

## Like a rock

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By [Jamie Biesiada](#) | AUGUST 26, 2019

The year was 1989: "Batman" was No. 1 at the box office; Chicago's "Look Away" was the hottest song; a gallon of gas was 97 cents; and Susan Ferrell founded her host agency, Travel Experts, in Raleigh, N.C.

Ferrell said her the business has grown into what it is today -- [No. 34 on Travel Weekly's 2019 Power List](#) with \$397.8 million in 2018 sales -- because Travel Experts has always been "the rock" in the ever-changing travel industry.

"We don't change our program, because it was designed well from the beginning," Ferrell said. "We don't change our contract, because it was fairly written. We don't change our fee, because it was fairly designed. We improve our support, and we add support people when we need to, but we're like the rock."

Travel advisors tend to dislike change, Ferrell said, and independent contractors (ICs) could face a slew of it: contracts change, hosts are acquired, and other things could make them bounce from host to host.

"Travel advisors hate change, and it's happening so much out there," Ferrell said. "We don't change because we don't need to. We were designed well to begin with."



Susan Ferrell

Today, Travel Experts hosts more than 450 advisors around the country. Its beginnings were more humble.

Before founding the business, Ferrell was the business manager for two other agencies for about five years apiece. Before that, she worked in hotels.

She read an article in the Oct. 27, 1988, issue of Travel Weekly that would spur her to found Travel Experts. "\$54,000 a year? In the agency business?" highlighted what at the time was a fairly unique concept adopted by Go, the Travel Company in San Jose, Calif. Owner Kathryn Trieb Moore rented out office space to high-earning agents. They would use Go's computers, ticket stock and accreditations from ARC, IATA and CLIA. Then, the agents would keep their commissions. On average, earnings among the 20 agents were \$54,000 a year, the equivalent of more than \$114,000 today.

At the time, Travel Weekly called it a "shell" agency; Moore based it on a model used frequently in real estate. Go had opened five years before the article was written, and a handful of others like it had opened across the U.S., precursors of a sort to the modern host agency.

Ferrell liked the idea. All of the agents were ICs, an attractive proposition. She flew out, consulted with Moore and founded Travel Experts.

The idea didn't exactly take off.

"It seemed like a no-brainer to me," Ferrell said, but she had a tough time convincing agents to eschew a salary -- most were agency employees at the time -- in favor of working for commission. The math worked out, Ferrell said, but it was a tough sell.

A few years in, though, the agency started making money. Travel Experts nabbed a million-dollar producer, and others started to see how their earning potential was essentially unlimited when based on commission.

In Travel Experts' early years, most agents were making money from airline tickets, Ferrell said. They needed a GDS, which meant they needed to work in the office.

Then, when working from home became a possibility as technology advanced in the 2000s, business started booming.

"We just kind of mushroomed, because anybody could work anywhere," Ferrell said. "That's when it really started to take off."

In recent years, most of the travel advisors joining Travel Experts focus on luxury leisure sales, a difference from its early years, Ferrell said. The host enjoys organic growth from referrals.

Travel Experts' goal isn't to sign up a massive number of agents, but to onboard ICs who will be a good fit, according to Ferrell. Travel Experts has a thorough onboarding process to make that happen, including background checks and good communication with prospective ICs. As a result, many stay with the host for decades; Ferrell has some ICs who have been with Travel Experts for nearly its entire history.

She attributes that to Travel Experts' high level of service and attention given to all its ICs.

It probably also has something to do with Ferrell's personal ethos: "My mission in life is not to be mediocre -- to be exemplary."