



Passion for Progress - 12/16/2002

By Marty Wentzel

Sho Dozono's response to the Sept. 11 terror attacks helped earn the Azumano Travel President ASTA's 2002 Travel Agent of the Year award. In presenting Dozono with the award, ASTA President Richard Copland honored his success not only as an agency leader but a champion of Oregon as a leisure and business travel destination.

"Sho's commitment and devotion to the travel industry and ASTA is evident in everything he does," Copland said in a released statement. Shortly after Sept. 11, Dozono organized a group of 1,000 Oregon business and community leaders to travel to New York City.

"We were the first large contingent to fly across the country after the terrorist attacks," he said. "We wanted to make a statement that we can take back our lives from the terrorism that threatened to paralyze us."

The project, Flight For Freedom, also helped earn Azumano Travel the American Express Great Performers award.

Dozono's high-profile leadership, which he has demonstrated throughout more than 25 years in the travel industry, has paid off.

Azumano Travel has expanded from five employees in one location in 1976, to 250 employees in 13 locations today.

Revenue has grown from \$1.5 million in 1976 to a projected \$120 million in retail sales and \$38 million in air consolidator sales for 2002.

Responding to Adversity

Over the years, Dozono's quick and innovative responses to challenges have helped Azumano Travel thrive.

Like all agency owners, he found Azumano Travel in a crisis on the morning of Sept. 11, and he knew he had to come up with an immediate plan to offset the economic impact the terrorist attacks would have.

On Sept. 12, to help keep the company afloat, Dozono convinced 78 members of his staff to either work as volunteers or go on furlough.

By Sept. 20, he had furloughed 35 more people, and the remaining 215 employees scaled back to a four-day workweek, all of which reduced the payroll by more than 30 percent.

At the same time, Dozono completed the agency's business plan for the next three months.

"I anticipated a 30 percent reduction in business, and while it was purely guesswork, I guessed right," he said. "Because of our quick actions we actually eked out a profit of several thousand dollars per month in the fourth quarter of 2001."

By January, 90 percent of Azumano's staff was back on the job, with the entire work force reinstated to five days a week in February.

Years earlier in 1995, when the airlines imposed commission caps, Dozono set out to track down every hotel commission his agency had earned, no matter how small. His efforts resulted in a \$60,000 increase in monthly collections for the year.

"People told me hotel commissions were too hard to come by," Dozono said. "But if you put your mind to it, you can collect the revenue you deserve."

Future Growth

Dozono sets goals and makes plans for reaching them. For the coming year, he has outlined a characteristically aggressive strategy.

"We'll grow by 25 percent and \$30 million next year," he predicted. "We're going outside of Oregon and bidding on national accounts, since the Pacific Northwest is leading the country in unemployment."

It helps that Azumano Travel is the only American Express representative in Oregon and Southwest Washington, an affiliation that began in 2001. As the firm reaches out to national accounts, Dozono relies heavily on the use of e-tickets, which he called "a life-saver."

"E-tickets are the single factor that has allowed us to expand beyond our geographic boundaries," he said. "There's no way I can deliver tickets to people in 50 states."

But if Dozono were able to distribute each ticket personally, he probably would.

"It's been said before, but this business is all about relationships," he said. "There's no magic in it. Agencies need to nurture relationships with customers, vendors and their own employees. If they don't, they won't make it."

Dozono developed his own people skills in the 1970s as a high school history teacher. In 1976 he joined Azumano Travel, which was founded in 1949 by his father-in-law George Azumano, because he wanted to participate in the family business.

In 1980 Dozono joined the agency's management team, and noticing that the average turnover for travel agents was two years, he set out to lengthen their stays.

"I figured if I could keep agents on staff for a longer period of time, I'd be more profitable." Today he has employees who have been with him for more than 20 years. The secret?

"I treat them with the utmost respect, showing them that I value what they do," he said. "Our staff is the product we offer our customers."

High-Profile Agency

Dozono nurtures relationships outside the agency as well, building Azumano Travel's reputation in the community.

"We try to be a good corporate citizen," he said. "We have established a solid reputation by staying engaged in local affairs."

Leading by example, Dozono has chaired Portland's 1,700-member Chamber of Commerce, served as commissioner of the Port of Portland and president of the Portland Oregon Visitors Association, and he has sat on such boards as the Portland Public Schools Foundation and Portland Art Museum.

"This type of local involvement has led us to quite a few corporate clients," Dozono said.

The largest is Wells Fargo, representing about \$40 million in air and another \$12 million in hotel and car business.

"We beat out some pretty big agencies for the Wells Fargo corporate account," he said. "We believe there are customers like Wells who want service above price or size."

In anticipation of the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, Dozono solicited donations from corporations and local supporters to promote Portland as a stop along the Olympic torch's relay route.

"The motive was to put Portland on the map," he said. "We're a major city and I'm proud of it."

The Olympics committee acknowledged his efforts by choosing him as one of Portland's torchbearers.

Seizing the Moment

As the company has blossomed, so has Dozono's ability to recognize and seize opportunities. In 2001, for instance, when the Seattle Mariners acquired Japanese superstar Ichiro Suzuki, Azumano Travel became a licensed travel partner of the Mariners, bringing thousands of Japanese baseball fans to the games ever since.

And, as co-chair of the International Air Service Committee, Dozono led efforts to secure Lufthansa's nonstop flights between Portland and Frankfurt, Germany, the city's first direct European service. Portland beat out several cities vying for the service, which Lufthansa will launch on Mar. 31, 2003.

"The new flights represent a huge opportunity for us to connect with Europe," Dozono said. "We earned it by presenting the airline with a business case, demonstrating that Portland is a perfect fit for them and that the business community will support the nonstop service."

The Portland-Frankfurt sale fares that Lufthansa offered on Oct. 23 sold more than 8,000 seats in one month, with Azumano selling more than 450 tickets in 20 days, he said.

With characteristic foresight, Dozono is taking advantage of the new air service in part by promoting travel to Athens, Greece, for the 2004 Summer Olympic Games and weekly tours to various European destinations.

"We see 2003 and 2004 as Europe, Europe, Europe on Lufthansa, Lufthansa, Lufthansa," he said.