

Adding a Corporate Travel Arm to a Leisure Agency



Maya's first corporate inquiry came through a leisure customer's recommendation. Her agency had handled the customer's family trip well enough that the customer's company asked if Maya did corporate travel too. The honest answer was no, but the customer's company had a budget and a timeline and a willingness to try, and saying no would have meant turning down a \$180K annual account.



The email was forwarded by a regular leisure customer with a one-line note: "They're asking — would you be up for it?" The right answer at that moment was either a clean no or a careful yes. The wrong answer was the half-yes Maya almost gave, where she'd try to handle it within the existing leisure team while pretending it didn't change anything.

She said yes. It was the right call, but the next eighteen months were a rebuild of the agency that she didn't expect to do. This is the playbook from that period, including the decision she'd make differently if she ran it back.

Why Corporate Travel Isn't "Leisure With Bigger Numbers"



The first thing Maya assumed wrong was that corporate travel was just a bigger version of what her leisure team already did. It isn't.

Leisure travel is built around the traveler's preferences and a price the traveler signs off on. Corporate travel is built around a procurement officer's policy and a budget envelope. Leisure customers buy on quality of experience and trust in the agent. Corporate customers buy on policy compliance, budget predictability, and the ability to roll up reporting at the end of the year. Different decision-makers, different success criteria, different cadence.

The mistake of treating them as the same product is what makes most leisure-to-corporate expansions stall. The agency tries to use leisure logic on corporate accounts and finds itself losing the second-year renewal even when the first year felt successful.

The Question Before the First Hire



Before she hired anyone, Maya called three agency owners who'd run a corporate arm for at least three years. The same question came back from all three: are you sure you want to do this with the leisure team or alongside it?

The two structures are different businesses inside one agency. Leisure-team-doing-corporate looks efficient on paper (no new hires, no new infrastructure) and tends to fail because the leisure team's instincts undermine the corporate motion. Alongside-the-leisure-team takes more upfront investment but lets each team get good at what it's actually doing.

All three of the owners she called had tried "use the leisure team" first and switched. Maya tried it anyway, lost a quarter, and then made the switch. The lesson saves you the quarter if you take it on advice.

The First Hire: Corporate Lead, Not Generalist



The single most important hire was the corporate lead. Not a senior leisure agent who'd "ramp up." A person who had been doing corporate travel at another company for at least three years.

The reason isn't capability. Smart leisure agents can absolutely learn corporate. The reason is access. A corporate lead with three years of experience comes with relationships, procurement officers they've worked with, supplier reps in the corporate channel, vendor contacts at the GDSes that feed the corporate motion. Those relationships compress the agency's first eighteen months by twelve.

Maya's hire came from a competitor. The non-compete was enforceable on the customer accounts but not on the supplier relationships and the playbook knowledge, which is what she actually needed.

What Stays Shared, What Splits



Eighteen months in, the structure that settled looked like this. Shared functions: finance, the CRM, the back-office systems, the brand. Split functions: sales process, supplier relationships, fulfilment workflows, account management.

What you don't want is two parallel companies sharing only the building. What you also don't want is one company pretending to do two motions. The middle path is operationally heavier than either extreme, but it's the only one that lets each motion get good at what it does.

The split that mattered most was sales. Leisure agents stopped being asked to handle corporate inquiries; corporate inquiries went directly to the corporate lead. The leisure book and the corporate book stopped contaminating each other's pipelines, which made forecasting honest for the first time since the experiment started.

The Pricing Rebuild That Has to Happen



Corporate pricing isn't quoted per trip, it's negotiated annually. The agency signs a master service agreement with each corporate account that defines the management fee structure, the supplier-rate-pass-through policy, the volume rebate triggers, and the year-end reconciliation method.

Once the MSA is signed, individual trips under that contract are administrative. The pricing happens once per year per account, not per booking. This is a different business model than leisure (where pricing happens per inquiry) and requires different financial reporting (revenue is recognized differently, working capital looks different).

Maya's leisure-trained finance lead struggled with this for the first two quarters. She brought in a fractional travel-industry CFO for one day a week for a year. The investment paid for itself when the second corporate account asked for a customized payment schedule that the leisure-only finance setup couldn't have handled.

The Eighteen-Month Mistake (And the Reversal)



The decision Maya would reverse if she could: she branded the corporate arm under the same agency name. It looked efficient, same logo, same website, one brand, one front door.

What she discovered eighteen months in was that the leisure brand was actively working against the corporate motion. Procurement officers who'd never heard of the agency assumed (correctly) that an agency named "Wanderlust Tours" did leisure travel and weren't taking the corporate pitch seriously. Some inquiries the corporate lead reached out to never returned the call because the brand signaled the wrong thing.

The fix, eventually, was a sub-brand. The corporate arm got its own name (a serious-sounding compound noun, not a wanderlust word), its own one-page website that linked back to the parent agency, and its own LinkedIn presence run by the corporate lead. Inquiries lifted within six months of the rebrand.

The Eighteen-Month Mistake (And the Reversal)



The launch wasn't a marketing event. It was the corporate lead and a contractor designer working through a quiet afternoon to ship a one-page website, a brand mark, and a LinkedIn presence. Total cost was less than three months of the leisure brand's marketing spend. The signal that it had worked was an inbound RFP arriving the following week from a procurement officer who'd never have called the leisure brand cold.

If you start a corporate arm today, name it differently from the parent. The shared parent brand only helps if your leisure brand is already premium-positioned. Otherwise it actively hurts.

The Year-One Targets



Maya's year-one corporate targets, in retrospect, were too aggressive on revenue and too soft on accounts. The right way to plan a first year of corporate is in account count, not revenue.

The targets her agency now runs for any new corporate motion: 5 signed MSAs in year one, 12 in year two, 25 by end of year three. Revenue per account ramps independently as the relationship matures, first year is mostly proving the agency can deliver, second year is when the account expands to its full footprint.

Setting revenue targets too aggressively in year one pushes the corporate lead toward chasing one or two big accounts at the expense of building a portfolio. A portfolio of 10–15 mid-sized corporate accounts is more durable than two whale accounts that can disappear if their procurement officer changes jobs.

The Signal It's Working



The signal isn't revenue mix. It's the corporate lead being able to answer this question: which three of your accounts are most likely to renew at higher volume next year, and what work has the agency done in the last 90 days to earn that?

If the corporate lead can answer with specific names and specific actions, the corporate motion is real. If they can only answer with revenue numbers, the motion is brittle, those numbers are the trailing indicator of last year's work, not the leading indicator of next year's.

Eighteen months in, Maya's corporate book was 30% of revenue. Two years in, it was 38%, and the leisure book was still growing. The two motions weren't cannibalizing each other once they were structurally separate. That's the proof the structure works.