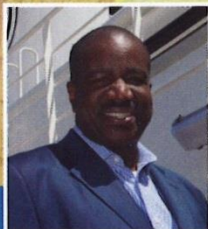


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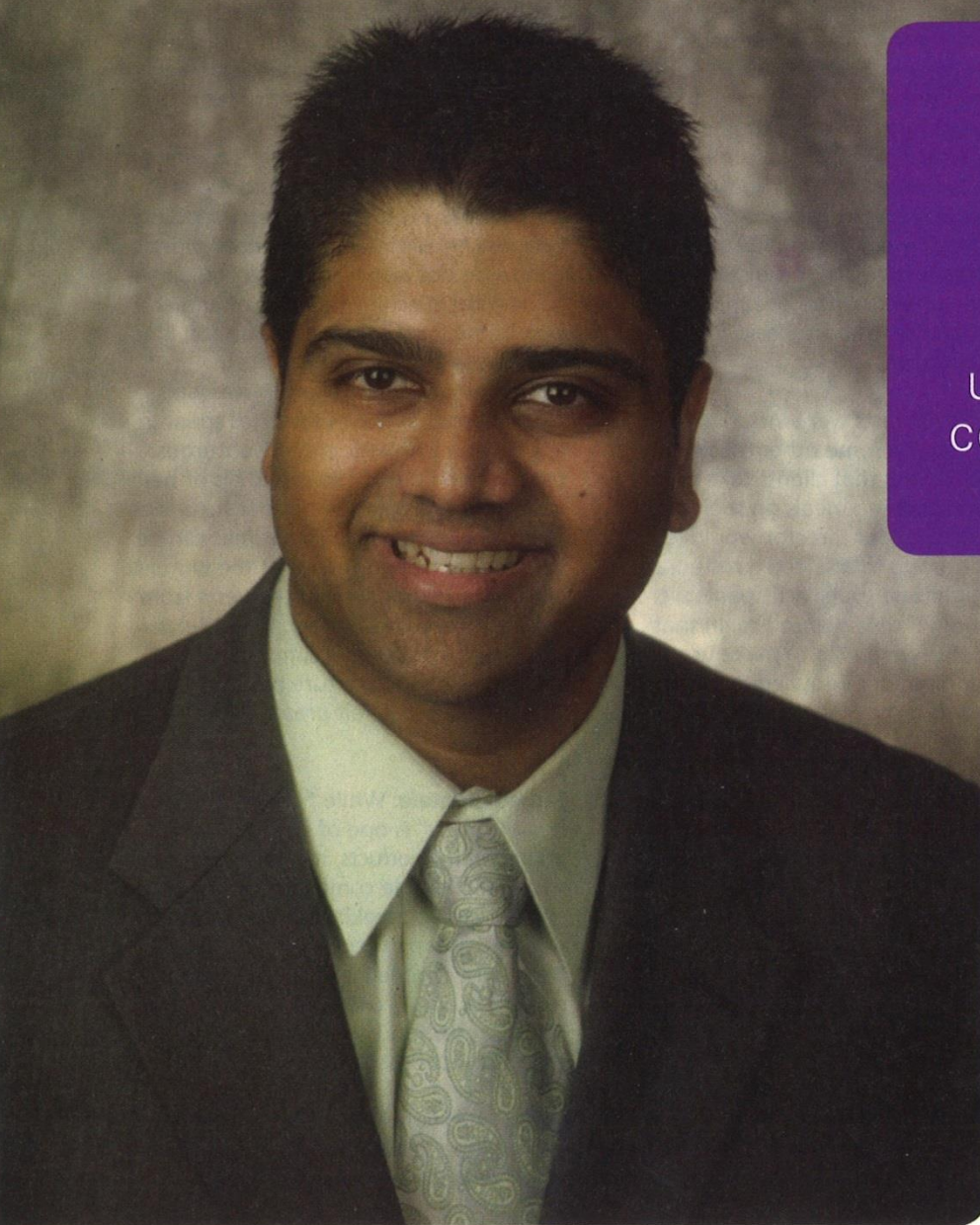
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Stand by Me

Ashish Sanghrajka urges agents to offer consumers more than a transaction

**“TRAVEL IS
A LIFE-
CHANGING
EVENT.”**

Ashish Sanghrajka has been president of Big Five Tours & Expeditions since 2008. Born in Kenya, Sanghrajka grew up in the company founded by his father Mahen Sanghrajka more than 40 years ago.

