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## A Firm Foundation

Technology platforms offered by host agencies have become increasingly robust

The industry's top host agencies have developed formidable technological platforms that give you everything you need to build your businesses right from your desktop.

**America's Vacation Center (AVC)**, famed for its Agent Power operating system, designed that platform on three basic tenets of technology: It should make life easier, it should help your business make money, and it should make you look like a genius to your customers. AVC used those principles as well as the knowledge gained from decades of experience—the third generation of family is now in the business—in designing Agent Power. With Agent Power, nothing is more than a click or two away.

Marketing is AVC's lifeblood, and so is its customer-relationship management (CRM) system is the foundation of its technology platform. "Without having solid CRM, a booking engine alone isn't sufficient and accounting tools aren't sufficient," says Jeff Anderson, vice president of marketing.

The CRM system helps you build relationships with your clients to help keep them coming back. On top of that, CRM is AVC's lead distribution system and is also the booking engine that contains the products in which its agents specialize.

On top of the CRM and linked to the vacation components is AVC's accounting system. Accounting is sometimes overlooked, says Anderson—without good accountants, no one gets a paycheck. AVC agents are paid weekly. And steady cash flow is vital.

Education is part of Agent Power as well. AVC offers several training sessions every week, as well as face-to-face sessions at its national conference.

AVC goes beyond the nuts and bolts of business, it also uses its technology to help its members connect. The agency had been using social networking principles long before the advent of Facebook to help its agent members connect with one another, sharing not just industry information but such personal news as recipes and photos.

For more information, visit [www.americasvacationcenter.com](http://www.americasvacationcenter.com).

**Cruise Planners'** CP Central, its franchise management system, is a single platform with everything an agent needs, says Terri Burke, senior vice president of relationship marketing. All functions—marketing, researching, booking, training, accounting and networking—essentially fall under two pillars.

The recently re-released client pillar, Erez, features a powerful CRM system that integrates with Cruise Planner's back-office system—reservations, invoicing and all booking-related functions. It integrates with Global Commission Payments, which most cruise lines use to pay agents.

and searches databases (that you can purchase) for similar people that you can add to your database.

Cruise Planners recently launched the sophomore level of Cruise Planner University, also part of CP Central. The program now has 45 modules in the freshman track and 40 in the sophomore track, and will ultimately go up to the Ph.D. level.

Cruise Planners will be introducing BEACH (Booking Engine for Air, Car and Hotel), partnering with Expedia in creating private-label microsites that it has built for each of its 700 members. This service is free for mem-

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BY KATE RICE



America's Vacation Center University offers training to member agents.

The agent pillar, Esource, holds agent information, including vendors, training and other resources. Esource also features Regisweb, a group booking tool that lets you create microsites for specific groups. Your clients can book through it, check their itinerary and refer friends, who can also book there. Cruise Planners also offers such marketing services as CPPod, a print-on-demand service that sends personalized direct-mail pieces to clients and e-brochures that you can customize for clients.

One of Cruise Planners' newest products is Sketch, which analyzes your most profitable clients, determines their psychographic and demographic DNA,

and searches databases (that you can purchase) for similar people that you can add to your database. The program incorporates 100,000 hotels (more than half of them with negotiated rates), vacation rentals and condominiums. It offers TripAdvisor reviews and destination guides to more than 5,000 cities, and is integrated with Cruise Planners' accounting system and Erez. It can also be an information source, quickly providing members with the details they need for a client interested in visiting, for example, Table Mountain in South Africa. The product is completely customizable—you can opt not to use BEACH or not to use TripAdvisor if you so choose.

For more information, visit [www.cruiseplannersfranchise.com](http://www.cruiseplannersfranchise.com).

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**Expedia CruiseShipCenters** is a big believer in investing in technology, says President Matthew Eichhorst. The company has what Eichhorst describes as three technology “buckets” to help its agents: CruiseDesk, the agent tool; a recently enhanced consumer booking site; and an integrated booking engine that links the two.

CruiseDesk keeps customer information in a managing system called 7SEAS Club, which holds all the contacts who receive Expedia CruiseShipCenters’ newsletters. For instance, you might have 1,000 clients who receive newsletters about a particular region. These will be completely personalized and signed by you.

CruiseDesk also features online training, a complete record of your transactions and such back-office information as commission status.

Agents who use CruiseDesk will find all of Expedia CruiseShipCenters’ product, both cruises and such land-based products as all-inclusive resorts, tours, hotels and car rentals.

The integrated booking engine tracks everything, whether it’s an agent booking or a consumer booking made on the consumer-facing site, which is on more than 2,500 agent sites. The consumer site is a template that promotes CruiseShipCenters but features the agent’s information, their areas of expertise and any specials—their own or a vendor’s—that they’re promoting.

