

## AGENT REINVENTED

Leigh Padilla has made adapting to change her roadmap to success

BY KATE RICE

Leigh Padilla is continually reinventing herself. The onetime costume designer for members of rock bands such as America and Steppenwolf is now one of Altour's top-selling agents at home. She has tripled her revenues in the past two years, and so far has not felt the effects of the current economic slowdown.

In her current incarnation as the owner of World Leigh Travel, Sherman Oaks, Calif., she's specializing in high-end travel for clients who fly by private jet from one city to another in Europe, stay at hotels such as the Ritz in Paris and Claridge's in London, and combine a safari to Botswana with a laid-back beach vacation in the Seychelles. She built her business from scratch.

"I started out with zero," she says. Designing clothing for rock bands was so all-consuming that she decided she wanted to move over to the business side of entertainment. But with only a high school diploma, she had no training. She decided to get the best business education she could by working for Jerry Weintraub, an icon in the entertainment world who has produced decades of movie hits (the Ocean's series are among his latest) and managed stars such as Bob Dylan, John Denver and Frank Sinatra.

Padilla spent seven years learning to run a business with Mr. Weintraub, as she still calls him. As time went on, she began booking his travel and enjoyed it so much that she enrolled in a travel certification program. She grew more enamored with the business of travel in her next job as personal assistant for Miss Ellie on the TV hit "Dallas." That involved a lot of on-location work, and as a result, she decided she wanted to do entertainment travel. She also wanted to be her own boss, so she started out as an independent contractor with a company called Rodeo Travel in Beverly Hills. She began booking the travel for film crews.

In the mid-1990s, commission caps and cuts hit, hurting her film business, so she shifted to doing television com-

mercials and music videos. These were much shorter, taking a few weeks out of her life instead of several months, and were more lucrative. As the advertising world changed, budgets tightened, and she moved out of commercials, although she still does a few, and now specializes in



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high-end leisure and corporate travel. All along, she drew on her connection from her previous professional lives to build her client base, sending her customers letters and meeting with them in their offices to tell them about her new business.

"The only way you can make money in this day and age is to establish a niche for yourself," she says. She sends her clients all over the world; her niche is the ultra-luxury segment. She takes advantage of her own connections, as well as Altour's own preferred suppliers and

industry connections. She also networks with her fellow home-based agents at Altour, and with agents she meets on fam trips and industry events.

Her other key to success: offering her clients 24/7 service. She's always available; even on vacation she checks her BlackBerry and cell phone. She also takes advantage of Altour's support services to take care of her clients. And, if she really wants to get away, she has a long-term relationship with another agent at home who will cover for her.

She is highly targeted in her marketing, doing things such as telling her clients about a new hotel or upgrades to a classic resort that she knows they'll enjoy. She once sent out a flyer about an attractive deal to Tahiti and made about 23 sales from that.

Good followup and paying attention to detail are her credo.

She has an email file for every client. She'd learned shorthand while working for Weintraub (because he talked so fast, she says), and takes detailed notes on her telephone conversations with clients. After the call, she sends them and their assistants an email summarizing their discussions and what actions she'll take based on those conversations. She asks them to make any notes or tell her of any changes they'd like to make. She does this because clients might say something over the phone that sounds good, but when they see it in black and white they may change their minds.

She has a high retention rate, and for the most part she will accept a new client only if another client refers that person to her. That referral is something of a vetting process—the experiences of her fellow agents have demonstrated that an agent can be defrauded.

And, she keeps traveling herself. She believes it makes her a better saleswoman. "Once you see a property and love it, you can sell it like hotcakes because your enthusiasm comes over the phone," she says. @