

Harry Sommer calls himself ‘relentless.’ Once he tucks into a challenge, he never gives up.

As evp international business development, Sommer leads one of the most dynamic areas of Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings. The company now has 15 offices dealing with international business, many more than when he got involved a year and a half ago, and NCLH is making a serious investment in global customer sourcing.

‘Harry is the smartest person I’ve ever met, and, he has unbridled energy. Just what we need to get the international expansion in high gear,’ says his boss, Frank Del Rio, president and ceo, NCLH.

Sommer is not one of those brainy types who lacks the human touch.

‘Harry is a great leader,’ says a team member. ‘He puts absolute faith in his people and he fights for them. He’s very business-focused, but he has a big personality and a good sense of humor. He’s funny and witty.’

Sommer considers his job tremendously exciting, with vast upside.

‘We’re certainly less internationally sourced than Royal Caribbean and Carnival are. We’re not necessarily looking to copy what they do, but we believe a little more diversity is good for us,’ he says, adding that even without China, international business is clipping along at a much faster growth rate than the US.

Rather than focusing on competitors, Sommer trains his attention on ‘flawless execution’ at NCLH.

‘Clearly we’re a little bit behind. Carnival and Royal Caribbean have established brands that are country-specific. That isn’t something we’ve done yet and probably we’re not likely to do for awhile.’ Instead, NCLH aims to make its ‘world-class brands’ appeal to lots of different people, mainly through on-board product delivery. In his view Norwegian Cruise Line leads the contemporary segment, Oceania Cruises ‘owns’ the upper-premium niche and Regent Seven Seas Cruises sets the bar for luxury.

China offers ‘huge opportunity’ and is Sommer’s single biggest project. It won’t be easy since NCLH is starting from scratch there, but he thinks Norwegian Joy will be the best ship, premium and tailor-made for China.

In a ceremony at the Xing Tian Temple in Shanghai, Sommer joined other NCLH executives for a traditional prayer and pledge ceremony to the Chinese goddess of the sea, Mazu, seeking blessings for a coin to place under Norwegian Joy’s keel during its keel-laying at Meyer Werft.

It was ‘one of the coolest things I’ve done in my career,’ Sommer says.

Having traveled more in the past 15

Harry Sommer – looking sharp at Seven Seas Explorer’s naming in Monte Carlo



PHOTO: A. KALOSH

Brainy & relentless

Anne Kalosh gets to know Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings’ international mastermind.

months than in all of his earlier years, ‘What fascinates me is how similar everyone is – Chinese, Brazilian, Mexican, Japanese. Everyone has the same dreams, wants to live comfortably and be able to enjoy time off every year. As much as everyone talks about differences, we’re 95% the same.’

Now NCLH has three offices in China (Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai), an Asia Pacific office in Sydney, a small Tokyo presence, a Southeast Asia office in Singapore, two India locations (Mumbai and New Delhi), a recently consolidated office in Southampton, a continental Europe office (Wiesbaden, Germany), a call center in Malta, two locations in Brazil

(Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro) and a small design office in Asheville, North Carolina. Miami hosts the Latin America and international marketing teams.

A year ago NCLH opened the Australia office, quickly bulking it up with a staff of close to 50 to optimise what is one of world’s largest and fastest growing cruise markets.

‘Determined and persistent’ is how the head of that office, Steve Odell, describes Sommer. His ‘unstoppable energy and high level of engagement both internally and externally’ set him apart. ‘Harry is a very structured and supportive boss who sets high standards for himself and those who report to him.’

Odell says that since Sommer once ran a



At the opening of NCLH’s Asia Pacific office in Sydney. Sommer is next to office head Steve Odell, at centre

travel agency, 'he really understands how our trade partners work and think. He likes to be hands-on and engaged with them.'

As for Europe, NCL has had offices there for decades, and Oceania and Regent are well established in the UK. Recently the three brands were consolidated in Southampton.

