

COVER STORY



NANCY STRONG is flanked by her son, Jim (left) and her husband, Ace (right). They are shown at The Rachofsky House in Dallas. Photo by John Derryberry

Strong Travel Family Ties

Nancy and Jim Strong Take Luxury Service to the Extreme

If not for the coffee, Strong Travel Services might never have come into existence.

In 1975, Nancy Strong had secured her first job for a travel agency, which entailed driving around Dallas to deliver airline tickets for \$2 an hour. So seriously she took this simple responsibility that she dressed to the nines in white gloves and a hat every day. And why not? It was her very first job; until now she had focused primarily on raising her five young sons and maintaining a home in Dallas with her husband, Ace.

When the agency suddenly lost three people, Strong was moved into a full-time position, handling the travel for the International Newspaper Association. "The phone would ring and they'd say, 'New York Times calling Nancy Strong'... 'Chicago Tribune calling Nancy Strong.' This was big stuff to me," she recalls.

Then the memo came out. It decreed that the women in the office would have to make coffee for the three men who worked there. Strong refused and was fired on the spot.

Not missing a beat, she joined forces with a friend to launch her own agency in a 60-story building in Dallas, where from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. each morning, they'd ride the elevator, chatting loudly about the fabulous new travel agency that had just opened on the 10th floor; that agency just happened to be theirs.

The corporate travel business was an immediate success, growing eventually to six additional locations in downtown Dallas.

"I literally put my wagons around the block because each building became a small city in itself of corporate business," says Strong. A. Strong Travel, as it was known

from 1975 to 1987, blossomed into a \$30 million enterprise with 55 employees.

The business from its inception was a family affair. Nancy's son Jim had started as a part-timer while still in high school, delivering tickets throughout the academic year and chasing down hotel commissions during summer vacations. By 1978, he was a full-fledged corporate reservationist. After a long and successful career in the world of finance, Nancy's husband, Ace, joined the agency in 1980 to help guide its dramatic growth. (To this day, Nancy credits Ace for being her key advisor. "He is the most incredible teacher in the world. I give all the credit for my success to my husband," she says.)

A. Strong's success caught the eye of a local businessman who offered to buy the company. Nancy demanded cash. He paid her on a Friday, she and Ace took a noncompete, and made their exit. Three days later, on Black Monday, October 19, 1987, the stock market

went into free fall. Within 18 months, A. Strong Travel was out of business.

The Strongs got back into the game when they purchased Marilou Sargent & Associates Travel Specialists, Inc., a leisure agency catering to the carriage trade, which had never sold a corporate airline ticket. The agency was an original member of API, which became Virtuoso. Nancy's passion for selling luxury travel to the affluent Dallas community led to an event that could be considered just short of a miracle by any seller of affluent travel: In 1993, a profile appeared of her on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, which glowingly painted the high level of service Nancy extended to her clients. The article noted the personalized touches she provided, such as wrapping vacation documents in a best-selling novel she knew her clients would enjoy or faxing them the latest baseball scores while they were sailing on a cruise ship.

The article put her on the map internationally: VIPs far and wide now wanted Nancy Strong as their luxury travel advisor.

To this day, she is still working with many of those clients, and while she is CEO of the firm, her entire focus is on selling travel. Jim Strong, the agency's president, spends 75 percent of his time selling. Combined, the mother and son's personal book of business holds 500 to 600 clients. The agency as a whole, with more than \$30 million a year in revenue, has 5,000 clients, corporate and leisure combined.

The Strongs are discreet about their clientele; however, they will reveal that their roster includes the CEOs of many Fortune 500 companies. That list is complemented by a generous portion of über-affluent clients from

STRONG TRAVEL SERVICES

Headquarters: Dallas

CEO: Nancy Strong

President: Jim Strong

Number of Agents: Nine full-time consultants; nine inhouse independent contractors; 18 home-based agents

Business Mix: Leisure: 55 percent; Corporate: 30 percent; Groups: 15 percent

Annual Revenue: In excess of \$30 million

Website: www.strongtravel.com

Affiliation: Virtuoso

BY RUTHANNE TERRERO



JIM STRONG FOLLOWED in his parents' footsteps; he is currently the president of Strong Travel Services.

LUXURY CLIENTS: It's not safe to assume

Jim Strong says that it's important to propose all sorts of travel to your clients, because you never know what might be their secret, hidden dream. "You could have a 75-year-old client who has been around the world, and you wouldn't think that they would want to go river rafting in Utah. But you know what? Maybe they've been waiting all their life to go do that. So sending those oddball ideas to clients sometimes sparks an interest, and what you think that client has absolutely no interest in is sometimes what hits the nail right on the head. Don't ever assume."

At the same time, not all luxury clients are alike, he adds.

"We could sit here and say, 'Oh, we have these fabulous clients and they're all millionaires and they all stay in suites.' Not everybody wants a suite, however, so it's up to us to personalize what the customer wants. You might have a husband and wife that wants a two-bedroom suite or you might have a large family that wants to get crammed into two connecting rooms. My planning is all geared toward how they want things delivered to them."

the Dallas market.

Nancy stresses that the name of the agency is Strong Travel Services and because it caters to such an elite clientele, it's necessary to go above and beyond what's expected. "We are in the service business. Since I opened the doors, I've always said you have to have an understanding of service," she says. "You don't leave at 5 p.m. if someone needs something. You're there to take care of the client."

