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Re: Response to Woman's Day Article "10 Things Travel Agents Won't Tell You"

To the Editor:

The American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) read with concern Woman's Day article entitled "10 Things Travel Agents Won't Tell You." While the article starts out right, as we certainly agree that "a travel agent can be a great resource," that's where it ended.

Here are a few facts about the over 100,000 U.S. travel agency workers, 67 percent are women, many of whom are readers of your magazine. The 'typical' travel agency is a small businesses run by people with a strong service orientation and a love of travel. Yes, it's true that some charge fees for certain services, yet those that do use a transparent, straightforward fee structure.

Despite the author's first argument that travel professionals exhibit bias because they earn commissions with cruise and other products, it is also true that travel agents work for their customer. And no agent in his right mind would risk the loss of a client by an unjustified slanting of advice or booking for a few dollars. Further, since the advent of the Internet as a major means of finding and booking travel services, travel agents commonly report that consumers who come to them looking for advice usually have already been on the Web, doing research on options. These highly informed consumers are not going to be fooled by any agent slanting advice or making preferential bookings when there are other services that the consumer knows are available to meet her needs.

And while it is always a good practice for consumers to check to see if they are already covered before purchasing travel insurance, point five of this article implies that travel professionals "push" insurance on those that don't need it. Let's be clear, it is in consumers' best interest to be made aware of travel insurance and the value it may provide. While it may be duplicative for some, it is a valued product for many others. For example, my sister's family recently took a cruise in which passengers were delayed from disembarking by four hours upon returning to Miami due to a crime that had occurred onboard. As a result, she and most of the other passengers missed their return flights. Rather than forgo the \$1,600 it cost her to change her family's flights, she was fully covered for all out-of-pocket costs by her travel insurance policy, which, thankfully, was brought to her attention by her travel professional.

Below you will find the article that we feel would have better served your readership.

8 Reasons Why Booking with a Travel Professional Creates Value

Plus 5 tips for finding a professional to "help you travel smarter"

1. **Customer advocacy:** If you have a problem with a particular part of your travel experience, the agent is there to act on your behalf to see that restitution is made. ASTA, for example, is the only travel industry association aggressively fighting to improve the travel experience, and air transportation in particular, for all consumers, not just those with access to the Internet.
2. **Expert guidance:** Travel agents, unlike instructions on a Web page, are experts in understanding and deciphering the myriad of travel information and codes out there. It's what they've been trained to do and they do it every day.

3. **Personalized service:** Instead of an impersonal voice thousands of miles away, travel agents are your neighbors. They know what you want and what you value in your travel experience.
4. **Professional advice:** Travel agents are there to make sure you get where you want to go, when you want to go and for the lowest price.
5. **Time:** Instead of checking a long list of travel Web pages, which only provide rates and fares for the companies that have contracted with them, why not go straight to the source? A travel agent has all the information at their fingertips, saving you a few hours in front of a computer screen.
6. **Unbiased information:** Agents work for their clients, not for a travel supplier. It makes sense that a happy customer will be a repeat customer.
7. **Value:** Travel professionals have access to online deals, as well as many consolidators that only work with travel agencies. A travel agent will help you find the best products that provide you value.
8. **First-Hand Experience:** Many travel professionals have been to where you want to go and will give you the inside-scoop on what to do and when to do it. Look for a travel professional that is an expert in your chosen destination or type of travel.

Here are some tips provided on choosing a travel agent who is right for you:

1. **Go with the Pros:** Look for the ASTA label. Through its continuing education and training programs, ASTA prepares its members to operate high-caliber, competitive businesses. Check TravelSense.org to find an ASTA member professional. You can also search for travel professionals with expertise in specific destinations and types of travel (i.e. scuba, adventure, etc.)
2. **Ask Around:** Tap friends, neighbors and relatives who use an agent they trust. You may want to visit or call several agencies to find the one that best suits your needs. Consider everything from the appearance of the office to the agent's willingness to listen and answer questions. The best agents want to establish a long-term relationship with a client, not just make one sale.
3. **Ask about Fees:** Good agents will notify their clients of any additional fees, including service fees, up front. Doing otherwise is pointless, as the fee will appear as a separate charge on the client's credit card bill.
4. **Check Credentials:** Many agents have been trained in business management, travel and tourism or geography. Others have supplemented their agency experience with extensive education and training courses. Some travel agents are Certified Travel Counselors (CTC) through the Travel Institute or Master Cruise Counselors (MCC) through the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA).
5. **Research your Agency's Track Record:** Visit ASTA.org to see whether a travel agency is an ASTA member. Check with the local Better Business Bureau (bbb.org), while keeping in mind they will only have records of agencies that have had reports filed against them.

Best regards,



John Pittman
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ASTA