

YOUR Lifeline

Tips for Working With Suppliers

Coffee chats and thank you cards are among tactics successful agents use

Home-based travel agent Ron Hermanson, a SeasMaster Cruises franchise owner in Walnut Creek, CA, says that agents are connecting more meaningfully to both clients and suppliers for several reasons. The array of networking capabilities offered by computer technology is one; another is home-based agents' growing willingness to leave their doors open.

Here are some tips for home-based agents looking to increase their field of contacts and to identify strategies to keep these contacts active and productive.

Get Out There as Much as Possible

Face-to-face contact is important—but how to do you make that first, in-person meeting? After all, many suppliers may feel uneasy having a cup of coffee in the home of someone they haven't met before. This is why home-based agents should take advantage of as many fam trips, trade shows, seminars and conferences as they can. For the fam trip, don't just get familiar with the destination, get familiar with the people you are on the

trip with. This piece of advice paid dividends for Hermanson.

"Although I am not in a position to invite vendors to my home office, there are other ways to cultivate relationships," he says. "During a recent fam trip to Alaska, I had an opportunity to spend several days getting to know Raul Parquet and Nicole Bishop at Royal Caribbean International. Over time, we will build some very good things together traced to the foundation of this experience."

Trade shows, conferences and seminars are

also vital depending on which ones you attend, says Frank Hryszkanich, of the host agency Travel, Ports & Voyages, who also serves as director of the New Jersey Outside Sales Support Network. Hryszkanich says it's good to learn as much as you can from a trade show exhibitor, but the experience can be multiplied if

there is a little give and take.

"I prefer the classroom approach where you get to listen to an in-depth presentation followed by a Q and A," says Hryszkanich, whose company uses restaurant space in the New Jersey area for such seminars.

"I think a trade show is meaningless unless an agent can get some good information and that usually requires asking a lot of questions and speaking with the suppliers one on one afterward," he says.

(Ed. Note: See page 22 for info on the Home-Based Travel Agent Expo.)

Hallmark Cards and Business Cards Make a Great Combo

Now that you've met some important suppliers, gathered some useful info

and traded business cards, it's time to make your new friends remember you. After all, many of these suppliers walk away with stacks of business cards. Remaining in contact is vital.

Hermanson says he often sends the people he has met at networking events handwritten thank you cards or will even take the simple approach of

dropping an e-mail.

"Anything you can do to make a contact remember you is important," he says. "It might be a card, it might be an e-



mail, perhaps you come across an interesting article that you want to forward the person or perhaps you learn something that you want to pass along to them. They meet so many people. What makes you stand out? You have to make that happen."

When he meets with a client, he comes prepared, bringing packets, folders, business cards—as much information as he can.

"When people can put a face and memorable conversation together with a business card that includes a follow-up thank you after the conversation, business is good," he says.

Stay in Touch By E-mail and Phone

E-mail and telephone conversations between home-based agents and suppliers are not only effective, they're mandatory, especially when conducting business with people in other countries. So once agents establish face-to-face contact they can then get into the rhythm of this form of communication.

Sheri Clarke, a SeaMaster Cruises franchise owner in Bowling Green, KY, says she puts a lot of stake in monthly "coffee chats." Clarke says it's vital to allow the people you work with the ability to "put a face with an e-mail."

"I feel that you are treated differently when people know who they are speaking with, who they are e-mailing or chatting with online," Clarke says. "The relationship is more personal when you have met the person first, when you have talked with them like you would with any of your friends over a cup of coffee."

"Personality goes a long way in this business," Clarke continues. "Once they are comfortable with you, once they know who you are, then you can make that phone call or that e-mail. But it's



Royal Caribbean Cruises chairman and CEO Richard Fain, fresh from a run on the FlowRider, flanked by SeaMaster Cruises' franchise owners Liz Fisher (left) and Gina Carey aboard *Freedom of the Seas*

always better to establish a relationship in person first."

The Computer Doesn't Bite

Working with home-based agents for many years, Hryszkanich learned that many agents, believe it or not, are still not adapting to the age of the Internet. Many, he says, are afraid of it, don't know how to use it or never really even gave it a shot.

"I'm finding that more and more agents are not really up on technology," he says, noting that he offers tech classes to get agents familiar with the many resources available on the web.

Clarke says technology has provided a great source for agents to maintain relationships, to share information with other agents and keep up with the latest news. Signing up for newsletters, taking part in online chats and using e-mail are tips agents give.

"Many people think any home-based profession is taking the easy way out," Hermanson says. "But that's all changed in the last few years and the Internet is a big part of that. Technology enables you to set

up meetings with a host of suppliers, to set up conference calls with your contacts. It's makes your life so much easier."

Don't Be Afraid to Share

There's plenty of business to go around and there are more opportunities when home-based agents work as a team. Sharon Emerson, owner of Cruise & Tour Planners, Inc. in Seattle, WA has had success working with five independent contractors as well as other home-based agents, one of which lives near her.

"What works for us is to have the suppliers come to our homes, invite other agents and sit around with a cup of tea to hear [their] presentations," she says.

Emerson says she usually invites about two to three other home-based agents to take part in the tea chats, which she notes are vital since "agents' relationship with suppliers is the number one most important thing in this business."

And as far as inviting the competition to take part? "There's plenty of business to go around, so I never worry about that," she says.

—Joe Pike