

ENTREPRENEUR

# SPACE ACE



Spaced out: Penny Spencer's travel business was chosen from hundreds of others to take Aussie adventurers into space.

SETTING SIGHTS HIGH IS ONE THING, BUT PENNY SPENCER'S ARE OUT OF THIS WORLD. **NUKTE OGUN** TALKS TO THE DRIVEN ENTREPRENEUR ABOUT HOW WITH HARD WORK AND A CLEAR MAP, THE SKY IS LITERALLY THE LIMIT

**PENNY SPENCER'S ENTHUSIASM** for travel is clear within moments of stepping into Spencer Travel. Her attitude is reflected in the inviting, colourfully decorated office. Surrounded by warm colours I'm instantly at home, not that the managing director is at all surprised. My reaction is roused in customers and staff when they enter the Feng Shui-designed space. "The environment is very important," says Spencer. "Everyone spends so much time in their office space; it should have the right energy, and the right feeling." Without a single speck of grey or an uninviting sharp corner in sight, I settle in my chair and listen to how this glowing mother-to-be went from stamping brochures to selling tickets to space.

Spencer always knew her place was in the travel industry. Desperate to get a start, she began knocking on the doors of suburban travel

agencies, offering to work for free. Eventually she was taken on by Adventure World Travel, and before long was hired as Girl Friday to run every errand imaginable. "It was a good leg into the industry to understand the business right from the bottom," says Spencer.

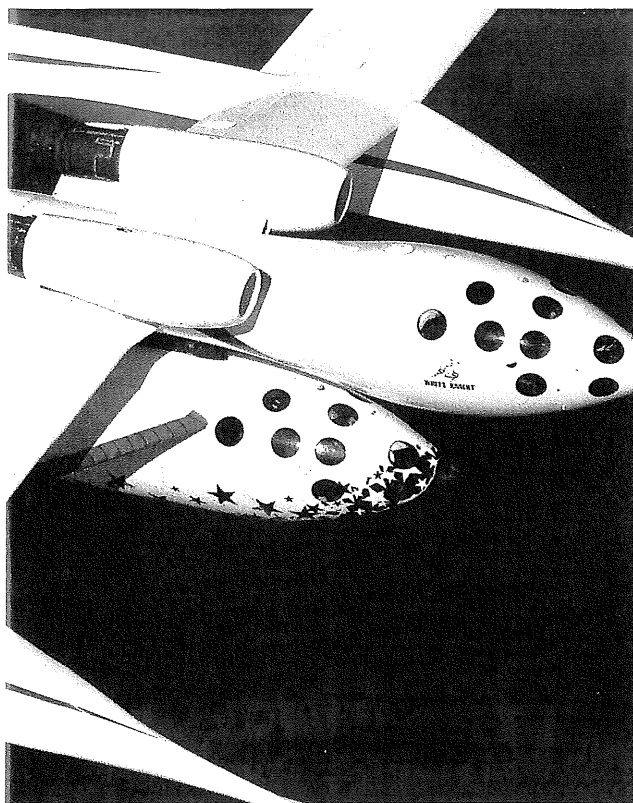
The dream of doing things the Spencer Travel way was in the back of her mind as she climbed the travel industry ladder, and finally, nine years ago, the dream became a reality. Since then, her corporate travel agency has recorded growth of 500 percent, and an annual turnover of \$15 million. It has taken Spencer 17 years to get to where she is, and she now offers employees the same opportunity to work their way to the top.

A combination of training, rewards and recognition gives her team of 20 the right mindset, says Spencer, and leads to high retention levels. "It's not just about being the boss and not acknowledging what they do for you, because they're obviously part of the company too, and making it work."

Knowing they have room to move, keeps staff motivated. Each year employees present business proposals as part of Spencer Travel's Innovation Award. The applications are evaluated by an independent panel, and the most practical and creative staff ideas are applied to the business.

But keeping staff happy goes beyond retention. Happy employees will provide a good service, which results in return business, says Spencer. "At the end of the day it is about relationships." One of the core policies is that employees don't deal with customers they haven't met. And Spencer even socialises with the MDs of companies that book their services.

