



Milford travel agency prospers despite tough times

By **Bob Tremblay/Daily News staff**
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MILFORD — In recent years, the economy has been as kind to the travel business as a plane full of screaming babies to an insomniac on a nonstop flight from Boston to Sydney.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, jobs supported by the global travel and tourism industry declined 1.9 percent in 2009 and global revenues dropped 3.5 percent.

The International Air Transport Association, the association that represents most of the world's major airlines, projected a global airline industry net loss at \$9 billion for 2009. That follows a net loss of \$10.4 billion in 2008.

Not surprisingly, bankruptcy grounded many airlines while hotel occupancy took a hit in 2008 and 2009 as well, and numerous major hotel construction projects have either been canceled or put on hold.

Yet at least one company is bucking this negative trend - Atlas Travel International. The Milford-based firm was recently ranked 10th on the list of the Top 50 Fastest Growing Women-led Businesses by the Women Presidents' Organization, a national nonprofit, and American Express Open, the small business division of American Express. The list points out that Atlas' gross revenue has grown from \$130 million to \$150 million in just two years.

Also, aided by a 9.7 percent sales increase in 2009, Atlas recently moved up eight slots to rank 44th on this year's Travel Weekly Power List. Researched by a travel industry publication, the list is designed to annually rank the country's top travel sellers.

To support further growth and drive more in-house technology initiatives, Atlas recently added a director of technology and automation.

"We see economic challenges as an opportunity to look for gaps in the travel industry that need to be filled as other companies recede or change their business models," says Atlas founder and CEO Elaine Osgood. "We believe in finding the right people to do the right job and that is reflected in our continued success."

The Westborough resident, who was named the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year for New England in 2006, recently discussed her company with Daily News staff writer Bob Tremblay.

QUESTION: How did you come up with the company name?

ANSWER: The original name of the company was Uniglobe Atlas Travel. When the franchise agreement expired, we simply dropped the Uniglobe and became Atlas Travel. When we started doing business outside of the United States, we became Atlas Travel International.

QUESTION: Why was the business started?

ANSWER: In 1986, Atlas Travel International began when I decided to make a career change after a decade of serving children as an elementary school teacher and social worker. I bought a travel agency franchise, opened an office in Milford with one employee, no customers and travel experience that included only personal vacations.

In 1997, after winning many franchise awards, I discarded the training wheels and jumped into the arena as Atlas Travel International, ready to compete with the country's largest travel agencies.

Perseverance, innovation and unyielding dedication to customer service have catapulted the agency into an award-winning corporation with a satellite office in St. Louis, Mo., and a list of 50,000 customers traveling on business and vacation worldwide.

Now, as one of an elite group of independent agencies chosen to represent BCD Travel, Atlas is an exclusive northeast regional affiliate for this \$13 billion travel network.

I have always believed that the way to best serve travelers is to hire travel professionals with unique skills, knowledge and 100 percent dedication to customer service.... I remain dedicated to winning business one customer at a time.

QUESTION: Do you have other businesses?

ANSWER: We own Savvy Travel Shop, a travel fashions and travel goods boutique in Milford.

QUESTION: What does your company sell?

ANSWER: We sell anything and everything as it relates to travel. That includes corporate travel, vacation planning, meetings, individual and group incentives.

Also, through Savvy Travel Shop, we sell travel fashions, luggage and travel accessories.

QUESTION: What makes you different from the competition?

ANSWER: Atlas sets itself apart because of the founder values we live by here. My focus is people, relationships and how to make every encounter a win-win situation. The power of one is established in every employee's first meeting with me when I give them the company philosophy. Each employee is given a wallet card with "What We Value," an employee-conceived reminder of the Atlas Travel International core values:

Respect: We strive to hold an appreciation and sense of worth for the people we encounter every day.

Vision: We work to craft solutions that propel our company and industry to new levels of excellence.

Compassion: We foster a sense of empathy and understanding for our customers and teammates.

Integrity: We use our talents in the spirit of honesty and uphold sound ethical principles in all of our business activities. We do what we say we will do.

Dedication: We commit ourselves to personal and professional excellence in all we endeavor.

I also maintain an open-door policy and I am willing to listen to questions, concerns and personal issues. I make an effort to empower supervisors to do the same with staff and to let me know when real problems arise.

I guess it all comes down to the fact that we care. We care about our employees, our vendors and, most importantly, our customers.

QUESTION: Any business news?

ANSWER: Our transactions are up 15 percent over last year.

QUESTION: Any other news?

ANSWER: Our new director of technology and automation has been hired to keep Atlas ahead of the curve with custom, fully mobile-enabled solutions for every facet of travel. Atlas is able to provide "the smart trip" through a complete suite of Atlas TravelSMART solutions for everything from online booking, trip approval, secure profile management and unused ticket tracking to completely

mobile-enabled itineraries, flight updates, e-invoices for expense reconciliation and more.

Atlas is known as an innovator when it comes to technology, and its size and agile methodology allows solutions to be developed and customized for individual company needs in very short time frames.

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