

# Rob Dexter sails into travel business

By Carol Johnstone  
Special Features Writer

Rob Dexter got into the travel business by accident through his passion for sailing.

"I've had some kind of sailboat since I was 12 year old," he says.

In 1974, while at Dalhousie law school, he bought Halifax Harbour Tours. You can still see the Haligonian IH he owned down at tire wharf at Historic Properties.

Mr. Dexter ran the operation part-time while working at what later became the Stewart McKelvey Sterling Scales law firm. Then, in the late '70s, he bought shares in a financially troubled Maritime Travel. He says he got involved "really to just get it fixed and sold."

But, tire first year he and his partner Jim Smith made a little money. Mr. Smith managed the business full-time, while Mr. Dexter remained as a silent partner continuing to work at his law practice, primarily representing the Sobey's group.

Gradually, the business took more and more of his time, until finally in 1987 he decided to go full-time at Maritime Travel. He liked the business. He discovered he liked travel itself and he liked talking about it.

"When I was practising law, people didn't want to talk about law," he says, but now when he's at various events, "people know I'm in travel so that's what they talk about. I like that."

The second reason is "people in the business are really upbeat," he says. "If you see any group of travel people anywhere as a group, they're very talkative; they're very open."

While he doesn't practise law actively any more, he's still a partner at Stewart McKelvey and serves on many boards representing the Sobey's Empire, Sobey's Inc., Highliner, and Wajax, a heavy equipment company. He also serves on the boards of Aliant and Maritime Life.

As president and CEO of Maritime Marlin Travel, Mr. Dexter's brought the company from 33 branches and sales of \$76 million annually in the mid '90s to 65 branches serving more than 100,000 Maritimers and sales of \$140 million in 2001.

The company's done so well that Maritime Marlin won a place among the 50 Best Managed Companies in Canada. Mr. Dexter is quite proud of the fact that they have won three consecutive years running — 1999, 2000 and 2001.

Mr. Dexter has applied his law skills to his business by carefully observing what works in other companies and applying it to his own business.



Rob Dexter, president and CEO of Maritime Marlin Travel, has brought the company from 33 branches<sup>8</sup> and sales of \$76 million annually in the mid '90s to 65 branches serving more than 100,000 Maritimers and sales of \$140 million in 2001.

"A lot of the practices we have here, I've copied," he says. "I think it's probably my legal background. Lawyers basically copy things, that's what they call a precedent."

He's used numerous models, learning and observing from the boards he's on, and learning a lot from his participation in the Young Presidents Organization. He's been going every year for the past five to Harvard for the week-long Young Presidents Seminar. To belong to YPO, you must be a company president and under 40 years old.

"The initial idea was that younger presidents wouldn't have the same network that the more established would have. That's why they graduate us when we're 50, because we're getting too old. It's true, I have a much better network at this age than I would when I joined in '87."

Mr. Dexter turns 50 this year, "so this is my graduation year," he says. He's learned a lot through the years though. At a YPO University in Yokohama, Japan, one year he learned that measurement matters.

Mr. Dexter had heard of the 20/80 rule but hadn't believed it applied to travel. Then he heard of a Canadian resource which had developed the first frequent flyer plan. It presented stats showing that, in the airline business, 20 per cent of the clients

give 80 per cent of the revenue, business and leisure. Mr. Dexter said to himself, "those are my customers he's talking about!"

He went back and took measurements of his own and discovered it was true. Ten per cent of leisure clients gave Maritime Marlin 47 per cent of its revenue and 20 per cent gave it 66 per cent. In business travel, the statistics were similar, 10 per cent gave 50 per cent and 20 per cent gave 67 per cent.

With his management team, he developed better tracking programs to streamline the travel process so that counsellors could focus more on personal interaction with the client. Another practice Maritime Marlin has adapted is to give counsellors opportunities to become partners.

"If you've been with us at least seven or eight years and your sales are good and your customer service is good, you can qualify to be a partner, which entitles them to profit sharing within a branch," Mr. Dexter says.

Partnership also confers shared management responsibilities. For example, no one can force a hire without consensus among the partners. There are now about 60 partners in the system.

Mr. Dexter uses what he calls 360 degree feedback to measure per-

formance among his associates and managers. Because of the partnership system, the feedback is voluntary and not tied to compensation. This involves an annual survey that includes comments from those above, below and at the same level as the manager. It's all consolidated and scored.

"Once a year they get a sense of feedback and it's fairly specific on things they're doing or not doing and things that need to be improved. A lot of it will be complimentary," he says. "The managers really pay attention to their scores, even though it won't change the compensation."

For their own leisure activities, Mr. Dexter and his wife Deanna, alternate sailing their new Beneteau 41 yacht up and down the Nova Scotia coast during the short summer season with chartering a boat and sailing around the Virgin Islands for a week or two.

In the winter they like to downhill ski. One of their favourite places to ski is at Vail, in Colorado, where "besides the fact it's a big hill, it's not that cold at Christmas. I like to ski, but I don't like the cold," he says.

At press time, he will have just come back and be on his way to Toronto to the 50 Best Companies Gala to accept his award.