozen or so seminars this lifelong traveler gives yearly, and on her own time. "An empty suitcase is full of hope. Hope for a vacation, a successful business trip, a reunion."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANGEL F. CASTELLANOS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANNSLIE BIGBEE

Continued from page 38

product. It's about removing friction from the travel experience, making it as pain-free as possible. "My talk is not about product at all, it's not about this organizer or that doodad," Castellanos explains. "I talk about traveling smart and really educating people on how to travel well, and often, and better, so they can have the time of their lives. I certainly talk about what I use and what works for me and my family, but it's a very soft sell." And it works. Veteran rep Patti Falvo has witnessed it: "Believe me, anything Angel is showing, it sells."

For Bigbee, seminars are a valuable opportunity for retailers to establish expertise. "When you come from a place of authenticity, when you talk about travel, people have a better experience." It's also an opportunity to steer

the conversation away from pricing and selection – where the Internet wins every time – and talk about quality. "Specialty retail is about the experience. It's about having the right gear to travel leisurely. Happily. On the Internet, there are thousands of compression socks to choose from, thousands of neck pillows. What a store does, they're curators. They've gone through all the different products and tried and tested – they're the experts. They only have four because they've tested the best for you, and they've made it so you don't need to test and try all of them."

Seminars spur repeat shopping and draw new business. "If my followers know I'm appearing at a store and they're local to that area they'll come to that event," says Castellanos. "My talk is ever evolving – in September I was in

Italy, in early October I was in Morocco and France."

Bigbee notes that Briggs & Riley will help stores advertise upcoming seminars in local papers, on Facebook and the Briggs & Riley website. "You have to publicize. Rooten's Luggage in Orange County, CA, will get 80-90 people at a seminar," she says, noting that another store five miles away, where the employees are shy about publicity, will draw a mere handful. "You need people to build energy. When you reach 80 people at once people ask questions, they're engaged." And that engagement can really pay off – Bigbee says \$4,000 to \$7,000 in accessories sales immediately after a seminar are par for the course.

Peninsula Trading – Cultivate Your Customers

One look at Peninsula Trading's wall of postcards, and its world map festooned with Post-It arrows marking points visited by its customers, and it's obvious this 7-year-old store loves its traveling clientele. And they love it – and owner Betsy Borden – right back. It's a tiny 1,000-square-foot shop in Grand Rapids, MI, but it drips with authenticity. And it all comes from owner Borden, who runs it without any full-time assistance. "Just a couple of friends I've found," she jokes.

Borden's window displays are gorgeously evocative, and she changes them often. Her storefront marked a 5-show Grand Rapids visit by Garth Brooks earlier this year by riffing on the country star's hit, "Friends in Low Places," proclaiming, "I've Got Friends in Great Places," and completed the look with guitar, cowboy boots, vintage steamer trunks and a collage of dozens upon dozens of customer-mailed postcards in the oversize front window. A wintertime display of road-worn license plates, a Route 66 highway marker, car parts and travel clothing makes you almost feel the rumble of rubber over blacktop on an epic road trip. A travel vest, Indiana Jones-style bush hat, canvas-and-leather satchel and a big photo of elephants silhouetted against a fiery sky bring the safari to Michigan's northern latitudes.

Scroll through Peninsula Trading's Facebook page, Borden's only social media, and it feels like a travel club. There's an occasional new-product announcement – New Stormy Kromer



Peninsula Trading's amazing window displays put owner Betsy Borden's contagious love of travel right out front to draw customers off the street.



Peninsula Trading fuels wanderlust with its own customers (and their postcards)! The global map is peppered with Post-Its showing where customers' travels have landed them.



No slatwall here – Borden wanted a unique look, and built one. Note the vintage globes along the back wall, and customer postcards to the left.

PHOTOS BY BETSY BORDEN

caps have arrived; New Eagle Creek Cargo Haulers are here – but the vast majority of the posts are customer post-cards from far-flung reaches; customers lounging in campsite hammocks, a shout-out from Borden thanking a customer for a gift of Moroccan spices, a winter road trip to Michigan’s Upper Peninsula with one of the store’s few employees.

“I was a sales rep for a long time for Eagle Creek, ExOfficio and Merrell, and quite a few smaller brands too,” Borden explains. “And I did visual merchandising before I was a sales rep, so all those steps came together. I never wanted my store to look like slatwall. My lamps on the wall are old pieces of luggage we dropped spotlights out of. I wanted that vintage-type look, and I collected globes and old trunks, without even knowing what my space was going to be.”

Borden drums up a lot of business with travel seminars, especially for student groups. “I’ll go right into the classroom; there are a lot of colleges

around here. I’m speaking today to a group headed to Ireland, I do retirement groups, high school groups, I’ll have mothers and dads bring kids in to talk with them because they can’t get anywhere with them, it’s easier for me to tell them what to do,” she says. “Instructors will come in here, they got the word from another school, that I do these talks. Sometimes I’ll pack the biggest bag I can, and have my friend the instructor wear what you’re supposed to bring, that kind of thing, the Do’s and Don’ts.”

“I have noticed when people come in here they are really after a solution. They want to go lighter, they want everything they need to be on that flight, and be in control of their own bag; that’s really an important thing. And I don’t have a person who wants the cheapest thing they can find; they want luggage they can rely on, something that’s not going to fall apart, and that’s the same for young people or an older person who’s retired, and sick of buying a new bag every year. And when I can solve

that problem, those customers come back! Word of mouth has really helped develop those relationships.”

Good Travel Stories Sell Travel Goods

It’s true that travel products are what make a travel goods store. But it’s a travel identity, and travel storytelling, that give stores personality and the consumer perception of expertise. How you weave travel into your store’s story, and pitch it to your customers, depends on you, and your available resources.

Focus on the travel experience, instead of the product experience, and success follows. It works on Peninsula Trading’s small, 1,000-square-foot scale. It definitely works on the 40,000-square-foot warehouse scale of Portmantos, which has a full-timer in-house and an external marketing company to manage its message. And it works for in-betweeners like Index Urban and Traveler’s Depot, too.

It’s just a matter of building personality. One travel story at a time. 

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