

ENTERPRISING AGENT

All In The Family

By Marilyn Green

Nobby and Carol Orens have repositioned their agency from the bottom third in total revenue to the top two percent in the U.S., with virtually no staff turnover, by running their 48-agent office like a mom-and-pop organization.

Nobby was a sales representative for men's gifts in several western states 15 years ago when his wife, Carol, became interested in turning her love of travel into a career. She enrolled in travel school, but decided



Nobby and Carol Orens

that being an agent wasn't for her. As it turned out, this was a fortunate decision, because Carol's role in staff support has proved to be a key factor in Plaza Travel's success. Meanwhile, Nobby had bought a six-person

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Building A Loyal Staff That Stays

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agency and decided to go ahead with the business.

"I thought it would be an easy way to make a living," he said ruefully. "Actually, it was like buying an iceberg; 90 percent you didn't see."

At a time when agencies complain about finding and keeping staff, Plaza Travel has expanded to 52 members. Thirty-seven of these are independent contractors; they choose their own hours and must maintain a certain level of sales to have a personal desk or office. In addition to the regular office staff, the company has a briefcase brigade, rotating the use of their desks. Nobby said the agents are a blend of very high producers, medium ones and those who just enjoy selling travel.

"We have [almost] no turnover," he stated. "In 15 years, two staff members have left to start their own agencies and two moved out of the area, but that's it."

FAMILY TIES

The Orens credit their unusual combination of family atmosphere and business sense with the agency's success. Nobby said he saw a dichotomy in the industry when he started, with a choice between the businesslike megacompanies like American Express and Carlson on the one hand and cottage industry of mom-and-pop operations on the other.

"We wanted a company with the best characteristics of both," he said. "The problem for a lot of people was and is that they are great agents, and

eventually become owners, but they are not addressing the business aspect with the same professionalism they bring to the client. They're not giving

Plaza Travel

Name: Nobby Orens
Title: President and Director of Golf Research
Headquarters: Encino, Calif.
Affiliations: GIANTS
Advice: "Treat your agents and clients as if they were family."

the same attention to personnel problems, accounting problems, supplier relations and getting the best overrides that they give to matching the client with the vacation, and you need to cover both," he said.

This is where his previous business experience helped: "I don't think like an agent; I think like a businessman," he said. "The criteria for a good transaction are that it must be the best possible arrangement for the client, it must be profitable for us and it must have strong sales support."

As independent agencies band together for buying power and special concessions, Orens offers his agents the company's collective influence and relationship with suppliers to solve problems and provide extra perks. "We cultivate our relationships with our suppliers, and produce a lot of business for them, so we can arrange special value-added features for our agents' clients," he said.

He also does trouble shooting for the agents when mistakes or misunderstandings occur, working out errors with air scheduled on the wrong day, problems with hotels, etc. He intercedes for clients, even on some occasions where he didn't do the booking. One valued client called from a holiday his wife had booked on the Internet, with a hotel horror story. Orens phoned an upscale property nearby and arranged a number of value-added features, then called the client back. "I have your reservations and, I'll give them to you on one condition," he said. The client asked about the condition. "Your wife can never book a trip on the Internet again," Orens told him. "Don't worry," said the client, "I've told her I'll break her fingers if she does."

PERSONAL TOUCH

The Orens' support goes beyond professional to personal issues. Carol's respect and care for the staff extends to advice and a listening ear, and her card lists her titles as Staff Psychologist and Chief Schmooser. Since she has no desk, she meets staff wherever she can, and Nobby once lightened an emotionally intense day by giving out numbers for staff members waiting to

consult Carol in the ladies' room.

The familial approach is literal in one case; the Orens' son, Steve, has taken over the electronic side of the business. He puts specials up on the site and is working on an e-mailed weekly newsletter to let clients know about attractive deals. He is particularly careful to have e-mailed inquiries receive the same response as telephone ones, and is currently adding a link through Onsite Connect that calls agents up on the phone system to indicate that a client has e-mailed asking for an immediate response.

The Orens' warm approach and careful attention to detail has paid off. Although cruising represents only about 20 percent of their business (50 percent is cooperate, 30 percent FIT and tours), Plaza was among the platinum producers for Crystal Cruises and the company does a large volume of sales for Silversea, Windstar and Radisson/Seven Seas. "We do a respectable volume of business with Holland America, Princess and Royal Caribbean, as well; many of these clients buy up to luxury lines later on," Nobby said. Plaza is also a preferred agency for suppliers like Tauck Tours, SuperClubs, Happy Tours and in the midrange for Runaway.

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