'I still think there's tremendous opportunity,' Sommer says. The brand recognition is high, and the UK business is solid, while Spain, France, Scandinavia and Benelux have room to grow, as does Israel, 'a very good market.'

Latin America, though, is a challenge. Economic conditions are volatile, and business may swing from really good one quarter to flat the next. 'The exogenous factors are so overwhelming. It's hard for us to grow there.' Yet, overall, the region remains important, especially for supplying passengers to NCL's winter Caribbean ships.

Besides having owned a travel agency, Sommer's background in finance, IT, pricing and marketing enables him to look at issues from a well-rounded standpoint.

Born and raised in Riverdale, an affluent section of the Bronx, Sommer earned an accounting degree from Baruch College and an MBA from Pace University. He started his career at IBM and moved to Florida where he'd spent time on family vacations. There he joined Renaissance Cruises and says he'd still be ensconced in finance if not for the career-broadening boosts he got from his boss, Ed Rudner, a mentor, along with Del Rio.

When Rudner acquired Renaissance in 1991, it was on the brink. Sommer, a certified public accountant, was one of his early hires. Even though he was the most junior person, he became an integral part of the team.

'He was extraordinary. He's very bright and very hard-working. What really stood out is that he was enthusiastic in taking on challenges,' Rudner says. When others claimed something was impossible, Sommer was 'good at finding unconventional solutions.'

For example, cash flow was a problem and Sommer came up with a program incentivising people to pay in full when they booked a cruise. 'Nobody did it. People thought we were nuts,' Rudner says. 'At the time people were taking \$50 deposits.'

Rudner considered Sommer a congenial colleague: 'If I had a task and needed to pull a team together, he was the first on the team. People liked working with him. He's the kind of guy you'd like to go to lunch



'One of the coolest things I've done' – seeking blessings from the Chinese goddess of the sea

with.' Sommer ultimately became vp revenue management and direct marketing.

In 2000, when Star Cruises acquired NCL and tapped Colin Veitch to head it, Sommer was one of the first on board, leading revenue management and relationship marketing. But he and Veitch didn't click.

He went on to co-found Luxury Cruise Center in Miramar, Florida. It became the No. 1 seller of Oceania Cruises in its early years. During the 2008 recession Sommer sold his share in the agency to his partner and had a stint at Viking River Cruises as vp information technology.

His next move was more lasting. At Prestige Cruise Holdings, the parent of Oceania and Regent, he started as vp accounting, was soon promoted to svp, chief accounting officer and controller, then moved up to svp finance and chief information officer. Then-president Kunal Kamalani made him chief marketing officer to bring 'analytical horsepower' to the marketing approach.

After Prestige was bought by NCL, Sommer became evp and got the high-profile

task of chief integration officer. The integration completed, he took on international in May 2015. The structure now is pretty much set. There are no plans for more offices. That means Sommer can travel a bit less.

Off the job, he's an avid cyclist and runner, active in his church and enjoys spending time with his family, wife Sharon

and their three children. Jessica, 20, is studying sustainability and environment at Florida International University, Isaac, 18, is beginning his freshman year at FIU in pre-veterinary science, and daughter Julia, 14, got to attend the naming of Seven Seas Explorer in Monte Carlo with her dad.

Rudner, who's now director, chairman and ceo of Online Vacation Center Holdings Corp., isn't surprised his protégé has gone far.

'He could become cfo or even succeed Frank Del Rio if Frank decides to retire,' Rudner says. 'His skills transcend the cruise industry. He could lead almost any company. He certainly could be the cfo of any major company.'

Sommer's proudest accomplishment is 'having good working relationships in a very collegial environment ... All of us work together to have the success we've had. I enjoy participating in that.'

Where does Sommer, 49, see himself in five or 10 years?

'If they'll have me, I'd like to spend the rest of my career here.' •



Sommer thinks the tailor-made Norwegian Joy, from Meyer Werft, will be China's best ship