"Many of our clients own their own jets and do a great deal of multi-generational family travel," says Jim Strong. "Many are cultural

travelers. We have a lot of art collectors who go on buying trips, whether it's to Art Basel in Switzerland or Miami or to the Venice Biennale. We also have a lot of people who are just looking for a quick getaway. We do large groups of friends. Nancy and I really don't do group travel, but we'll do 12 couples at a time. We've just done a charter of the *Eclipse* down to the Galapagos for a family who's inviting other families to join them.

"We handcraft our trips," he continues. "We tailor-make them to the individual so that they have a unique texture and a unique

feel to the individual trip. That's what we do. We piece the hotel, we piece the driver, we piece the restaurant, we piece the sightseeing activities and so on."

Fabulous shopping tips also find their way into the extensively detailed itineraries the agency provides to its clients. Nancy recently advised a client about where she could find "knock-off" Hermès wallets for \$80 in a certain bazaar in Istanbul. Her client, whom she was certain never buys knock-offs, "went out of her mind buying them, she thought it was the greatest tip she ever got."

The wealth of knowledge that the Strong family bring to the table is culled from their many experiences on the road, which enables them to give their clients insider tips. "We give them the names of certain people. For example, at a restaurant, we'll say, 'Please ask for so and so and mention my name,'" says Nancy, who has already traveled a great deal this year, venturing out to Punta Mita and San Miguel Allende, Mexico, Turkey, Greece, London, Paris, Venice, Florence, Rome and Sardinia. She emphasizes, however, that she won't go somewhere unless she is going to truly learn about or see something that will assist her in selling. "I like to be with people who understand what we're looking at, particularly in terms of luxury," she says.

Because she personally knows so many suppliers around the globe, Nancy is known as the "Texas Hammer" around the office.

"If someone here is at their desk and they're somewhat frustrated because they can't clear space, they'll say, 'Nancy, please call whoever you know and see if you can make something happen.' I do have amazing relationships around the world and I have such good friends, so I feel very fortunate."

Jim, too, travels a great deal, checking out new properties and ensuring that the accommodations he is booking for his clients will be on par with their expectations, or to simply clear space for them.

"I've flown all over the world to look at villas, to make certain the villas will work for our customers and to get that villa space when they wouldn't give it to me. I've done it frequently," he says. He is also on Virtuoso's Hotels Committee and travels on behalf of

the association to review properties. One could say he's passionate about hotels; in fact, he's written a book on the topic called *Craving for Travel: Luxury Experiences for the Sophisticated Traveler*. A second book is currently in the works.

In September, he'll travel to Japan to personally meet with the guides the agency has used in the past and to find additional options for his clients.

Sometimes, there's the need to assist a customer with issues that don't involve an itinerary. One day, Jim received a phone call from the personal assistant of a very important client who had dropped her BlackBerry in The Grand Canal while traveling in Venice. Jim got the call from her personal assistant and promised to FedEx a replacement. However, since he had planned to travel to Europe within the next few days, he rearranged his schedule to fly to Italy so that he could personally deliver a new device.

"It was a customer that I had for many, many years, who is very, very dear to me, and they were on an extended trip throughout Europe," says Jim. When he arrived at the Palazzo Bauer, the client had already gone to dinner. He tracked her down in the restaurant, where she was dining with a large group of friends; many from the Dallas area.

"I walked in and they were very happy to see me, but when I delivered the BlackBerry, she was very, very floored. Then I met all the people around the table, who are all now clients of mine," he says, grinning.

In another instance, right after September 11, the Strong's had a photographer client on assignment in South Africa. His concern that increased security at the airports might mean that his film would receive an increased X-ray dosage, convinced him to leave it all behind, even though it was for an incredibly important assignment. When he returned home, he called Jim Strong. "I need to get my film," he said. Recognizing how dire the situation was, Jim flew Andrew Rocchio, one of his agents, to South Africa to retrieve the package. Rocchio left on a Friday, picked up the film, had it hand-checked when he went through security and delivered it to the client on Monday.

Strong Travel Services' employees are extremely important to Nancy and Jim; many have been with them for years and have traveled all over the globe together. Jim personally leads the entire agency, salaried consultants and independent contractors combined, on three trips throughout the year. In the past, they've traveled to Istanbul, London, Paris, Venice, New York, San Francisco, Santa Fe,

Miami and Lake Como, Italy. Next stop: Scottsdale, AZ.

Jim says the trips, which certainly bond the staff together, tend to create immediate selling results as well. For example, after a visit to The Ritz-Carlton, Key Biscayne, the manager called to tell Jim that business from Strong Travel Services had shot up by 600 percent.

At the end of it all, what's clear from spending a full day with Nancy, Ace and Jim Strong is that they are a family that works beautifully together. According to Nancy, it's about respecting each other's talents. "When the three of us sit down to discuss something, we understand the strength of that person's comments because they're the one dealing with it," she says. "If it's about numbers, Ace is there at the desk looking at the numbers. Jimmy is over there discussing contracts and I'm over here discussing the sale. So, at the end of the day, the three of us have the ability to bring our heads together. There doesn't seem to be any disagreements, there's no screaming, yelling or gnashing of teeth at this point."

At this point, after 33 years of working together, it looks like the formula is working.

"We come to work every day and we try to do the very best job we can," says Nancy. "We have an understanding of service and what service is all about." ■

NANCY STRONG travels all over the world to garner insider secrets for her clients. She is shown here in Dubai.

