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## Using technology to make his agency fly

Donald Johnson has guided Town & Country Travel through the post-Sept. 11 industry slowdown

By MEGAN E. CONNOR

While some avoid new technologies, Donald Johnson, president and part-owner of Town & Country Travel Inc., embraces them.

He keeps the following motto on his desk and reads it often: "The lesson: New technologies can put entire industries out of business. But the same technologies can open doors, too, for entrepreneurs with the courage to walk through them."

Johnson believes technology—including a software program called Cliqbook, a Web-based service that helps his agents and clients manage travel itineraries—sets his agency apart from competitors.

The software allows agents and clients to see every Internet fare available, he says. It brings new meaning to comparison shopping.

"The technology has really changed the dynamics," he says.

Johnson's focus on technology helped make him a finalist for the 2001 eBusiness Executive of the Year award. He also was nominated for the 2000 Small Business Person of the Year. Both reflect his leadership at the 14-employee firm, based in Bushnell's Basin.

"I consider myself an entrepreneur at heart and a somewhat subtle (type) A personality," he says. "I like to seek out the challenge, meet it, try to resolve it and go forward. Those are some of the things that motivate me as an individual."

Johnson and his wife, Teresa, bought Town & Country Travel in 1996. It was a 12-year-old agency generating some \$1 million in sales. Since then, the Johnsons have grown the agency into a \$7.5 million to \$8 million business. Its top accounts include Agrilink Foods Inc., the University of Rochester and CooperVision Inc.

"We don't do business with Town & Country; we do business with Don Johnson," says Dennis Mullen, chairman and CEO of Agrilink Foods and a five-year client of the agency. "We do business around Don Johnson's commitment: the constant, constant, constant assurance to service."

Peter Robinson, vice president and chief operating officer of the University of



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

**TRAVELING MAN**—Donald Johnson, president of Town & Country Travel Inc., has used technology to give his company a competitive edge. The firm logged \$7.8 million in revenues in 2001.

Rochester Medical Center, says Town & Country has been handling a sizable part of URM's travel business for 14 years or more.

"I've been so impressed with how cus-

tommer-friendly and proactive Don is," Robinson says.

Before acquiring Town & Country, John-

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son had worked for 12 years as vice president and director of operations at Grinnell Travel Agency Inc., the local American Express representative. But he longed to run his own agency.

His wife left a career in advertising and a successful home-based business to learn the accounting side of the travel industry. She is CEO and majority owner of Town & Country. He handles the agency's sales and marketing, and serves as the face and voice of the agency.

The couple grew the company in an unusual way. They recruited people they knew were talented travel agents—he had worked with many of them in the past—by focusing on flexibility and family, Johnson says.

"We're parents," he says. "We know what it's like to have a sick kid."

### Flexible workplace

Agents at Town & Country enjoy flexible schedules, coming and going during the workday. The flexibility gives them a chance to see their children's recitals or care for a sick family member. The agency thrives as a result, Johnson says.

"We've built a staff so loyal that my turnover is less than 5 percent (since 1996)," he says. "We just don't have turnover."

A loyal staff allows Johnson to be the kind of business owner he has always wanted to be.

"I basically just have to act as a leader, not as a manager," he says. "Managers make people do things; leaders make people want to do things."

Johnson, 42, lives with his wife and their two daughters, Lindsay, 14, and Natalie, 11, in Webster. He grew up in Utica, and earned a bachelor's degree in business management, with a focus on marketing, from Rochester Institute of Technology in 1984.

While he lives and works in the Rochester area, Johnson maintains strong ties to Utica. His family and his wife's family still live in the city east of Syracuse. He also is part of a close-knit group of more than a dozen Utica natives who live in Rochester and support one another.

The group includes Angelo Nole, executive vice president of CB Richard Ellis; Robert Noonan, president and CEO of Real Lease Inc.; and James Magee, president and CEO of Paradigm Environmental Services Inc.

"We all ended up in our businesses. The one common bond is this long-standing, hard-to-break friendship," Johnson says. "We just basically looked at Rochester as an economic diamond."

Johnson strives to give back to his adopted city. He is a board member and trustee



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

**Johnson: "I basically just have to act as a leader, not as a manager. Managers make people do things; leaders make people want to do things."**

of Hillside Children's Center and past chairman of the annual Hillside Skins Challenge golf tournament. He also is a board member of the local chapter of the American Heart Association and has helped organize the American Red Cross' Fire and Ice Ball.

Johnson's passion for those community organizations encourages other local businesspeople to become involved, Agrilink's Mullen says.

"I'm involved in more damn things now because of Don Johnson," he says, laughing. "He is such an engaging individual."

### Pro-Rochester

URMC's Robinson calls Johnson a community booster.

"I think Don, personally, is just a very upbeat, pro-Rochester, pro-business person," Robinson says.

In his off-time, Johnson enjoys playing golf, taking family vacations to Cape Cod and watching his daughters grow into two different, yet equally charming young women.

"My daughters are at an age when it's fun to hang with them," he says. "My oldest is an avid golfer and plays varsity golf for Webster. It's such a humbling sport."

Natalie, his younger child and a bit of an artist, is completely carefree, Johnson says.

"She's just totally different," he says. "Nothing bothers her."

Every summer, the family rents a house in Chatham, Mass., for seven days of sunshine, rest and relaxation.

