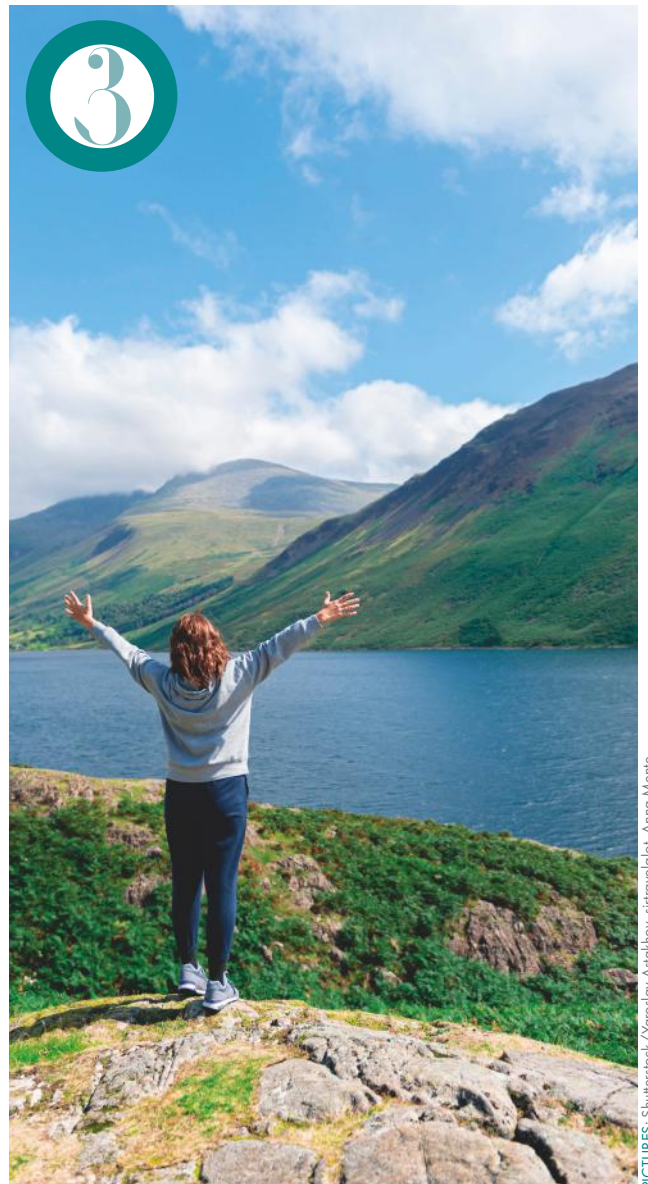


ASK THE experts

Three experts give their advice on how to sell to clients with hidden disabilities. **Laura French** reports



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1 “Speak with suppliers directly to find out what they can offer”

Beth started working for DisabledHolidays.com, the UK’s biggest disability specialist travel agency, in 2012 as a supplier manager. She became operations manager in 2016 and chief executive in 2018, and plans to continue to develop the company’s growing portfolio of accessible holidays.



Beth Nadin
chief executive,
Disabled Holidays

Arranging holidays for people with hidden disabilities can be challenging because of the very wide range of conditions that can affect a customer – a few examples include diabetes, autism, dementia, epilepsy, Crohn’s disease, angina and chronic pain.

However, it’s vital that we get further than the disability labels; often a longer conversation with the customer is necessary to fully understand their condition and how it affects them.

Our agents will usually begin by asking a customer with a hidden disability how it affects their day-to-day life. They will also discuss their mobility, health and any worries or anxieties they might have, as well as asking them about their previous travel experiences and what was good and bad about them. We cover everything from how they plan to travel from their home and the length of the journey to the accommodation and the season they’ll be travelling in.

Agents should speak with suppliers and airlines to find out what they can offer someone with a particular disability; most airlines will offer clients the opportunity to board the aircraft first or last, if a member of their group has autism, for example.

Finally, it’s important to be disability-aware and be careful with your language so that you don’t cause unintended offence. A kind and personable approach goes a long way.

2 “Listen to the client and understand their requirements”

Essex-based operator Ocean Holidays launched an accessibility programme last year for travellers with visible and hidden disabilities. As director of product & commercial, Anna-Maria applies her experience to enhance accessible travel and position the company as a front-runner in the field.



Anna-Maria Janssen
product & commercial director,
Ocean Holidays

A disability – regardless of whether it’s hidden or visible – can affect every person differently, so it’s important to listen to the customer and understand exactly what their requirements are for their holiday.

Avoid using disability categories, and ask for as many details as possible to find out the level of support needed. Typical questions for our customers include whether and what level of assistance they require at the airport and on board a plane, what set-up they need for their accommodation and transportation requirements during their holiday.

There is support for those travelling with a hidden disability – for example, the sunflower lanyard, used to indicate a hidden disability, is a great way to let staff at airports and hotels know they might need a bit of extra assistance; travelling through a busy airport where most people are rushing might be overwhelming for some clients.

When it comes to destinations, Florida is fabulous for those travelling with a disability. All major airlines from the UK to Florida (British Airways, Virgin Atlantic and Aer Lingus) have fully trained staff on board and both the UK and Florida airports offer great services for clients who need special assistance.

3 “Listen to the customer and don’t make assumptions”

After being diagnosed with muscular dystrophy at the age of 23, Angus Drummond co-founded Limitless Travel in 2015 to empower people with disabilities to travel, both within the UK and to far-flung destinations around the world. The agency now operates in the US and Canadian markets too.



Angus Drummond
co-founder and chief executive,
Limitless Travel

Hidden disabilities can create a number of different challenges, as often they aren’t recognised and may be perceived as negative behaviour, or needs may not be catered for.

As an agent, it’s important to create an environment in which the customer feels comfortable disclosing the details of their condition without fear of any discrimination (often people might worry that if they reveal their disability, they may not be able to travel).

Don’t be afraid to ask questions – you aren’t expected to know the answers, and the customer will feel a lot more reassured if you’re asking good questions. The key is to ask in a way that gives the person the opportunity to speak freely, and then to follow up on any points you’re not clear on to find out how the condition might affect them.

It’s also important not to make assumptions about what a person can or can’t do, and not to ask closed questions. For example, don’t just assume a person can’t fly – instead, ask how their condition affects their ability to fly.

Finally, the key is to listen to what the customer says, take notes and then relay that back to them at the end of the conversation or via email. That way the client can confirm that you’ve understood everything they’ve said, so you can minimise the risk of any misunderstanding or missed information.