



Mom and dad have something called stress.
I think the beach would cure it.



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Enterprising Agent: Working Outside

By [Marilyn Green](#)



Harvey Siamon, co-owner of Incentive Connection Travel in Phoenix, has set up an enormous and far-flung system of outside sales agents who enjoy very high commissions, strong support and who pay no fees to join.

Siamon's travel career started by a fluke; he and his wife retired to Phoenix in 1981, and a neighbor who had been a flight attendant wanted to start an agency, but had no capital.

"We put in a big investment; then they discovered within 30 days that selling travel took work, so they said good-bye," Siamon said. "We had to get our investment back so we went to Eastern Airlines' school in Miami. We had a qualifier to manage the office, because ARC required two years of ticketing before you could do that, and then there were the two of us."

Although the Siemons had no experience in travel, they did have experience in international business, as importers of bonsai trees. They took that expertise into their new business and considered how to sell to people in other parts of Phoenix.

Friends can Help

"Advertising wouldn't help much, because they still would have to come all the way across town. So the obvious solution was to use friends and

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neighbors in each area as sales people," Siamon explained.

Siamon said outside sales people are generally treated very poorly, and the couple resolved to treat theirs well, pay them 20 percent more than the industry norm and offer earned perks, including seminars, famtrips, etc.

"My overhead was fixed," Siamon said. "Whatever they made was found money. They cost me absolutely nothing and brought me something."

The operation was very successful, and the family opened two additional agencies in the next year. But they discovered that retail sales were not for them, and in 1983 they sold their brick-and-mortar agencies.

"We had retired," Siamon said. "We wanted something much more exciting. So we went into meetings and incentives." They started working with meetings in their agencies, however, some of the clients the Siamons had dealt with were not comfortable with the new owner of the travel agency. So Siamon got an agreement from the agency owner to handle the meetings from his home. They eventually built up 10 to 12-person board meetings into 500-person events.

"You could let your creativity run wild; it was challenging and rewarding, and companies had lots and lots of money to spend," Siamon recalled. "Then the crunch came and they began to be very careful about expenditures, and it was less fun."

At about this time, Siamon's son graduated from college and was looking for work while attending graduate school at night. The family decided to launch a network of outside sales agents, with the parents working with the start-up for six months. The whole family is now employed there, more than 10 years later.

1,000 Pros

"At one time, we had 3,500 outside sales people, but that included some people who came for the wrong reasons, for the excitement of travel and free famtrips," Siamon said. "We now have about 1,000 highly professional, skilled agents who know this is a business, like any other. Our manual doesn't promise anything that won't be delivered, and we include the good, the bad and the ugly."

Agents discover ICT through classified advertisements in trade publications; ASTA recommends them and so do suppliers, but Siamon said their biggest magnet for new outside agents is their own people. "When one of our agents goes to a seminar or fam, we know we'll get four or five good people the next week," he said.

One reason is that the Siamons offer agents 70 percent of everything, including the sizable overrides earned by the network's volume. "Our agents make almost 13 percent commission on everything," Siamon said. "We take a little bit from a lot of people, and everyone wins."

It doesn't hurt that this host agency is huge and familial. Siamon said they have an annual convention in Phoenix, with all the major suppliers, tour operators and cruise lines, and their own trade show.

"Our agents, from Singapore to the Bahamas, come for it, and they call it the ICT family reunion," he said.

Besides the networking--they have a chat network and share key sales techniques daily--ICT agents have a special manual covering everything from cruise nights to obtaining free advertising, the benefit of 300 faxes a day (scanned by a proprietary system that categorizes them and places them online immediately), plus a unique professional Sabre setup.

"When we started this, what was available was access by modem," Siamon said. "If you were in Moscow or Singapore, you didn't have local access, and you'd be paying high fees." He went to Sabre's integrated technologies, which set up customized systems, and they created one where agents dialed in on the Internet right into their gateway and got full professional services. "We did the Beta testing in return for use, and it was marketed as Sabre Interconnect. It was a very short-lived product," he said.

Expensive Solution

The system, he said, was expensive, and impractical for anything but an enormous group like Siamon's. By the terms of their agreement, if Sabre abandoned the project, ICT received the system for free, Siamon said.

They still use the system, and occasionally it has been the incentive for joining the network.

"This agent from Moscow went to Paris and did business there, then he moved back to Moscow," Siamon explained. "He couldn't get Sabre there, only a local system, and Sabre told him they had no intention of going into Russia. So he contacted us and downloaded our program, and he's operating from Moscow."

The support ICT offers includes ticketing, emergencies and dissemination of information in a usable form. "For a new agent who doesn't run tickets, we take care of emergencies and tickets daily," Siamon said. "Because we ask very little in the way of favors from our suppliers, when we do need help we get it fast."

ICT's Web site also is a major resource for the outside sales people.

The Siamons have developed a proprietary system that automatically scans the 300 faxes that are received each day, offering sales and specials.

These are catalogued as they are scanned and entered into the site with a very sophisticated breakdown in access. This allows an individual agent in their network to check to see what specials are offered for cruising Alaska on a given week, or what price breaks are being offered by Carnival Cruise. Travel specials remain on the site for 60 days, then are automatically replaced.

Confirmations are also scanned into the system as they come in, and agents simply key in the confirmation numbers to access them; they can then print them, e-mail them or save them to files.

"We save them so much time, and we make sure that they don't miss any specials available; all this can be done on point of sale," Siamons said.

Outside sales agents who wish to join the network can contact the company with any questions or they can go online and get information and forms. "They fax the forms over, and within two hours they get the pass code that lets them into the full Web site; within three more hours they can download and install Sabre," Siamon said.

Willing to Learn

Although they try to discourage people who have no experience related to travel, they will accept them if they read books on running a home-based business. They have free Sabre school and offer support, but not instruction.

"We have gotten some very, very good people from other businesses," Siamon observed. "About 11 months ago, one came in who specializes in Apple Vacations. That's all she sells, and she's now up to about \$150,000 a month in Apple."

ICT's business has been increasing by at least 200 percent each year for the past eight years. Their numbers are growing at the rate of about four agents a week, although some are put off by the fact that ICT doesn't charge for membership.

"They think there must be something wrong," Siamon said. "I tell them, 'Here's our IATAN number; call any sales office and see what they say about our production and about any problems with us.'"

In terms of plans for the future, "We just want to do exactly what we're

doing, just do it more," Siamon said.

If you know an "Enterprising" sales person, frontline agent, manager, or owner let us know. Send information about their "Enterprising" sales or marketing initiative, or business strategy to [Donna Marino](#).

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