

# executive experience

RON HERMANSON USES NETWORKING SKILLS TO BUILD HIS CRUISE VACATION BUSINESS

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Ron Hermanson of Walnut Creek, Calif., has never been at a loss for work. His past experience runs the gamut, including overseeing a corporate department with annual operating revenues of \$12 million, managing 175 employees, traveling internationally and identifying key corporate decision-makers with whom to set up networking meetings. But after the dot.com bubble burst, he found himself, an executive in his 50s, floundering in the job market.

Then two years ago, he stumbled across SeaMaster Cruises. Rather than seek out experienced travel agents with established track records, SeaMaster recruits professionals from other fields looking for career changes. It was a perfect fit.

The cruise vacation franchise, which is backed by Carlson Travel Franchise Group, appealed to Hermanson for several reasons: First, he loves traveling the world. Second, it gives him the opportunity to encourage his clients to branch out beyond the safety and familiarity of U.S. borders to experience different countries—all from the comfort of a cruise ship. Finally, he appreciates SeaMaster's approach of focusing on the positive.

"I'm really excited, and I'm having a good time," Hermanson says. "It all comes out of just having a coffee, getting to know someone and developing a relationship, which then blossoms. The reality is that people love to cruise, and the cruise industry is growing. If you can leverage that and build on those relationships, selling the cruise itself is not that hard. It's getting your name out there, starting relationships and building the trust level."

Like his SeaMaster colleagues, Hermanson has established his trustworthiness and uses it to cultivate relationships. Developing relationships was a skill Hermanson learned about 10 years ago as a fundraiser and Board of Trustees member for Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

A fellow Grace Cathedral board member and founder of the Worldwide Labyrinth Movement, a spiritual group that conducts several pilgrimages a year based on the spirituality of labyrinths, had coffee one day with Hermanson and started asking him about the cruise business. That discussion led to a highly successful fundraising Alaska cruise. Now, the Worldwide Labyrinth Movement, which has a membership database of thousands, is planning annual cruises. Next year's sailing will probably be to the Eastern Mediterranean, according to Hermanson.

Hermanson uses database marketing in other ways as well. Originally, his database consisted of friends, relatives and current and former colleagues who allowed him to

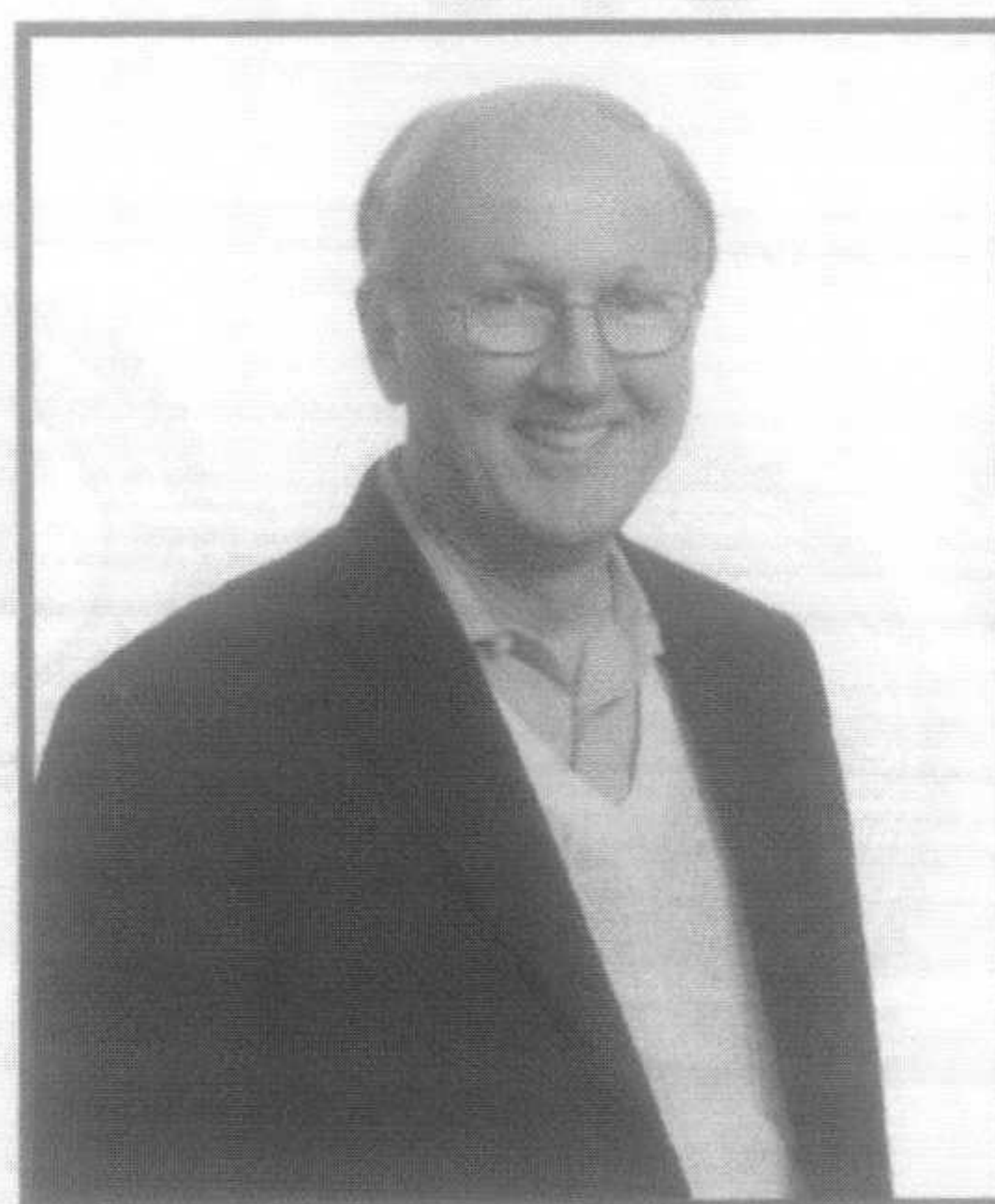
send them his monthly electronic newsletter. He now has 500 to 600 names on his list and hopes to increase that figure to 1,000 next year. Hermanson is aware that his potential clients are not going to take cruises every month, but sooner or later, a client probably will be ready for one. He wants to make sure his name is top of mind when clients are ready to book.

He also joined the Walnut Creek Chamber of Commerce, which has several networking groups. That effort generated a phone call from a local group called the American Golf Program for Senior Centers. The organization was planning a trade fair and invited Hermanson to participate for \$250. He was reluctant to do so, because he didn't think the investment would spawn any cruise sales.

But the manager of operations at SeaMaster suggested that he view the trade fair as a relationship-building opportunity. So Hermanson attended the function and accumulated more database contacts. Two weeks later, he received a call from someone who wanted to organize two group cruises a year that would be marketed to senior centers across California with anywhere from 50 to thousands of residents. Hermanson is finding these face-to-face contacts to prove invaluable.

In addition to building his clientele, Hermanson is also cultivating suppliers. On his return flight to New York-JFK following the annual SeaMaster Networking Convention, he traveled with two cruise line vice

presidents: one from Celebrity Cruises and one from Royal Caribbean International. During a layover, he invited the two to join him in the Admirals Club, and now he's going to be on a panel at a major travel trade show in December with high-level cruise executives. 🌐



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