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NEWS - Business & Government Travel

Hickory makes committment to future(6/1/2004)

By Jerry Limone

SADDLE BROOK, N.J. -- Last year was a difficult one for Hickory Travel Systems, with several agencies departing the corporate consortium, saying Hickory didn't supply the technology required to compete with emerging corporate online agencies.

Hickory's outlook is brighter for 2004 and beyond, said former CEO Bill Chiles, because the company is building a technology package that will help member agencies be more competitive with Expedia, Travelocity and Orbitz.

Chiles sold Hickory last October to American Leisure Holdings (AMLH), a public company, and now as chairman of AMLH is less involved in the day-to-day operations of Hickory and more involved in business development for the parent firm.

One result of that deal, he said, is that the company has more capital to invest in technology.

"The commitment to technology is not a cheap date," Chiles said. "My heart's been in the right place. I just didn't have the money to do it."

Hickory's goal to build a reservations platform for member agencies fizzled in 2002 because Hickory didn't have sufficient funds to develop and implement it, Chiles said. Plus, Hickory's technology partner, Canadian firm Peragis, dissolved.

Today, Hickory and sister company TraveLeaders (a Florida-based agency purchased earlier this month by AMLH) are developing a reservations platform internally. A few Hickory members are testing it, including Campbell Travel in Dallas. The product launch is scheduled for fourth-quarter 2004.

"It's a phenomenal product that will serve us well in a deregulated environment because it gives us access to content in all the GDSs," said Bill Campbell, the agency's CEO.

Hickory is supplementing the reservations platform with products developed by TRX. Hickory offers

members preferred pricing on TRX's self-booking tool and quality-control automation.

If Hickory had established the TRX deal and started developing a reservations platform in 2002 or early 2003, Chiles said, "We would have had no agency defections." He's hopeful that some agencies that left will return.

Campbell thinks it's a distinct possibility. He said some former members are disappointed because they were promised lower technology fees and sales leads for small and midsize accounts, and "those things have not materialized."

"I think several may make a U-turn and come back to Hickory," Campbell said.

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