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Brothers Zachary, left, and Lawrence Hester co-founded FareHarbor in 2012 on Oahu. Today, the company has clients in 20 states, the British and U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Tahiti.

## The Tour Starts Here

FareHarbor launched on Oahu less than three years ago, and today its software simplifies online bookings for 1,200 U.S. and foreign tour and activity companies

BY TREENA SHAPIRO

**W**HEN LAWRENCE AND ZACHARY HESTER were booking activities for a family vacation in Hawaii, they noticed it wasn't always a smooth process — so they took it on themselves to make a change.

Their solution is FareHarbor, an online booking and management platform for more than 1,000 activity and tour companies. Since its launch on Oahu in January 2013, FareHarbor's software has been used to book tours across the U.S. and internationally, and the two-brother operation has become a family-run business with 90 employees in Honolulu, San Francisco, Denver, Minneapolis and Boston.

Not bad for a couple of guys who

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started out working in coffee shops and taking calls in a car with windows they couldn't roll up.

FareHarbor and its clients say the difference between it and other booking services is customer service.

"Over the course of the first year we grow very slowly, over-promising functionality and then manually delivering," recalls Lawrence, FareHarbor's 32-year-old CEO. At one point, Lawrence and Zachary, 28, were even manually sending "automated" confirmation emails. But while fine-tuning the software, the Hesters also got to know their customers well, learned their software needs and determined how to make it easy for their customers' customers to make reservations.

By the end of 2013, the Hesters and

three developers had 25 clients. They refined the software and expanded exponentially. Today, FareHarbor has more than 1,200 clients spread across states, the British and U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Tahiti. People use their computers, tablets or phone make bookings.

The Hesters have done it with extravagant spending. Their home in Honolulu is an actual house in Aiea close enough to the beach that it breaks during the lunch hour. The gives out-of-town employees a p stay when work brings them to O

"We're pretty happy putting our backs into the business for me and more developers, whatever it takes to help the clients," Lawrence says. mares FareHarbor has raised 1/5 what its Silicon Valley counterparts raise. "We're a break-even co

Before switching to FareHarbor, the Hesters handled reservations over the phone and booking agencies called online to see when cruises were

but had to call to book the trip. Since the website didn't update in real time, however, this system led to overlaps in bookings and the last thing owner Don Germain wanted was to leave passengers at the dock.

Germain was reluctant to make a change when the Hesters first approached. North Shore Catamaran was a mom-and-pop startup and FareHarbor was looking for its first client. But, Germain says, "I knew what they had to offer was something I had been looking for: being able to do my bookings in real time."

**\$150 million**

REVENUE FOR TOUR AND ACTIVITY COMPANIES CREDITED BY FAREHARBOR BOOKINGS FROM JANUARY TO AUGUST 2015

Customer service helped alleviate his concerns. "They really took their time with me. They met with us numerous times and went out of their way

to make sure this thing happened," he recalls. FareHarbor even built North Shore Catamaran a new website.

What really impressed Germain was the Hesters' refusal to take new accounts until they were sure everything was running perfectly at North Shore Catamaran, which included training booking agents on the new system. "Once they did that, I got a lot of compliments from my agents," Germain says.

Lila Tollefson, the event sales and marketing director at Gunstock Ranch in Kahuku, wasn't looking for reservations software when FareHarbor approached her. "I was pretty tough on them. We had another company we were working with and it's tough to switch," she says.

FareHarbor's team ultimately convinced Tollefson to try them when they promised to address all of Gunstock Ranch's concerns with the company it had been working with. "They changed all the major problems and then we gave them a list of really great things that could happen and they did that, too," she says.

New Gunstock Ranch uses FareHarbor primarily for online bookings, but Tollefson also values the

partnerships she's made with other tour and activity companies who use FareHarbor software. FareHarbor also recommended the company that redesigned the ranch's website and took over its social media, as well as someone who helped improve the ranch's marketing in Waikiki. "They helped our company grow based on their recommendations," she says.

Tollefson and Germain also say the price is right. According to Germain, other companies want a flat fee up front, starting at \$1,100. But FareHarbor doesn't charge its clients; it gets paid a booking fee attached to the customers' online payments. Online customers are used to paying such fees, Germain says, so he hasn't heard many complaints. "Only one or two people have said anything. That's no problem to me."

Tollefson points out the fee system means FareHarbor makes more when its clients make more. "They would do whatever it took to help you succeed and they continue to do that," she says. "I think that probably the best thing to know about FareHarbor is their customer service is above and beyond. They've been consistent and true to their promises from the time they came in." ■

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**\* CORRECTION**

**Our Water World**

**Per Day, Not Per Year**

Our November 11, 2015 cover story said Oahu receives 1.8 billion gallons of rain per year. That sounds like plenty, but the actual figure is 1.8 billion gallons, on average, per day.