

There's Nothing Retiring About This Baby-Boomer

SCORE Helps P&G Retiree Create NextLevel Vacations Success



A room concern at a Caribbean resort introduced Berrece Andrews to a multi-million-dollar business idea, but it is advice from his SCORE counselors that he credits with his NextLevel Vacations success.

Andrews was retired for only one month in 2005 when he was already chafing under the burden of perpetual tee times. A world traveler with an entrepreneurial streak, he knew he had to do more with retirement than golf. A birthday trip with his wife, Adrian, to Puerto Plata Dominican Republic resulted in a room re-assignment. Having traveled the world with his job at P&G, he wanted to make certain they were treated right.

He ended up meeting the resort marketing and sales representatives and investing in a partnership to offer wholesale resort vacations to travelers and to nonprofit organizations to help with their fundraising needs. "For a while I didn't even know that I was a vacation wholesaler," he said. "All I knew was that I had access to unlimited vacations at resorts around the world. But at my level of investment, the worst thing that could happen was I'd become a hero with my family and friends in terms of future vacations."

After 33 years spent in the corporate world, he knew the importance of product, placement and pricing, but found starting a small business was an entirely different animal. He needed help branding, planning, and running his business. First off, Andrews didn't form his business to sell vacations himself. He formed it to develop strategic partnerships to sell resort vacations for him, because he still wanted time to golf and volunteer. Once he received access to his vacation inventory, he began looking for distribution channels for his vacation packages.

He knew he needed a Web site, an attorney, because he "thought necessary to have a legitimate business," he said. That's where SCORE came in. Andrews knew the importance of building a strong resource team from his corporate days. He had heard of SCORE, and called its West Chester office at the West Chester Chamber Alliance for help.

SCORE is a nonprofit arm of the Small Business Administration made up of working and retired executives who volunteer time and expertise to counsel small business owners and entrepreneurs. The Cincinnati SCORE chapter will sponsor 61 low-cost seminars this year and anticipates reaching almost 900 small business owners and entrepreneurs.

Counselors Jerry Agin and Bill Haman worked with Andrews for the past three years to help him brand his company, set financial goals, create a strategic business plan, and most importantly-- work the plan. Andrews began by meeting monthly with Agin, bringing in publications to familiarize Jerry with what he was doing. Then he started attending SCORE business seminars. "The seminars helped a lot," Andrews said, "because they were relevant. I could choose what topics were important to my development at that time. I met Bill Haman at one of the sessions and he and Jerry agreed that I needed to build an appropriate structure to support the processes for getting work done in the business."

Andrews knew what he wanted to do, but not exactly how he should do it. He had lots of ideas for the business. "We'd talk a lot about focus and opportunities," he said. "We developed a business plan focused on slow, methodical growth and to seize opportunity as it came along."

The two men also emphasized the importance of getting an attorney. Soon Andrews felt he had a legitimate business, but needed distribution for his vacation products and business partners to grow. "I had done a lot of volunteer work through the Boys and Girls Clubs, which is a wonderful organization to help disadvantaged youth. I also worked on a committee to start a fundraising partnership with the Arby's Charity Tour," Andrews said. "They do an annual fundraising golf tour in selected local communities with an auction component following golf, so I offered a private villa for sales in the auction."

He now provides vacation time at resorts around the world to charities and nonprofit organizations for their fundraising efforts on consignment. If an acceptable minimum bid is reached on an item, the charity sells the vacation, Andrews takes a pre-set administrative fee, and donates everything above the fee to the charity. He has also begun working with cMarket, an online auction fundraising firm, to extend his reach to hundreds of charities across the country.

Sales have been steady. Profit from all distribution channels helped NextLevel Vacations earn back its initial investment the first year, and earn six figures the next. The company is on track to reach revenues of a million dollars by 2010.

Lately Andrews has been concentrating on group sales—weddings, family reunions, group cruises, festivals through social networking Web sites-- and is developing a network of travel agents who will sell resort vacations for him. He has access to more than 5,000 resorts worldwide, but has chosen to focus on a few resorts where he has developed good relationships.

"If I had to list three things I've learned, it would be these," he said. "One is that the concept of branding is important, from creating an identity right down to the logo and colors. The second is to surround yourself with the necessary resources to help you, such as attorneys, accountants, advocates and organizations like SCORE. The third is to realize how important the choices you make are as you move ahead. Think big, but manage your capability; concentrate on slow, methodical growth, and provide a quality product."

The key to continued success, Andrews says, will be increased distribution and repeat business. He hired an administrative assistant in March to manage vacation fulfillment and to help customers with trip details. A plus has been his ability to develop and offer wholesale prices representing as much as 50 to 75 percent off the retail rack rate. He plans to help customers learn to travel wholesale, not retail.

"We are focused on planned and controlled growth," he said. "Our strategy is to control our growth consistent with our organizational capability to handle it. The control and reliability of our vacation delivery service and the quality of our customer service are key measures for the business." Andrews sees a bright future for vacation wholesaling as Baby Boomers retire, receive inheritances, and cherish their relationships with loved ones through travel. He also says he really doesn't want to work too hard, and if he finds himself getting up to go to work everyday, then he'll know he has failed.

Travel and leisure, he says, is a \$7 trillion business worldwide. "I'll be happy with a little slice of that," he said. Andrews and NextLevel Vacations was named the First Runner Up at the annual John J. Frank SCORE Client of the Year luncheon held Friday, Aug. 15 at Kenwood Country Club. A prominent feature story on NextLevel Vacations appeared in the September 17, 2008 Cincinnati Enquirer.

For information on wholesale vacations, contact www.nextlevelvacations.com.