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# Why travel agents are still useful

by [Ed Perkins](#) - July 20, 2007



Contrary to what you might have heard, travel agents aren't obsolete. Sure, much of today's focus (including my own) is on the Internet, but many travelers still rely on agents. And for good reason: Although an agent charges a few dollars, professional assistance in travel is often well worth the cost.

This column's topic was suggested by an email from a reader asking why I ignored travel agents. Actually, I don't, but it's been almost two years since I last covered agents, so an update is in order.

First, to a basic point: For the most part, a travel agent can't get you any better deals than you can find for yourself through diligent online searching. But a travel agent can save you time, provide valuable counsel, and help you out when something goes wrong. Specifically, here are some of the advantages of using a travel agent.

**Knowledge.** The number one reason most consumers use travel agents is to take advantage of their specialized expertise.

**Destinations.** Whenever a reader emails a question such as "what are the best small cities to visit in Italy," my response is usually, "see a travel agent." Destination reporting isn't my focus—instead, I try to keep up with changing prices, new buying options, and scams. But good travel agents do know destinations, and what they don't know firsthand they can find through databases designed for agency use.

**Local deals.** Internet sites are essentially neutral about where you start your trip, and you can easily waste a lot of time with airlines that don't serve your home airport and tours that may be great from New York but are lousy from your area. A good travel agent bypasses that problem by keeping tabs on the travel suppliers that actually serve your area and offer attractive deals to its residents.

**Time saving.** The main reason so many business travelers rely on agents to make their travel arrangements is to save time and hassle. If you've ever spent several hours online searching for a hotel deal or an airfare, you'll know why. Unless your time has very little value, you could achieve the same result in a five-minute call to a travel agent. And even though your time may not be worth as much as that of a harried businessperson, you can

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probably find lots of things to do that are more interesting than searching a bunch of online sites for a deal.

Good deals. Good agents know what's available through the same Internet sites you might visit on your own. In addition, agents can search their GDS computer reservation systems, not available to the public, for deals that might not be on the Internet. And cruise lines and tour operators constantly bombard agents with emails and faxes about special promotions that aren't always available online.

Airline tricks. Online booking is simple for buying straightforward one-way, round-trip, or even multi-stop air tickets. But some international air ticketing rules are arcane, and a good travel agent knows cost-cutting tricks—pricing a ticket in a foreign currency rather than U.S. dollars, finding fares that allow free stopovers, and such—that you could never find online. You may not need these tricks often, but when you do, an agent is invaluable.

Assistance in a pinch. When something goes wrong—either before you leave or when you're already on your trip—a travel agent is your best source of help. Don't make repeated calls to a voice-response system or stand in an endless airport line: Instead, as soon as you encounter a problem, call your travel agent. You don't get caught in a serious problem very often, but when you do, you really want an agent on your case.

Finding an agent. When people ask how to find a good agent, my answer is, "the same way you find a good accountant, stockbroker, or auto mechanic—word of mouth." A travel agent is a professional, just as those others are professionals, and the best way to find one is through other satisfied clients.