



Parsippany firm specializes in barter advertising

By SALLY SILVERMAN • STAFF WRITER

Jody Merl is president and owner of Innovative Travel Marketing in Parsippany. (Photo by: Karen Mancinelli / Daily Record)

Jody Merl founded Parsippany-based Innovative Travel Marketing in 1992. It's the only company in the United States that specializes in barter advertising for the hotel and travel industry.

How it works: Merl works with hotels that trade a value in room inventory in return for a targeted program for advertising placement and services in print, broadcast and other media.

"Bartering is an age-old business. Every night, things go unsold. Bartering is a way to monetize this inventory for marketing purposes," she said.

In 2002, she co-founded a charitable program called the ITM Hospitality Fund, which has donated more than \$300,000 worth of New York City hotel-room stays from her barter inventory to financially needy families who travel to Manhattan to receive critical medical treatment for life-threatening conditions.

Beginnings: Born in Tarrytown, N.Y., Merl moved to Raleigh, N.C., when she was 10. After graduation from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's journalism school, she joined Hanson & Schwam, an entertainment public-relations firm in Beverly Hills, Calif., where she handled client special events and press previews.

"I worked with incredibly talented people like Julie Andrews and Blake Edwards and was baptized into learning how to deal with lots of different egos," she said.

Career path: At Hanson & Schwam, Merl met Lawrence Gordon, a Paramount Studios producer, and became his assistant, working on such movies as "Xanadu" and "48 Hours." Through Gordon, she met the owner of L'Ermitage and worked for him as corporate director of sales.

Merl came back to the East Coast in 1984 to develop corporate programs at The Leading Hotels of the World Ltd. In 1987, she joined Broadcast Marketing Corp., a corporate barter company providing millions of dollars worth of travel services to its media industry clients, as vice president of travel services.

ITM: She founded the company in 1992 on Manhattan's Madison Avenue, relocating to Parsippany 10 years later.

"Business is very good. In these times, companies should look at equity that can be gained from monetizing inventory to gain new business. It's a resource for cash-strapped companies," she said.

At home: Merl lives in Morristown with her husband, Elliot Leibowitz, and two sons, Adam, 15, and David, 10.

Away from home: Traveling to new places is her passion. Top on her list are The Breakers in Palm Beach, Fla., and Venice.

Eating out: Among her favorite restaurants is The Vine in the Basking Ridge section of Bernards.

Mentor: Marcy Rothman, senior vice president at Hanson & Schwam. *"She taught me to write press releases for AP with no edits and how to deal with different personalities," she said.*