Spencer Travel's approach to client satisfaction is straightforward. "It's actually quite a simple strategy, which the staff all know is round like this," explains Spencer, touching the round table we're



A model of the proposed Virgin Galactic spacecraft (left) and an artist's impression of the launch site in the Mojave desert in the US.

sitting at. "You have your client, make them raving fans, they love you and refer you to someone else, and on it goes."

With this technique firmly in place, there hasn't been much need for marketing. "The majority of the business has grown through referral and word-of-mouth." It was only after the first six years that Spencer employed a business development manager, who started networking and cold-calling to get the business name out. The majority of marketing now is aimed at promoting the Virgin Galactic space trips.

Applying for numerous awards also helps to get the business's name out there, and Spencer was recently nominated Best National Corporate Travel Agency by the Australian Federation of Travel Agents (AFTA). "We've got a very high profile within the industry, having won those awards, and it's great for staff morale, they love it. Now we're concentrating more on awards outside the industry, so we get a profile outside as well." The plan seems to be working, with Spencer named as one of three finalists for the NSW Telstra Business Woman of the Year Award.

Professional memberships are very important too, and she believes they show Spencer Travel's commitment to distinction. "From a client's point of view, it's important for them to see that you're striving for excellence." While membership to bodies like AFTA is a necessity, there are other memberships that are invitation only. Among these is Virtuoso Group, an elite collection of members representing the top one percent of travel agencies worldwide. Spencer was also invited to join Qantas platinum, a grouping of Australia's top 100 travel agents. "I'm always looking for new challenges, new areas, new niche markets."

But staying on top of her game is not always easy, and Spencer believes the best way to do so is to constantly self-educate. "I think that's another key to being a good businessperson," she says. This is why Spencer is a member of The Executive Connection (TEC), a member organisation that provides ongoing learning and development for business owners and managers. Spencer meets with a group of up to 16 CEOs once a month to discuss

their business plans. "You basically undress in front of everybody. Everybody knows your business, your figures, and they question you." She credits a lot of her business success and growth to this level of accountability. "As a managing director you're not accountable to anyone. My staff aren't going to come in here and say: 'Did you review your business plan this week?' No one's going to do that. At times you need to step out of your comfort zone."

Through this process, Spencer has realised that following her gut instinct is essential. "The mistakes I've made have been when I haven't gone with my gut instinct," she says, not that she necessarily regrets these mistakes. "Every mistake you learn from, you can't expect to know everything, and I've learnt a lot."

What has been her biggest lesson? "The main thing you learn about is people management. That's the biggest thing in small business. How to manage people, how to get them buying, how to attract and retain staff."

Spencer has also learnt that a lot of hard work is required to be accepted at this male-dominated level of the travel industry. "There is still the old boys' club," she says. "I do have boys' club lunches, I do go out with the boys. And that's sometimes what you have to do for them to realise you're dedicated, and to be acknowledged as a leader in your industry."

## INFINITY & BEYOND

Spencer's dedication is what led her to take the leap into space. As one of only nine accredited Virgin Galactic space agents in Australia, and having sold Australia's first fully paid ticket to space, she is pushing both herself and the travel industry to new heights.

And how did she become one of Richard Branson's handpicked space agents? The long accreditation process began after she spotted a Virgin advertisement and decided to put forward a submission, which took more than two months to complete. But as it turned out, it was well worth the time and effort, and Spencer's commitment and initiative separated her from the 250 initial applicants, and placed her on a shortlist of 25 to be interviewed

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> by Virgin representatives from London. Nine travel agencies were finally selected from Australia.

