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Sluggish economy doesn't dampen Azumano outlook

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Cathy Cheney | Portland Business Journal

Now that his mayoral campaign has ended, Sho Dozono is again focusing his energies on Azumano Travel.

During the reams of press coverage that Sho Dozono received in his recent campaign for mayor, he was most frequently referred to as a "businessman."

With good reason.

Azumano Travel, a frequent occupant of the Business Journal's Largest Private Companies list, has performed solidly throughout its 59 years.

The company also gave Dozono a comfortable fallback position when City Commissioner Sam Adams defeated him and 10 other candidates outright in the May 20 primary.

"The last six months, I was kind of distracted by the campaign, but now I'm getting my head back together," Dozono said. "There are a lot of things that have to happen here for the citizenry, but it's hard to articulate that during the campaign. It's good to have a job, though."

It's also good to have a job in which revenue fell only slightly despite a tough economy. Azumano reported \$214.7 million in revenue during 2007, compared to \$225 million in 2006.

It's a solid performance for a company in an industry slammed on two fronts. For one thing, travel agents had booked about three-quarters of all airline tickets, either by telephone or in person, until around 1995. Today, about half of the nearly 141 million adults who travel purchase their tickets online, according to [Forrester Research](#).

The Cambridge, Mass. company projects that the numbers of travel packages purchased online will double between 2005 and 2010.

Then there's the overall downturn, which Dozono, as a candidate, termed a recession. The [National Business Travel Association](#) recently said increases in fuel prices and decreases in the value of a dollar would affect the industry in the short-term.

Azumano could sidestep any competitive or economic maladies by sticking with its business plan. For one thing, Dozono faced down the Internet threat and, essentially, embraced it, deploying software that allows Azumano customers to purchase options directly from the agency's Web site.

It's a strategy that's worked particularly well for businesses.

"It works better, within corporate and government cultures, to book it themselves using our software," Dozono said.

"For instance, we manage travel for the state of Washington. It's effective for them to book with us because our site can take into account all of their guidelines and restrictions." One grateful customer, [Wells Fargo](#), has remained with the agency since its First Interstate days.

"We have been a client of Azumano Travel for more than 20 years," said Tom Unger, a Portland-based Wells Fargo spokesman. "They handle about 75 percent of our total corporate travel nationwide. They deliver exceptional service. Our relationship with them is more like a partnership. They invest in what works for us. Also, they are strong supporters of our community, which matches our values."

Dozono earned similar raves from Bill Harmon, the agency's executive vice president.

"He's always focused on building relations in layers throughout our customer base, and he's obviously strong in community relations, which has served us well."

Dozono assumed the company's helm from his father-in-law, George Azumano, in 1987. Over the years, his employee roster has grown to 185. Azumano counts around 500 corporate accounts, including governments and nonprofits. Its largest account delivers more than \$55 million in annual sales.

Its key partners include Premier Gateway, a top international airline ticket wholesaler, and the Seattle Mariners baseball team. Azumano handles many of the arrangements for the team's healthy Japanese fan base.

To that end, Dozono also oversees the Azumano International affiliate, which provides inbound services to Japanese visitors.

While the country rides out the ongoing downturn, Dozono doesn't see much economic doom and gloom for Azumano.

The corporate accounts may cut back a bit, but baby boomers will continue using the agency's services because they tend to travel no matter what the economic climate.

"2007 was a pretty quiet year: The economy slowed down," Dozono said. "There was some shrinking there. We might see a bit more of that in 2008, but we're maintaining our presence. Consumer spending patterns will change, but instead of people taking five trips, they might just take four."

agiegerich@bizjournals.com | 503-219-3419