

## Masters of political travel

**M**ike MacNair, president of \$30 million American Express representative MacNair Travel Management in Washington and Alexandria and Chantilly, Va., never knew his agency would build a reputation as one of the best in political travel.

According to him, it was all by chance that he and his wife Ellen got involved in the political arena.

"I was working for Iberia Airlines in New York and got relocated to Washington, and my wife had been working as a travel agent for three years in Manhattan before she came out to [Washington] looking for a job," MacNair remembered. "In 1988, she found a job as an on-site agent for the Bush-Quayle campaign with Didion World Travel in Washington."

This was their first foray into the world of political travel. After earning a name for her tireless efforts on the previous presidential

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vice assistance in the beginning, but basically it helped supervise the entire project.

MacNair joked that the project showed how a spirit of cooperation can exist in politics, particularly in political travel, that is.

"There's a vision you attach yourself to when working in this area — of getting that person to the White House — which really raises everyone to the next level," he said. "Plus you feel you helped change history when the candidate actually wins, and somehow you were part of that process."

MacNair added that political agents, such as his wife, start out knowing about and maybe even liking the candidates, but gain a new respect for what candidates actually go through in trying to make it to the presidency. "Folks are working on pure energy and 'no' is never an answer," he said. "It's a grueling experience with days when everything that can go wrong does. There are also more changes involved than in a normal business travel account."

But this work ends up becoming a \$2 million to \$3 million project if the campaign goes all the way.

MacNair added that he works with several companies that don't seem political in nature, such as the American Truck Association, but focuses on their political sides.

About 20% of the agency's clients involve political travel, while 50% of its business comes from contacts made during past campaigns.

BY MICHELE SAN FILIPPO



MacNair



campaign, Ellen MacNair was again asked to work for the Bush camp in 1992. Then in 1996, she co-ran travel for the Dole-Kemp campaign.

Mike MacNair explained that last year his agency was approached by several camps that wanted to work with them because of their previous political experiences.

"This time around we were account managers for the Bush-Cheney campaign, and Accent Travel in Austin, Texas, took care of all the travel booking needs," he said.

The agency did provide some customer ser-

## Growing expertise

**M**acNair Travel Management doesn't just know about the political scene. The agency considers itself to be a travel management and logistical company whose business mix is comprised of 75% corporate travel, 15% vacation and 10% groups, meetings and incentives.

Some of its other specialties include Spain, honeymoons and retired military travel. It has separate Web sites for these areas. The Spain site is at [www.goawaySpain.com](http://www.goawaySpain.com), the honeymoon site is at [www.travelagentoflove.com](http://www.travelagentoflove.com) and the military site, coming this summer, is

at [www.armedservicesvacations.com](http://www.armedservicesvacations.com).

"I try to build a clientele around the strengths of my consultants," said Mike MacNair, MacNair Travel Management president.

"A lot of romances have sparked during political campaigns, so we end up doing leisure travel down the road for them by planning honeymoons and anniversary cruises," he added.

Because of the agency's involvement in political travel, it has garnered a lot of referrals from political organizations, clubs and trade associations on its roster. It also has received referrals from people wanting help on travel management policies and systems for their political events.

"We truly consider ourselves a consulting firm and not an agency. We call ourselves consultants or project managers, not agents, and try to come up with payment plans catered to our clients' needs," MacNair said.

"Good travel consultants have to ask great questions, and this is something we take pride in," he explained. "We concentrate on being good travel consultants and on helping solve problems for our clients."

In a number of ways, according to MacNair, this type of travel does help grow your business. "Clients view the complexity of what we do with a lot of respect and end up wanting to work with us again."



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