Cape Cod is among his favorite vacation destinations. But a sailing trip in Venezuela, a visit to Hong Kong shortly before it reverted to Chinese rule, and a tour of the Grand Canyon rank among the Johnsons' most memorable travel experiences.

"The Grand Canyon was probably the most awe-inspiring vacation we've ever been on," he says. "It was just incredible."

Trips to England, Ireland and the rest of Europe are planned for future years,

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Johnson says.

## Vocation and avocation

Traveling is one of Johnson's favorite pastimes, and the basis for his livelihood. He realizes all too well the travel industry changed forever after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

Business at Town & Country dropped 25 percent after the attacks, he says. Much of the fourth quarter of 2001 was spent trying to find ways to keep his agents employed, while reducing expenses.

A state "work share" program—under which agents worked reduced schedules and got reimbursed through unemployment insurance—helped Town & Country weather the downturn. The agency also received \$103,000 in disaster-relief funds through the federal Small Business Administration. M&T Bank was helpful as well.

The financial assistance turned out to be a lifeline, Johnson says. He acknowledges the last four months of 2001 and the first few weeks of 2002 were a make-or-break time for his travel agency.

"If it's your business and you're living your dream, you can either step up or step aside," he says. "I can't even begin to tell you how much stronger it's made us."

Business is still off, however. Revenue projections for 2002 are a conservative \$7.5 million, down \$500,000 from last year's projection of \$8 million. The agency finished 2001 with \$7.8 million in revenues.

"(Revenues are) still not back to where we should be," he says.

## Industry consolidation

The crisis taught Johnson to anticipate changes in the industry, rather than react to them. In light of that, he aims to take advantage of the rapid consolidation among travel agencies.

He has no intention of selling the agency, even though larger companies have come calling. He declines to identify the suitors.

Instead, Johnson wants to acquire smaller agencies that are closing in Rochester and elsewhere in Western New York. Town & Country recently added accounts from Passport Travel Agency Inc., a small firm in Irondequoit that shut down this spring.

He also is looking to hire independent contractors. The agency installed Internet and e-commerce technology that allows agents to work from home.

"We're open to just about anything, any-

one's pitch," he says. "This is our time. We have become aggressive."

Town & Country also is aggressive in terms of accounts. The agency is competing for three potential corporate accounts, each in the range of \$2 million to \$3 million. Johnson declines to identify the companies. Two are in the Rochester area and the other is in Central New York.

Some 75 percent of Town & Country's business is corporate travel. The rest is a mix of leisure travel and "groups and meetings"—an offshoot of corporate travel that includes incentive trips for salespeople and the like.

"We're seeing a rebound to where it was prior to this time last year," he says. "We are seeing businesses get back."

Robinson says travel always will be important for UR, especially in terms of academic exchanges, collaborations and research projects. As a result, the amount of travel business URMC does is starting to increase compared with 12 months ago, and even six months ago.

"My impression is that we have been picking up our volume," he says.

Agrilink was among many businesses that cut back on travel after Sept. 11, Mullen notes. A refocus on families after the attacks led to a change at the company: If employees can get deals done without being

away from home, all the better.

The change reduced the amount of travel employees do, especially on internal company business, Mullen says. Face-to-face visits with customers remain important.

"We've made much better use with teleconferencing; we've made much better use of videoconferencing," he says. "If you don't have to make the trip, you don't."

As a result, Mullen does not see Agrilink's travel spending reverting to pre-Sept. 11 levels.

"I don't see it in the immediate future," he says. "I see it being more prudent."

Johnson says the biggest industry change, other than cutbacks, is in corporate buying patterns. Businesspeople are much more willing to fly low-cost carriers into smaller, alternative airports than in the past.

He believes mismanagement, poor service and regular talk of bankruptcy are plaguing the nation's largest carriers and changing the airline industry. US Airways Inc. filed for Chapter 11 over the summer, and United Air Lines Inc. is considering it.

"The state of the airlines is tragic," he says. "Airline deregulation is not working the way it was intended to work. I'm a firm believer they are an oligopoly. They all seem to work in concert with one another."

The future of the airline industry is up in the air, he says.

"I don't think anyone knows what's going on," he says. "Everything is at a whim right now. It's like reading tea leaves."

Johnson also believes that Rochester's historically high fares—which have come down in recent years—may return. Large airlines are replacing jetliners with smaller planes, meaning fewer seats. American Airlines Inc. announced such a switch last week, when it said it would replace its jets with planes run by regional affiliate American Eagle.

In time, those fewer seats could lead to higher demand, which in turn could lead to higher prices, he warns.

"We are looking at shrinking inventory," he says. "The demand for those seats will start to increase, and that's when we'll see price increases. That's when we'll see the biggest problem as a community."

Town & Country helps local businesses and travelers see their way through the land of confusion, Johnson says.

"That's one of the strengths of his business," Robinson observes. "Don's people are always there to make the adjustments."

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## Close-up

### Donald Johnson

**Title:** President and owner, Town & Country Travel Inc.

**Age:** 42

**Education:** B.S. in business management, with marketing focus, Rochester Institute of Technology, 1984

**Residence:** Webster

**Family:** Wife, Teresa; daughters, Lindsay, 14, and Natalie, 11

**Board Memberships:** Hillside Children's Center; American Red Cross; Minister of Tourism International Advisory Board for the Islands of the Bahamas; International Tourism Advisory Board for United Airlines Vacations

**Quote:** "I like to seek out the challenge, meet it, try to resolve it and go forward. Those are some of the things that motivate me as an individual."