

# Short's Travel buys Groople, plans automated group booking

By Dennis Schaal

Short's Travel Management, which specializes in sports travel and small meetings, acquired Groople, an online, group-travel agency, in a move to develop an automated group-booking tool for clients.

The purchase price was not disclosed.

"This gives us a whole plethora of technology that we didn't have before," said David LeCompte, president and CEO of Short's Travel, which ranked 42nd on Travel Weekly's 2008 Power List, with \$211.9 million in 2007 sales.

Meetings account for just under a third of the business.

With the acquisition complete, a prime focus is to blend a Short's Travel Management online meeting registration product with Groople's automated request for proposal process, which delivers rates for group requests that often are slow and complicated to price, LeCompte said.

Groople is an online travel agency,

based in Englewood, Colo., that automates the planning and booking of group travel. An ARC agency and ASTA member launched in 2004, Groople's partnerships include Wyndham, Choice, Best Western, La Quinta, Avis Budget, SideStep, Kayak, Travelocity and numerous collegiate athletic conferences.

LeCompte said Short's Travel Management started working with Groople in March or April on group-booking solutions for the sports-travel market but came to realize that Groople's solutions would be advantageous in the meetings arena, as well.

Short's Travel Management then decided to acquire Groople when the opportunity presented itself, LeCompte said.

"When someone wants 12 rooms in Missoula, that's a lot of work," LeCompte said. "We got exposed to Groople's product. I had never heard of them before and thought it would be great for tracking corporate meeting spending."

Groople has a leisure focus, he added, but Short's will apply its corporate meetings experience as the two entities, now under one corporate roof, work on bringing to market an automated group-booking tool.



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LeCompte said Short's would conduct a beta test of such a tool in April for a client that spent some \$30 million on air and \$20 million on hotels annually.

The transaction marks one of the relatively few occasions in recent years when a so-called traditional agency acquired a dot-com.

"This shows how the online and offline travel worlds are merging," said Norm Rose, president of Travel Tech Consulting. "Group travel is an important revenue area for traditional agencies such as Short's. Planning group travel online is a natural way to improve the efficiency of the process."

"Bringing Groople to the Short's family of companies shows how all traditional travel agencies must embrace online as an important part of their strategy," he added.

LeCompte said Short's reduced Groople's staff to seven programmers, from 38 employees, because of "synergies." Groople CEO Mike Stacy will keep that title as CEO of the Groople business unit within Short's Travel Management, LeCompte said.

Through the end of 2008, LeCompte said Short's overall business was down 2%, including a 16% decline in its corporate business.

Still, LeCompte said he was pleased with the company's performance, "given where everyone else is."



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