Expedia also has a centralized e-marketing program that sends millions of agent-branded emails to customers. It also sends flyers and a 16-page magazine titled *Dream Voyages* to past passengers.

For more information, visit [www.cruiseshipcenters.ca](http://www.cruiseshipcenters.ca).

**Nexion** aims at providing technology and automation that helps agents to be effective, says Dwayne Wilson, chief operations officer. And it uses agent feedback to mold that technology, according to Robbi Hamida, director, agent development.

WebView, Nexion’s technology portal, holds almost everything a travel agent needs. It houses all supplier information, including specials. You can log in to report all your sales, both ARC and non-ARC (although a few things have to be manually processed).



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You can generate reports to see what’s been booked, what’s pending and what’s happening with commissions. Corporate agents can use the portal to track clients’ travel and spending and use that information in negotiations. Nexion is adding a more sophisticated reporting tool, GRASP, for corporate agents and plans on finding something similar for leisure agents. Travel news is available as well.

Nexion’s group-tour tool lets you request a booking from its group space, with its accompanying pricing and amenities, and automatically ties the

ClientBase Marketing Services, as well as supplier marketing materials available through the supplier portals in WebView.

Nexion has contracts with all four GDSs. You can use these through Nexion, through a separate browser window. All the GDSs feed into Nexion’s back-office system, so reports about GDS bookings are available in WebView.

All Nexion training materials can be found under the “Education” tab in WebView. These include Nexion University, which offers webinars, self-paced learning modules and reference documents.

Because Nexion is a member of Vacation.com, its agents can use the marketing group’s Engagement and Engagement Select programs.

commission for that booking to you.

There are links to supplier booking portals, including log-in information for those supplier sites that support it. Users can access Sabre Cruise, Sabre Vacations and Nexion Xpress, which uses the Sabre reservations platform for air, car and hotel bookings and is available in WebView under the “BookIt” tab.

WebView offers marketing material as well. And because Nexion is a member of Vacation.com, its agents can use the marketing group’s Engagement and Engagement Select programs. They can also use Nexion’s private version of

There is also a link to NexionTown, Nexion’s social networking site, through which you can share information, ideas and moral support with fellow agents.

For more information, visit [www.nexion.com](http://www.nexion.com).

**Partners in Travel’s** (PIT) member site is an intranet that gives agents access to such resources as booking tools, partner and industry news, vendor information, tutorials, group cruise specials, Exotic Adventures customizable brochures, and information about PIT procedures.

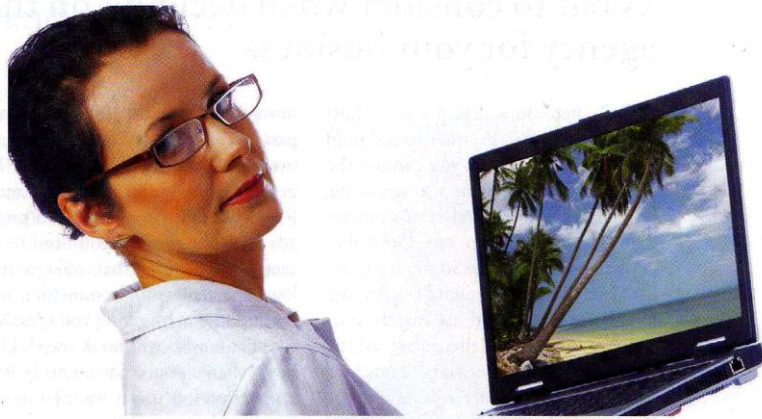
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And because PIT is pushing Sabre Cruise as a desktop application to the entire network, you can find the training for this program on the intranet. Training is very important to PIT, says Chris Parker, vice president. "We really pride ourselves on giving members the opportunity to educate themselves and learn the industry."

TravelConnect is PIT's main technology platform. It allows you to manage your clients, bookings, commissions, groups and financials. You can use it to report bookings, generate invoices, and produce sales and commission tracking reports. It allows access to Sabre Cruise, which provides fares, commissions, negotiated and group rates, itineraries and special services. There's a complete accounting system, as well as a module to help you manage your groups.

Parker says that there is "tremendous" inventory; agents can book one cabin or several, getting group pricing and amenities for individual travelers.

A group module is being added that will store all that inventory so you can make bookings live in TravelConnect. (Previously,



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you had to book this group inventory over the phone.) PIT will provide promotional flyers that you can customize and send to prospective group clients.

PIT also offers you a customizable website you can use to market to your clients. The

site has a vacation search engine to which you can easily add your own information and specials. PIT is planning on upgrading this option for its agents.

For more information, visit <http://www.partnersintravel.com>. @