

Careful planning and collaboration ensure smooth conversion

USTRAVEL TRUSTS SABRE TO HELP HANDLE GROWTH

It started with a few cups of coffee.

Mark Eliason, raised in Iowa, moved to Alaska in the 1970s and eventually developed commercial real estate in the oil boomtown of Prudhoe Bay. Eliason frequently stopped to chat with a tenant who ran a travel agency in the far north town. Eliason was also cold.

“It was warm inside and they always had coffee,” Eliason says.

Travel always fascinated him, and Eliason casually mentioned to the owner he might be interested in partnering someday. Eliason had no idea what a simple cup of coffee would lead to. But he soon found himself half owner of a travel agency. And, today, he’s owner and CEO of USTravel, headquartered in Anchorage.

“I’m naturally a curious person,” Eliason says. “I love the variety of my job. Each day is different. That’s what makes travel so exciting and interesting.”

In Alaska, unique and varied requests are everyday business for USTravel. Whether helping federal census workers access remote villages by riverboat, transporting workers to offshore oil rigs, or coordinating transit for 2,000 VIPs to the Olympics in Beijing, Eliason’s experienced team handles it all. USTravel has 15 regional branches and is the largest privately-held travel management company in the Pacific Northwest.

A TRAVEL MANAGEMENT COMPANY

USTravel has grown into several divisions, including corporate travel; meetings



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and events; and Alaskan adventure travel.

The large group meeting and incentive travel division, Air Fulfillment Services (AFS), handles travel and accommodations for thousands. One recent scenario: getting 1,200 people in and out of Indianapolis for the Super Bowl, in a four-day window.

He’s quick to point out the travel landscape has changed dramatically, and USTravel is a travel management company, helping manage all aspects of travel. His business mix is 75 percent corporate travel and 25 percent leisure.

PARTNER FOR GROWTH

As USTravel grew, it needed a reliable partner to support future expansion. So, it turned to Sabre.

“We were looking for a partner that would support our continued expansion,” Eliason says. “Sabre clearly stood out to us because they’re investing heavily not just for today, but for five years down the road, with both front- and back-end technology solutions.”

Chief Operating Officer Julie Crotts looks back on the decision to convert to Sabre technology.

“We’d simply come as far as we could with our previous GDS (global distribution system),” Crotts says. “As we’ve grown, we’ve gotten tired of piecing together older software. We wanted one GDS with dynamic systems that can all talk to one another easily. Sabre is one-stop shopping.”



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*Mark Eliason
President & CEO
USTravel*

SABRE SHOWED UP – BIG TIME

Eliason appreciated Sabre’s consultative approach.

“One thing that impressed me and our senior management team early on was that Sabre provided so many consulting resources, even before we’d actually selected them,” Eliason says.

Sabre teams spent two to three weeks in every USTravel office, Eliason says, observing work flow, getting to know USTravel people and the company’s business.

“Then they made smart recommendations that would really help us improve,” Eliason says.

For example, Sabre and USTravel implemented a system at AFS, USTravel’s large group meeting and incentive travel division, that helped simplify group reservations and data entry, Eliason says.

“For our staff, instead of having to enter passenger names and other info manually, the *QIK Developer* takes 40 percent of keystrokes and 100 percent of the errors away,” Eliason says. “This helps us focus attention on great customer service rather than data entry.”

“Sabre support and reliability helps us focus attention on great customer service.”

Mark Eliason
USTravel

It was Sabre all the way.

“Our team clearly saw the great ideas Sabre was bringing,” Eliason says. “When we asked our managers to vote, 43 of 44 voted for Sabre.”

SMOOTH, FLAWLESS SWITCH

Once the system conversion began, Sabre worked to make it as smooth as possible. The new implementation included all the major



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components of *Sabre Red - ClientBase*®, *GetThere*® and also *Sabre Web Services*®, for the custom development that was needed.

“Sabre’s people didn’t just work with us. They actually became part of our company,” Crofts says. “I know it sounds cliché, but that’s really how it happened. We have high standards here, we expect a lot. But Sabre sent great people, I was impressed.”

“Of course, there were bumps in the road, as you’d expect with any large project, but Sabre stayed with us the whole way,” Crofts says. “Whenever issues arose, their attitude was, ‘Let’s get it done right now. Let’s sit down and figure this out.’”

Sabre people were on the spot, she says.

“They didn’t try to punt to the corporate office and get back to me a week later,” Crofts says. “With 28 years in the travel industry, I’ve been involved in four big technology conversions and this was by far the best experience.”

STAYING AHEAD

- USTRAVEL IS THE LARGEST PRIVATELY-HELD TRAVEL MANAGEMENT COMPANY IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST.
- USTRAVEL IS ADDING ITS 15TH BRANCH OFFICE THIS YEAR IN PORTLAND, OREGON.
- USTRAVEL RECENTLY CONVERTED TO SABRE – VERY SMOOTH CONVERSION DUE TO CAREFUL PLANNING AND COLLABORATION.