

New age travel agent more than a ticket agent

BY LARRY HALSTEAD
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Travel agencies are grappling with ways to use the Internet but not lose business to it.

More than 80 percent of consumers consider the Internet most useful in planning travel, while only 8.6 percent considered a travel agent for the information, Walter Klages, president of Research Data Services Inc., recently told the Pinellas County Tourist Development Council.

Travel agencies trying to weather the current economy are diversifying or mining their niche markets, deeper, said Tammy Levent, president of Elite Travel Group in Clearwater. For Levent, that meant adding corporate incentive travel to her burgeoning destination wedding business that conducts more than 500 weddings per year.

Levent has partnered with the National Football League Alumni to handle its members' travel with a co-branded Web site. Three percent of each sale goes to NFL

Alumni for its favorite charity.

Levent has expanded that program with other companies and nonprofit organizations and said she now has more than 2 million potential customers with access to the co-branded sites.

Another innovation is providing travel packages for silent auctions conducted by nonprofits. Elite Travel provides a travel package at wholesale pricing and the nonprofit sells it for as much as it can, paying Elite Travel the minimum bid price and keeping the rest.



KATHLEEN CARBONE

Tammy Levent, president of Elite Travel Group, in front of the Safety Harbor Resort and Spa. Levent will soon be booking all-inclusive wedding packages with the resort.

preferences, steer clients toward travel discounts and keep clients up to date on the industry, said Lois Raffel, travel manager for AchieveGlobal, an employee-training company with a Tampa office.

Raffel is a member of the Tampa Bay Business Travel Association, a branch of the National Business Travel Association. The local chapter was founded in 1988 and facilitates networking among its members, who represent travel agencies, travel buyers and industry vendors.

Visit St. Petersburg Clearwater, Pinellas County's convention and visitors bureau, uses Bowen-Keppie Travel in Clearwater and has all employees book their own travel. There's an approval process to go through that takes about three days, said D. T. Minich, executive director of Visit St. Petersburg Clearwater.



Minich

One company that moved away from staffing a corporate travel department is Raymond James Financial. It made the switch back to a travel agency in 2005 and now uses BCD Travel, said Anthea Penrose, Raymond James' public relations manager.

"It's just not cost effective for companies to keep four or five people on staff to do travel," said Marcus Mittermayr, spokesman for St. Petersburg Travel Center Inc.

Nor is it effective to have all employees book their own trips, even if they go through an agency, Mittermayr said. What's their time worth if they're spending it online researching travel, he said.

Travel agencies can consolidate the management of a client's travel needs, keeping records and helping design a travel policy that predetermines how to choose flights, hotels and car rentals. It all comes from the agents' expertise, Mittermayr said.

While there's no letup in the growing Internet presence, savvy travel agents are using the Web to expand customer bases globally and to communicate with clients, said Chris Russo, president and chairman of American Society of Travel Agents, a trade organization based in Alexandria, Va.

"Instead of just being brick and mortars, we're click and mortars," Russo said. Ninety percent of the top travel agencies in the country are corporate based and embrace the Web, he said.