

Dear Travel Editor,

"Why should I use a travel agent?" As a veteran travel executive, that's a question I'm often asked. Today, with the overwhelming number of sources for travel information (the Internet, cable television, newspapers, magazines, guidebooks, etc.), it's no wonder the consumer is confused. Yet that's precisely why the services of a professional travel consultant are more valuable than ever.

In January, the television news magazine, *20/20*, reported the results of a test in which travel agents beat consumers at uncovering the best airfares. However, it is much more than the "lowest fare" that provides the compelling argument for a good travel agent.

The best thing an agent can do is to match up a traveler with the vacation that's right for them. The professional travel consultant builds relationships with their clients to learn their interests and lifestyles, as well as their dispositions.

Below is a list of some of the important services, which are either provided free or for a nominal charge, by travel agents:

- 1. Distilling the product information:** Through an on-going and time-consuming process of familiarization, continuing education and customer feedback, the agent becomes a travel expert.
- 2. Investigating and supplying competitive information:** No single supplier is going to advise a consumer that a better route or a better fare is available on a competing carrier.
- 3. Staying abreast of the most current and timely promotions:** Via daily faxes, agent-only e-mail transmissions, and their relationships with their district sales managers, agents are obtaining the most current promotional information.
- 4. Analyzing the current promotions:** The cheapest is not always the best.
- 5. Clarifying the fine print, such as cancellation penalties and restrictions:** Again, the benefits of a professional's experience can save a traveler money . . . and headaches.
- 6. Making recommendations for travel-related options:** Travel agents share the to pack for different travel options.
- 7. Simplifying the research and subsequent transaction:** Like a personal shopper, agents can provide one-stop shopping for travelers who require air arrangements, rental cars, cruise accommodations and hotel stays - with suggestions that are in the best interest of the client, not the supplier.
- 8. Enhancing the trip with value-added benefits and amenities:** Agents can add to the client's experience by sending a bottle of wine, providing a special land package, a specific escort or other customer amenities.
- 9. Using their clout to obtain the best possible in seemingly impossible situations:** Whether it's airline seats, hotel rooms or cruise space, the travel agent has more buying power than the consumer.
- 10. Getting problems resolved:** The agent serves as the consumer's advocate in the event something inadvertently goes wrong.

The use of outside service providers for many transactions, such as tax preparation, isn't questioned. Similarly, if one is going to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars, as well as a good chunk of valuable leisure time, it makes great sense to use a professional.

I hope you'll consider sharing this information in future consumer interest columns.

Sincerely,  
JOSEPH A. WATTERS  
President