Today Big Five Tours & Expeditions offers customized tours to Africa, South America, Asia and the South Pacific. *Vacation Agent* recently talked with Sanghrajka.

Has Africa recovered from last year's Ebola scare?

Yes, Africa is making a comeback. The areas that are making the biggest comeback are South Africa and Tanzania. Kenya unfortunately is falling behind. There is so much potential in Kenya, but in the media the negative publicity outweighs the benefits of being there. That said, the country itself is still wonderful to be in. We knew South Africa would come back because

it's a perennial powerhouse with the amount of publicity that they get for everything. One of the things South Africa is dealing with now is the new child trafficking law. As a father, I think the decision to stop child trafficking is wonderful. But the way in which they are implementing it may not be the best, and hopefully they will understand that there may be better ways to do it by making the rules clear. What they need is uniform



training so that if you were to ask 10 different officials, you would get the same answer.

The other destination in Southern Africa that's coming up is Botswana, which is starting to draw a lot of interest and is making a slow comeback.

How are other regions of Africa doing?

What we're noticing is that while the value of the euro is making Europe less expensive, many people are nervous about visiting some of the countries neighboring Greece because of fall-out or a concern about having access to funds and ATMs. That's pushing up business in Latin America for us. We've polled people and many said, "We were thinking about Europe, but we're not comfortable going to certain parts right now and want to stay close to home, so we're going to Latin America instead."

Is Big Five operating in Colombia?

We've been going to Colombia for nine years. We were one of the first. When we launched in 2007, we knew it was a sleeping giant but there were many service issues. That first year whatever could go wrong went wrong. I went there to shut down the operation, thinking they're not ready — and no one was there to pick me up at the airport. I thought, This is not turning out the way I wanted it to.

Since that point, however, it's been amazing, because what my team noticed

was that it was not that the Colombians don't want to provide good service, but rather it's that they didn't know how. So we spent a lot of time training on customer service. Now it's one of our fastest-growing destinations.

What is your message for travel agents?

What's really important for travel advisors to home in on is the fact that this idea of trying to be everything to everybody didn't work five years ago, 10 years ago and it's not going to work today. [Agents] have to define what they stand for. The one thing everybody has to understand is that we must stand for something more than a transaction.

We deal with intellectual property, and travel advisors as our partners deal with intellectual property. You shouldn't be afraid to charge for intellectual property. We need to make sure that we are not afraid to say no, that we do stand for something more than a transaction.

For example, just yesterday we had someone looking to go on safari to India to see the tigers, but it was not the season for tiger tracking. The agent put the bid out to five companies, and only we and one other company told her that she shouldn't go during this time, because it doesn't make sense. Get the timing better to dates when you'll see the most tigers.

The other three companies were willing to take the business, no problem, without using their intellectual property. If we choose to be a commodity industry

then we deserve what we get. What we should be doing is working on becoming intellectual property.

Our time and knowledge are extremely valuable. In terms of what people demand, travel is up there with houses and automobiles. It's a lifestyle product if we let it become a lifestyle product. It's not going to be just a regular trip, just a tour. Travel is life-changing.

That's one of the reasons we launched our kids collection, "Precious Journeys." This program is not just a matter of focusing on families traveling together, but kids learning firsthand about the world's problems and being asked to solve them with a younger, fresher mind. It's about challenging ourselves to be better, to do better by educating ourselves. You can't [market this concept] if you're just selling widgets.

We need to be sure we are dealing in intellectual property. It starts with advisors standing for something that is more than a transaction.

If you think about it, we are consultants. What kinds of fields have consultants? Medicine, law and business have doctors, attorneys, business consultants. These are other professionals who deal in intellectual property.

We shouldn't be dumbing down the product for people who don't get it. We should be asking them to catch up to the stream and then extending and accelerating it.

For more information, call 800-244-3483 and visit www.bigfive.com. 