

By Jodi Ferguson

The newest member of the IMA-CC is really going places – and helping its clients to do the same.

Roadtrips Inc. is a premium supplier of travel with a twist. Corporations are rapidly realizing there is a high demand for the unique travel experiences offered by Roadtrips, making the company's products ideal for rewarding employees and customers alike.

Would you know how to get tickets for the Indy 500? How about the World Cup or Wimbledon? If sporting events are not your thing, how would you go about booking a trip to drive Porsches in the Dubai desert, or Ferraris in Tuscany? What about a food and wine experience in the south of France? Or shopping in Milan with tickets to La Scala?

Anyone can call a travel agent and book a trip to Cancun or Cuba, but the travel experiences offered by Roadtrips Inc. go far beyond the average getaway. The whole focus of Roadtrips is finding ways to make travel memorable and coming up with neat ideas people might not think of themselves, says Duane Penner, the company's vice-president of sales.

“We ask ourselves, what would we really like to do? What would really catch people's eye?” he says.

People want to do things that are different and exciting, Penner notes. Travel must offer special experiences to serve as an incentive because those rewards usually go to top producers who can readily book their own trips to Las Vegas or Hawaii. “They want to have interesting experiential travel – everything they've imagined plus some unique stuff.”

Roadtrips president Dave Guenther started the company while attending university in Winnipeg in the mid-1980s, running student-friendly bus trips to concerts, sporting events and spring break locations around North America. After completing a degree in commerce, he dabbled in financial services before realizing work should be fun. So he returned to the travel industry and founded Roadtrips. His first offerings revolved mainly around hockey travel but soon grew to include other sports, and later, other experiences as the demand for them grew. The company remains in Winnipeg – which Penner says offers affordable overhead and a convenient time zone for both east and west coasts -- and employs about 20 people.

About seven years ago, Roadtrips realized the potential of incentive marketing and began developing travel products specifically for the incentive market. The company joined the Incentive Marketing Association at that time and saw its sales to the incentive market take off.

Recognizing the new growth in the Canadian incentive market, the company recently joined IMA-CC. Penner says the United States has always represented the company's

biggest market because of its hunger for sporting events and its strong currency. But he says all that is changing as Canadians become more disposed to travel and are enjoying the benefits of a strong dollar.

Penner says there was a tremendous response to the company's first exhibit at the IMA-CC Incentive Works trade show in Toronto last August. People seem to love the idea of niche travel as incentives and rewards. "The idea of complete travel fulfillment in a variety of products ... they could see how their clients were going to be able to use this," he says.

Travel incentives become addictive. "One of the things that is nice about travel is you can never get enough of it," says Penner. It's possible to get enough of other rewards, but that is not the case with travel, especially as people become aware of unique destinations and want to experience those places themselves.

Satisfied clients cannot say enough good things about Roadtrips. Patty Chung, corporate communications and hospitality manager for Samsung Electronics Canada Inc., first came into contact with Roadtrips when Samsung's U.S. branch used the company to provide hospitality for the Superbowl. "They were really amazing," says Chung.

Chung was so impressed with Roadtrips that when her company launched an incentive program to thank its Canadian employees for a great sales year in 2005, they decided to take 100 employees and their families on a road trip from Toronto to Montreal for the Montreal Jazz Festival. Roadtrips hired luxury coaches, booked the hotels and arranged the meals. Chung recalls the company even thought to provide Tim Horton's coffee at the registration desk in the hotel. "It was those little details we were so impressed with. Everything was just really smooth."

As a global sponsor for the Torino Winter Olympics, Samsung again used Roadtrips to put together its hospitality program for an intimate group of about 30 senior executives. The offerings included hotels, transfers, restaurant meals, tickets to men's hockey and unexpected things like gifts placed in the guests' hotel rooms when they returned from supper.

"Everything was really thought out ... There was great care in the way they made their selections. We felt like we were the most important people in the restaurant," Chung recounts enthusiastically. "Every night they just blew us away."

Client reactions were so favourable that people were asking who put it all together. "Our customers were so impressed with the program they wanted to work with the company that helped bring it all together for us."

There is no question that Samsung will be doing business with Roadtrips again in the future, says Chung. "I would definitely go back to Roadtrips because they know what they're doing. It's great because we don't have to outsource to a U.S. company. They've

taken our hospitality program up a couple of notches. It's not cheap but you get what you pay for."

Penner admits that economy travel is not the focus of Roadtrips, especially not in the incentive market. But he says they try to work within a company's budget to create a memorable trip. "We can often create a very compelling experience for a variety of budgets."

The creative travel experiences offered by Roadtrips make the job much easier for people like Rose Bilak, partner relationship specialist with Maritz Canada Inc., a company specializing in integrated performance improvement, incentive travel, and marketing research services.

"My job is to create exceptional, really 'wow' experiences for members to redeem. I utilize Roadtrips all the time because they provide service and details and for me it's like a one-stop shop," says Bilak. "This is like a dream come true for me."

Bilak says "aspirational" rewards with a wealthy, VIP cachet like those provided by Roadtrips provide some of the strongest incentives. "Our sales dictate that because we see people redeeming this kind of reward. They don't want the blender and the mixer. They want to be rewarded with something that's beneficial to them. They want to go to the spa or the theatre."

Unique to Roadtrips is the company's willingness to book special trips for as few as two people. Other agencies will book similar trips, but only for large groups. Penner says corporations use Roadtrips because it takes all the work out of designing a trip. "Companies really like that. They don't have to research anything. We handle all the fulfillment."

While word of mouth from satisfied customers provides Roadtrips with its greatest marketing, the company also relies on a strong web presence and some direct marketing to sell its services. The Internet is a strong tool for Roadtrips, allowing corporations to check out its wide array of travel offerings at www.roadtrips.com, but Penner says most corporations later deal directly by telephone with the company's trip experts to design their incentive and rewards packages.