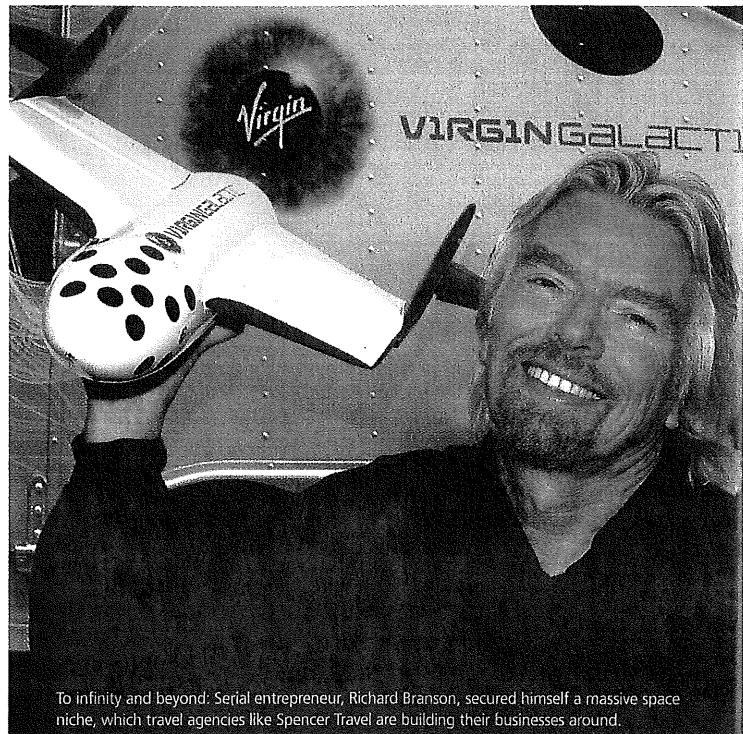
Spencer's first space customer will be a 'Founder', the first 100 people to travel to space with Virgin Galactic. The next 400 will be 'Pioneers', and anyone afterwards will be a 'Voyager'. Originally the first 100 places were for those offered an invitation by Branson himself, but Spencer's commitment to customer satisfaction changed that. "The woman we sold the ticket to was over the top about wanting to be in the first 100, so I went to Virgin Galactic and asked if there was any way they could include her, and they did," says Spencer. "She's very excited about being in the first 100. It's history, new generation, new frontier."

This historic space trip will set you back a tidy \$260,000, which includes getting to the Mojave desert in the United States, where the craft will take off, plus three days of training, and a medical. Virgin Galactic travellers will experience g-force, the same feeling experienced in a fighter jet, and will be weightless for 10 minutes. "But the main experience is that they're going to see the curvature of the earth from space. They're going to be in space."

While the experience will be undoubtedly unique, it has been difficult finding a target audience to market the unprecedented product to. "You need people who are passionate about wanting the experience. It's just a matter of throwing it out there."

At this stage space travel is not one of Spencer Travel's main divisions, so marketing efforts are focusing on media releases, in the hopes that the media will get the word out. Spencer is hoping to identify a target audience once enough interest is sparked. "Some people ask: 'Why don't you look at Star Trek club?' Well, those people are into Star Trek, they're not necessarily into space. Then there's the *BRW* 500 richest men. Yes, they might be rich, but they might be scared about going into space." Spencer is adamant she will not let this initial hurdle stop her, and will have a clear target in sight before long.

Spencer's secret to overcoming hurdles is the help of a good map. "If you don't know where you're going, you're never going to get there," she explains. In fact, Spencer's own business plan is so carefully mapped out she is now quite comfortable leaving the business for six months on maternity leave. She set up a management team last year, before becoming pregnant, as part of her succession plan. "I realised that if I wanted to start expanding



To infinity and beyond: Serial entrepreneur, Richard Branson, secured himself a massive space niche, which travel agencies like Spencer Travel are building their businesses around.

the business, I needed to have more of a helicopter view, as opposed to working in it day-to-day. I needed to implement a management team, so that I could work more strategically.

"The team are ready to do the job. It's about trust too. You have to trust other people to do the job and look after your business, otherwise you will be tied to it forever, and then it's not really a business, you just have a job. I don't want to be tied to the business 24 hours. For the first five years I was, but after five years you start looking at succession planning and exit strategies."

Spencer's approach to mapping carries into other sections of her life as well, and allows her to maintain a healthy work-life balance. "I have a plan every day. People probably think I'm very boring, but I diarise and know what I'm doing, and once it's in the diary it happens," she explains. "I always say: give a busy person something to do and it'll get done." But Spencer also knows she is lucky because of the support she receives from her mother, husband, and five-year-old daughter. "It helps having good support."

As always, forward-thinking Spencer is looking ahead, and her next goal is to double the business in three years. Having already taken out the necessary office space, the infrastructure is in place. "It's about building new markets," says Spencer. Alongside Virgin Galactic space trips, the newly added divisions include travel with kids, a leisure division, and servicing after hours for other travel agencies. "So with all of that, plus the growth we're planning, I think we're on track." ●