



Excerpted from The Travel Institute » Friday Five

10-24-14: Why Use a Travel Agent? Here are Five Reasons!

Why Use a Travel Agent? It's a really good and valid question, and to be honest, sometimes the answer might actually be that you don't need one! But we'll come back to that. Most travel agents now prefer the title travel consultant or similar. Why? It has a lot to do with the advantages they offer today. Still, with all the websites, deal finders, mobile travel apps, and online services, a lot of people ask: why use a travel consultant? It's not hard to do it yourself. It might even be fun! Or, it could turn into a huge disaster. Below are a few points to consider before clicking the BUY button or tapping yourself into a nonrefundable corner.

1. Experience. Think about what you do for a living. For nearly every profession, you can find a website, video, or app that gives potential customers a way to do it themselves. With a little help from the Internet you can fix your car, build cabinets, replace plumbing, write wills, draft contracts, cut hair, make clothes, buy shoes, do accounting, buy stock, cook, bake, and let's not forget edit videos and touch-up photos. Finding instructions or tools is not the problem. Doing it RIGHT is the issue. If you put the wrong screw in the wall, it's no big deal. If you put your family in the wrong resort, it's a much bigger deal. It becomes even bigger if something goes wrong.

Most people deal with planning a vacation once or twice a year. Travel consultants deal with it all day, every day and many have been doing it for years. Their livelihood fully depends on using their knowledge and experience to craft a vacation you'll love so much that you'll keep coming back for more. Websites and apps with advertising-driven, biased offerings are counting on your own lack of experience to push you to options that will earn them the most profit. Your satisfaction is not part of the display algorithm.

2. Real Deals. Have you ever wondered why some cruises, resorts, or hotels seem to have cheaper deals on some websites? There's always a reason. Sometimes, it's a good reason. Sometimes, it's a very bad reason that you won't know about until you arrive and it's too late. There's always a reason, and a great price is not always a good deal.

For example, every hotel has "undesirable" rooms they have trouble filling. Smaller rooms in noisy areas, rooms that haven't been renovated lately, or those that overlook the dumpsters are always cheaper than nice ones in quiet areas with good views. Websites are perfect for liquidating those rooms at bargain rates. Unfortunately, these so-called deals rarely mention things like smelly carpet or noise. It's also no coincidence that many require full payment upon booking and are nonrefundable.

Even the most beautiful cruise ship has cabins they have trouble selling. The ones directly under the dance floor of the all-night disco, or the ones near the anchor chain that bangs against the side of the ship are just two examples. There are plenty of hard-to-sell cabins that are perfect for online deals. To be fair, sometimes you can get lucky online! Sometimes the deals are real and worth the risk. Sometimes.

Travel consultants know the legitimate deals from the come-ons. They've been trained to uncover the reason behind the bargain. They understand travel lingo, know what to look for and most importantly: they know what to avoid.

3. Transparency. With websites and apps, you may not know what you'll actually be paying! Many hotels add nightly "resort fees" of \$25 to \$50 on top of the discounted rate apps and websites display. Of course, you won't know about them until you check out. Even rental cars can end up costing double the online rate once extra charges like airport fees, taxes, surcharges and such have been added. Travel consultants know these little details. They make sure you are never unpleasantly surprised. You'll always know exactly what you'll be paying and what you'll get for it.

4. Options. When you buy a cruise or vacation package online, you'll almost always be required to pay for the entire trip up-front. Did you know that travel consultants offer another option? Usually they can hold the space for you for a small deposit of around \$150 to \$200. Final payment is not due until between 30 to 60 days prior to departure. In many cases, you can change your plans or cancel entirely prior to final payment! In addition to the payment options, travel consultants can research and suggest alternatives to what you may have requested. While "Resort A" may be wonderful, its website will never tell you that "Resort B" has a nicer beach or better rates, or that its own casino is closed for loud and dusty renovations.

5. Advice and Connections. Travel consultants offer something you'll never find online or in an app: professional advice. Online, every resort or cruise is made to look beautiful and appealing. But, it's no bargain if you end up regretting the trip. The main reason to use a travel consultant is to make sure you never waste a penny on a vacation you won't truly enjoy.

There's one more thing you'll only get from a travel consultant: relationships. They have real one-to-one personal relationships with travel suppliers that can fix things should something happen to go wrong. If a travel app messes up your reservations, you're on your own. But with a travel consultant – you'll have an advocate on your side with connections. In other words: a human who cares. To the machines, you're nothing but their data.

Also, you might have heard that some travel consultants charge fees for their professional service. Like other skilled advisors, the best often do. But fees don't mean you'll always pay more. In fact, they're likely to save you more than you ever imagined.

When You Don't Need a Travel Consultant: It's true. Sometimes you might not need a travel consultant. If you're willing to take some risks, and not be concerned if something goes wrong, you might get lucky with the apps and websites. Many people do. Travel consultants just prefer not to gamble.

And: from the article **2014-06-13 Five Reasons Why Agencies Beat Booking Sites Every Time**

Online booking sites have had traditional travel agencies running scared – for no good reason. We have the competitive advantage in every respect. The question is, do YOU know that? Here are a few reasons you can quit booking online:

1. Ease of use. What's easier than clicking a few buttons for a plane ticket and hotel package? Calling your travel agent. And here's why: It's our job to know the best deals for every destination, the vendors usually pay my fees, and we make life far easier if anything should go wrong during your trip. You know what's not easy? Getting bumped from your chosen resort because you don't have a travel agent to fight for you.

2. It's all about experience. Not only do good travel agents have first- and second-hand experience of the properties they recommend, they also have the expertise to create unforgettable experiences for their customers. Booking sites are just a jumble of code – and ones and zeroes don't care about giving your grandparents the 50th anniversary cruise of their dreams.

3. "No Refunds, No Changes"? No way! After you've paid up front, nearly every booking site includes text saying "No refunds. No changes." With a travel agent, you can make changes or cancellations to your reservation at any time, within defined time ranges, for reasonable change fees.

4. Support American Business! Travel agencies like mine are family businesses that support the local community and economy. Just like you would go to a farmers market to support your local farmers, it's important to support your local businesses as well.

5. 24-7 Service. Unlike an impersonal booking site, we offer our clients 24-7 service whenever they need help. You never know what can happen on a trip – I can tell you stories that will make a believer out of you! Don't let your call for help go straight to a call center in Asia.