Learn Four Secrets to Picking the Right Travel Agent

Description

A good travel agent has an advantage over practically any other travel seller. They understand what you want, speak your language, and are there for you when you’re in danger.

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Who needs a travel agency these days?

Fewer of us do. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 124,030 travel brokers in the United States just eight years ago. By 2006, that figure had dropped by roughly 30%, to 87,600 agents.

The government's business outlook is simply gloomy. It forecasts "little or no growth" for travel experts over the next eight years, as market share gains by online behemoths like Expedia, Orbitz, and Travelocity are offset by a little increase in demand for specialized travel advice.

Many readers of this column believe it is overly optimistic. They believe that travel agents are

absolutely out of date.

“They are an outmoded relic of former methods that offer absolutely no value to any transaction today,” says Bill Clements, an airline employee in Ypsilanti, Mich. He also accused me of being “the biggest lackey for them that I have ever experienced” for promoting agents in my columns.

I get a lot of emails from readers like Clements. Every week, I appear to be the recipient of an angry anti-agent message that begins, “How could you?”

So let me explain how I could help.

Why do I like agents so much? When it comes to organizing a trip, a knowledgeable travel advisor might be your most valuable asset. “Competent” is the essential word here. And let me clarify what I mean by agent: I’m not necessarily referring to an overseas call center employee reading from a script or a hobbyist who bought a few hundred dollars for fraudulent agency credentials.

I’m referring to a genuine, certified travel specialist.

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It’s not an easy stance to hold. I understand. There’s no shortage of harrowing travel agency stories going around these days. I have a stack of grievances that all have the same basic story. This is how it goes:

I booked a trip through the online travel agency X. Something went wrong, such as my flight being rescheduled or difficulty with my hotel reservation. When I called the company, I was routed through a half-dozen divisions and ended up speaking with someone in Bangalore who I couldn’t understand. I’m still no closer to resolving the problem after five hours.

I was unequivocal that I have no ill will toward internet travel agents. Most airline tickets, cruises, and hotel rooms ordered through these giant sites are without issue. However, many readers believe that how they deal with the inevitable challenges leaves Something desired.

A New Orleans attorney, Jeffrey Alter, recently purchased an airline ticket online. However, when he received his final bill, he discovered that a $50 transaction fee had been added to his credit card statement. When he booked the ticket, no one mentioned the cost to him. I urged him to look at the website’s terms and conditions, and sure enough, there was a note regarding a $30 transaction fee.

So, why did they charge him $20 more, and why didn’t they notify him right away? Alter should contact the agency, I advised. He did. What was its reaction? “Do you think we give out airline tickets for free (sic)? If we did that, we wouldn’t be in business for long.”

That is what I mean by customer service.

Do-it-yourselfers are on the other end of the spectrum, having paid hundreds or thousands of dollars to become “instant” travel brokers. Because they are inexperienced, these amateurs tarnish the reputation of other agents. They’ve just paid for a card that claims to be a professional travel agent, but they frequently don’t know the difference between a stopover and a layover. However, instant agents

are more victims than anything else. They were duped into believing that they might become real estate salespeople by sending a check.

Even after you've weeded out the phonies and dot-coms, you're still left with a group of agents that aren't always flawless.

Bob Barstow, a long-time reader of my columns, has had disappointing encounters with well-trained, respectable travel brokers. He claims he has never encountered these trained specialists' alleged "go-the-extra-mile" attitude. "You imply that the industry is full of agents that are dedicated to the well-being of their customers and will go out of their way for them," he explained. "I haven't met this agent yet." More of Barstow's unpleasant travel agent encounters – and the amusing responses from agents – may be found on my blog.

1. Look for the appropriate certification.

It's a good sign if the agent is a member of the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) (www.asta.org). The American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) is the world's largest group of travel professionals, with a code of ethics that keeps the riff-raff at bay. It's a plus if your travel advisor is certified by The Travel Institute (www.thetravelinstitute.com), which provides courses on various places and travel specialties. The Association of Retail Travel Agents (www.artaonline.com/mc/page.do) is another membership worth considering. Affiliation with a significant organization such as AAA or a corporation such as Carlson Wagonlit can prove that your agent is trustworthy. Your travel agent should also follow any state seller of travel legislation and have error and omission insurance.

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2. If at all possible, stay close to home.

There is no substitute for the human touch. My most rewarding interactions with agents have been one-on-one. The ability to meet in person – to look the agent in the eyes and shake their hand – is Something online agencies cannot match. (It should be noted that not all agents operate in an office; nonetheless, home-based agents can and do conduct personal visits.) The sole exception to this guideline is if you're looking for an agent who specializes in a particular field. Even yet, when working with a huge organization, a trustworthy voice on the phone is better than the frequently incoherent, script-reading customer service employee you're connected to.

3. Meet with the agency.

Don't go with the first agent you come across. Speak with a travel expert. Determine the length of time they have been in business. Inquire about fees (they do charge booking fees, but they're worth it if you're in a hurry). I would suggest interviewing the person. Pay special attention to how your prospective agent replies and what's going on around you at the workplace. Is the other agent taking the time to speak with customers, or do they appear to be focused on pressuring their clients to make a booking decision? Is the agent you're interviewing preoccupied or focused on assisting you? If you don't like what you're seeing, leave.

4. Determine how they react under pressure.

The only sure way to tell if your travel agent is a keeper is to watch what happens when you run into problems. And you will have the opportunity at some point. For example, what will your agent do if your flight is delayed, your hotel is overbooked, or your travel insurance claim is denied? Agents are compensated for the booking in one of two ways: a fee you pay or a commission they receive directly from the company. If they leave you hanging or only send you the company's 800 number, they are not your agent. Most likely, they're only interested in the commission.

A good travel agent has an advantage over practically any other travel seller. They are aware of your desires. They are fluent in your language. And they're there to help you when you're in trouble.

To put it another way, travel agencies aren't extinct. Only the terrible actors are.

Category

1. Lifestyle

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