

'No limits' travel agent gets the edge

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Dedicated service has been a big advantage over the anonymity of the Internet

When a client of the Victorian travel agency CTS Travel failed to leave enough time to order a visa, he did not expect to make his flight to Saudi Arabia that evening. Not to be outdone in customer service, the consultant handling his account flew to Canberra, retrieved the visa from the consulate, and had it in the client's hand before take-off. It is this type of service that CTS Travel co-founder and managing director Philip Weinman says Internet travel agents can never match.

CTS Travel is ninth on the BRW list of 100 fastest-growing private companies (BRW, March 15). Its turnover is predicted to climb from \$31 million in 1997-98 to \$62 million this year. Weinman, 44, and partners David Payes, 46, and Alan Kras, 43, are projecting revenue of more than \$100 million by 2000. The company is only five years old.

"The Net will assist in terms of mundane, day-to-day, no-thinking bookings but it won't be sufficient for corporate Australia," Weinman says. "It still takes longer to make an Internet booking than it does with a consultant, and anyone who's dealt directly with airlines knows they'll deal with a different person every time so there's no continuity with their account."

Weinman's philosophy is that businesses are prepared to search for the ultimate travel provider. To ensure the hunt stops with CTS, staff are on call 24 hours a day and have home computers that are hooked up to the airlines. According to Weinman, this system works better than having global affiliations with other travel companies.

"The problem with affiliation is that you are only as good as the office a customer books in. There is no better system than having a personal consultant looking after their client, no matter where in the world they are."

Weinman believes CTS Travel's flat management structure drives staff to look after their clients. "The way I see it, we have 62 managers here," he says. "It's critical for my consultants to have absolute ownership over their accounts."

CTS Travel has diversified into other areas, including conference and event management and graphic design. In keeping with the "no boundaries" attitude, teams in all divisions are encouraged to employ their own staff if they become busy enough.

The company rewards loyalty as much as ability - its 12 car spaces are allocated according to length of service, not seniority. Weinman takes it so seriously that the general manager of operations parks across the road while his accounts clerk parks in a spot downstairs.

This innovative culture was adopted from Weinman's previous businesses. In 1967, he came to Australia from Canada to attend a wedding but stayed to form a partnership with David Kras and Alan Payes. In the early 1980s they founded the computer company HiSoft to break Apple's monopoly on personal computers.


All staff were on profit share, and within five years HiSoft was turning over \$200 million. "I can't tell you how many current managing directors of big, established computer companies used to work for HiSoft," Weinman says.

The trio sold the company in 1985 for a solid profit and founded Intrapac Properties, a company that buys large farms along the Cranbourne-Berwick corridor, the fastest-growing residential area in Victoria, and subdivides them into housing blocks. This year, Intrapac Properties was 29th on the BRW list of 100 fastest-growing private companies.

N.B. Weinman's office rules: "You don't work from nine to five, and if you do you won't last a week. Don't get involved in office

politics because that's a sign you're not busy enough, and staff must give absolute loyalty. That's it."

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