

## **With promise of travel deals, card mills lure would-be agents - Perkins**

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**Ed Perkins**

"Make lots of money selling travel!" "Travel like a travel agent!"

With travel costs constantly escalating, travelers are looking just about everywhere they can to find lower prices or better ways to arrange their travel. That's why some fall victim to "card mill" promotions that promise some combination of added income and lower travel prices.

The distinction between a card mill and legitimate outside travel-sales operation is sometimes difficult to see. In both cases, an umbrella organization appoints part-timers as representatives. The representatives are supposed to sell a full spectrum of travel services - air tickets, tours, cruises, accommodations, whatever - while the organization provides the "back room" ticketing, accounting and clerical support. The organization splits the commissions and fees with the representatives.

So far, so good - lots of travel agencies employ outside salespeople who work on that basis. Some, but not all, of these umbrella organizations require that potential outside reps pay some combination of an initial fee to join plus a monthly charge - possibly offset by earnings.

As a normal part of this process, the umbrella organization issues business identification cards to these outside reps indicating that they are, in fact, travel agents. The cards typically include the umbrella organization's industry affiliations: an International Air Transport Association number, plus membership in its trade associations (American Society of Travel Agents, International Airlines Travel Agent Network, Cruise Lines International Association and such). Again, this is all legitimate.

Card mills, on the other hand, cross the line into scams. Although a card mill organization nominally acts exactly as a legitimate agency that uses outside reps, it's totally different. What makes it a card mill is that neither the organization nor the individual reps actually expect the reps to sell any appreciable amount of travel (except possibly to themselves). Instead, travelers pay the fees and join solely to get one of those outside agent ID cards, which they supposedly can use to obtain free "fam trip" travel packages and huge travel-agent discounts on airfares, hotel accommodations, cruises and other services for their personal trips.

How do you spot a card mill? Typically, card mills act in two ways that legitimate agencies do not:

They promise you can "travel like a travel agent" in their promotions.

They use "multilevel" marketing, which means they ask reps not just to sell travel but also to sell others on becoming reps. That, in plain terms, means they are pyramid schemes.

These days, card mills may downplay the travel-benefit side of the appeal, largely because the industry has caught on to the scam and doesn't blindly honor those phony travel agent IDs. To get an ID from the International Airlines Travel Agent Network, outside reps must work at least 20 hours a week selling travel and earn at least \$5,000

per year in salary or commissions - a hurdle that's tougher than it might seem. And airlines limit their deals to agents who produce big sales figures.

Working as a legitimate outside travel rep is a respectable vocation, but it's highly competitive and requires a lot of hard work. But paying a card mill anywhere from \$500 to \$5,000, plus monthly charges, in the hope of finding fantastic travel discounts is simply wasting your money.

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