

Adventure inside and outside the office

By Nadine Godwin

There are a lot of ways to make a success of a travel agency. But how is climbing a mountain or writing a book good for business? Ask Mike MacNair, president and CEO of MacNair Travel Management/American Express in Alexandria, Va., who has done both recently.

First, about the mountains: MacNair climbed Mount Rainier in Washington state in 2004 and Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro in 2006, and he aims to tackle more. He also competes in triathlons, races in which athletes swim, bike and run.

There is a business aspect to all of this. MacNair wants to be "the adventure travel person who people want to work for and entrust their vacations or business travel to."

His experiences give him credibility when he has public speaking engagements or wants to make a point in his newsletter. He routinely urges clients to travel for a physical experience rather than just for vacation.

Not that this has directly changed MacNair's business mix much — yet. MacNair organizes the trips of friends who go to events with him, and he has been able to sell some of these kinds of adventures to other clients.

"I would love to do more," he said.

In truth, it's not just about business.

MacNair said that an active lifestyle "inspires me to be focused."

He likes the energy of competitions because the people who compete are very "positive and dynamic."

Except for Kilimanjaro, he has not traveled too far from his home base in Alexandria to pursue these activities, but his intent is to travel the world for competitions, with the travel itself functioning as another motivator for staying active.

Regarding book publishing, MacNair is the author of "Smooth Landings," a 73-page guide that advises corporations about how to gain better control over travel purchasing and costs.

The expertise for the book came from the agency's years of creating travel management systems for hundreds of customers, he said. He emphasized that it was a compilation of the experiences of MacNair's staff as well as his own.

The book, which MacNair worked on for three years, has three target customers: corporate personnel who do not have a lot of expertise in the industry but are responsible for buying travel; travel agents; and suppliers in the corporate travel arena.

MacNair said the book's No. 1 rule for travel sellers is to

ask good questions in order to help corporations understand their needs.

For buyers, he offered this central point: "Buying travel is not a social activity; it is a procurement process and must be approached professionally."

The greatest potential for savings lies with corporate accounts of \$2 million or less where there is "lots of waste," MacNair said.

The book, a self-publishing project, is available at Amazon.com for \$19.95, and MacNair said he was working with ASTA and the Travel Institute to boost sales.

Besides seeking press coverage, he will organize Internet seminars for prospective customers to offer a glimpse into the book's contents and will seek speaking engagements, which can help bring in customers as well as sell books.

But the primary purpose of the guide was not to sell books, he said, but "to galvanize our thoughts for a training mechanism."

The book also can help with sales by making salespeople better at what they do and by impressing prospects.

But most importantly, MacNair said that the book "confirmed the fact we're experts in this niche. It reinforces the sense of our value. The staff is proud of this book."

If the employees are happy, then everyone will be happy, he said.

MacNair founded the Alexandria agency 17 years ago and co-owns it with his wife, Ellen.

The agency's business mix is 80% corporate, 15% vacations and 5% meetings and groups. MacNair has 45 employees, or "team members."

PROFILE



Mike MacNair, right, on Uhuru Peak, the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.