



Looking ever so elegant in their Gatsby gear are (from left): **Mary Shilleto** (Thompsons Travel), **Wendie White** (Lloyd Orr), **Vanya Lessing** (Sure Travel) and **Nicolas le Roux** (Travelport).



Shereen Morolo and **Marthie Moore** (Tourvest Travel Services).

How to make a customer-centric business model pay off

HAVING a "customer-centric" business model instead of an "ego-centric" model can be very lucrative for travel agencies, says **Helene Hartwig** of The Peer Group. Helene spoke at the recent Asata conference about how small adjustments in consultants' behaviours can have far-reaching benefits for their business.

Although most agencies were aware that it is important to put the customer first, the return on investment of this focus on the client was not always clear, she said. But there is definitely a business case for being more customer-centric, as it costs considerably less to retain a customer than to get a new one.

"Increasing your customer retention rates by 5% could increase your profits by up to 95%."

It is not always easy to improve customer service when most of the time travel agents are not entirely sure who their customers are, Helene said. "Millennials, for example, spend money, especially on travel, but we seldom hear their voices and we seldom see their faces."

The key to improving customer service was to get to know the customer, she said. Learn about their issues, their problems and their challenges. "Address all the concerns that your clients have and apologise. Check to see what you can do differently. Your customer is the centre of your organisation. The customer is not an interruption in our work; he's the purpose of it."

To achieve great customer service, Helene outlined 10 key commandments:

1. Know who is boss. The

answer is simple: the customer pays our salary and needs to be at the centre of our universe.

2. Be a good listener and ask questions.
3. Identify and anticipate needs. You are the expert.
4. Make customers feel important and appreciated.
5. Help customers understand your systems.
6. Appreciate the power of 'yes'; make things happen for your clients.
7. Know how to apologise. It will take the wind out of the sails of the people who are looking for a fight.
8. Give more than expected.
9. Get regular feedback.
10. Treat your co-workers well. If you can't get it right with them, how will get it right with the consumer? ■



Bringing the glitz and glamour are **Shariefa Aille** (XL Nexus Travel) and **Dinesh Naidoo** (Serendipity Tours).



#InAbuDhabi was trending! From left: **Jane Davidson**, **Jackie Adami**, and **Tracey Krog** of Development Promotions.



Johanna Mukoki and **Tibor Zsadanyi** from Travel with Flair.



City Lodge's **Peter Schoeman** with Bidvest Car Rental's **Gaynor Von Loggenburg**.
Photos: Natasha Schmidt and Kate Nathan

