**TRNC Near East University, School of Tourism and Hotel Management, THM 221 Travel Agency and Tour Operating Course for 2nd year students**

**Useful Articles From The Tourism Industry**

**Compiled by Mustafa Köprülü**

**Airlines Stop Paying Commissions to Agents**

**News, Tips & Bargains**

Following Delta's lead, several major U.S. airlines this month eliminated most commissions paid to travel agents for domestic tickets. The American Society of Travel Agents denounced the move as "anticonsumer."

Citing the need to reduce costs after a billion-dollar net loss in 2001, Delta on March 14 ended commissions on domestic tickets sold in the U.S. It continues to pay foreign sellers of airline tickets. The company said it would continue "individually negotiated incentive commissions to select agents" but did not elaborate.

Within a week American, America West, Continental, Northwest, United and US Airways took similar action. Most would not discuss the issue further, so it was not clear whether they would offer incentive commissions. America West said it would offer commissions of up to 5% to agencies "in exchange for booking more of their business on America West." Air Canada said it would end commissions in April.

On March 21, the day after United ended commissions, online travel seller Travelocity, www.travelocity.com, began imposing a $10 service charge on United tickets. A spokeswoman said Travelocity had negotiated compensation with other major airlines and objected to "working for free" for United. Competitor Expedia, www.expedia.com, briefly demoted United to the bottom of its displays, without listing fares, then resumed normal displays. An Expedia spokeswoman declined to explain the actions except to say that United was now compensating the online agency for selling its tickets.

Before cutting commissions entirely, major U.S. airlines had gradually cut them back, starting in 1995. Travel agencies, which began adding service fees after the cutbacks, are widely expected to raise them.

# Travelers be warned: 10 things travel agents won't ever tell you

Travel agents have taken Woman’s Day magazine to task for printing a scandalous article called “10 Things Travel Agents Won’t Tell You.” The article claims agents won’t tell you tips such as “Book and fly on Tuesdays” or “Be flexible with travel dates and airports.”

Travel agent Beth Edwards responded to the article, “I am sending your article to all of my friends and family and encouraging them to CANCEL subscriptions to your magazine. I am a small business owner who owns my own Travel Agency. I do this full-time, and I suspect that my "major" commissions are considerably less than what the author of this article makes.”

Sherrie Shepherd Funk, President at Just Cruisin' Plus, responded, “This is the biggest bunch of crap I've ever read! Woman's Day is now off my list FOREVER!” Travel agent Elaine Bylos responded, “What Travel Agents REALLY won't tell you is how hard they work and how little commission they get paid. This article is unbelievably irresponsible and misleading.”

The article suggests travel agents get luxury rewards for selling travel, including major commissions and outrageously expensive gifts, like receiving a fur coat for selling an Alaskan cruise. The article asserts “there’s not much advantage to booking a package with a travel agent over booking online.”

The article indicts the entire travel agent community as liars by stating “Agents untruthfully telling clients that they’ve sailed on a particular cruise ship because it’s more expensive or stayed at a certain pricier resort is common.” Agents are particularly upset about this generalization, and are calling the statement libelous.

The article says:

A travel agent can be a great resource. But some may pressure you into booking less-than-stellar vacations or get you to spend more than necessary to up their take-home pay. We got the inside scoop on travel agents’ secrets and found ways to help you save on vacations, book more easily and enrich your trip experience. Read on so you can go into a travel agency with eyes wide open.

1. They’re making major commission…

…and maybe even a bonus for booking your travel. This means they’re trying to influence your vacation decisions based on perks on offer at that particular time. “If the agent seems to be pushing a particular cruise line, resort or destination, there’s usually a reason: a higher commission, a contest for a cash bonus or even a prize if she sells that product,” says Donna Cambridge, co-owner of Chesterfield Cruise & Travel in Springfield, MO. “I once won a fur coat by selling an Alaskan cruise!” Wendy Stone, a home-based travel agent in Kansas City, KS, adds, “Airlines no longer pay commission, so most travel agencies add a booking fee to the traveler’s total cost for air-only reservations. That’s how they make money and compensate for their time.”

2. They can’t book (or price) all airline carriers.

Have your heart set on a particular airline to earn frequent-flier miles or take advantage of their great amenities? Your travel agent may not be able to book seats on certain carriers without booking a whole vacation package, says Stone. Travel agents are required to have an International Air Transport Association (IATA) or Cruise Line International Association (CLIA) number to book airlines through their booking source, which gives them direct access to the airline's inventory. However, not all airlines (such as Southwest and a few other smaller, regional carriers) are on these booking engines. For an agent to book, say, a Southwest ticket and get paid for it, they go through a third party that allows them only to book vacation packages, likely with a hotel. And there’s not much advantage to booking a package with a travel agent over booking online.

3. They may not have been to the hotel or on the cruise ship they’re recommending.

Some pros may fib about their travels to close a sale. “Agents untruthfully telling clients that they’ve sailed on a particular cruise ship because it’s more expensive or stayed at a certain pricier resort is common,” says Cambridge. Stone explains that reputable agencies encourage their employees to take “familiarization (FAM) trips” which allow the agent to learn about a destination at a deeply discounted rate. She suggests asking about recent FAM trips your agent’s taken to learn which destinations and accommodations she truly knows well.

4. Be flexible with travel dates and airports.

Being open about when you fly and where you fly into can slash your trip costs. But your savings mean less commission for some travel agents, so they may not suggest being flexible. Jaime Freedman, Group Publisher at Travelzoo.com, suggests “being your own travel agent.” Visit sites like Fly.com and Kayak.com, plug in dates you’re willing to travel and airports you’re willing to depart from and arrive in and you just may spend less than you thought you would on your vacation.

5. Travel insurance may not be necessary.

Travel agents push insurance because it increases the price of the vacation package—and thus, their commission. Yet, if you have health insurance, you’re most likely covered for overseas travel. And many credit card companies cover the costs of lost baggage, canceled trips, emergency assistance and accidental death or dismemberment. It pays (literally) to check with your health-insurance and credit card companies before you buy travel insurance.

6. They’re best for milestone trips.

It’s easy to book yourself a quick flight from New York City to Dallas, but going through an agent for a special vacation can make or break your trip. That’s because good agents have networks of reliable vendors in certain destinations, getting their clients VIP treatment and ensuring everything runs like clockwork. Jeff Wasson, owner of travel site Gusto.com, used a travel agent who specialized in his honeymoon destinations of Italy and Greece. “I could’ve winged it and taken a subway or bus from the airport, but my travel agent arranged to have a town car whisk me away, cool drink in hand. Plus, the driver showed me the back streets where he grew up,” says Wasson. “Yes, it cost more, but my experience was considerably better.” And that may be worth it for a special-occasion vacation.

7. Online travel sites offer refunds and cancellation policies.

In the not-so-distant past, online booking engines didn’t issue refunds, so travel agents were the way to go if you were concerned you’d have to cancel your trip. Now, online travel sites offer money back even if airfare drops through benefits like Orbitz.com’s Price Assurance program. And, since January 2012, the U.S. Department of Transportation mandates that airlines refund your money if you book online at least one week prior to departure and cancel within 24 hours of booking. “Most people aren’t aware of that, so if you see something you love, book it, because you can now cancel. It’s how everyone at Travelzoo does it,” says Freedman. Travel agents won’t mention this because they want you to book through them instead of online.

8. A travel agent won’t necessarily find the best price.

You can often find a better price on a room than a travel agent can by calling a hotel directly or visiting their website. Many hotel sites have drop-down menus featuring AAA and AARP rates and special rates for in-state residents (especially in Florida), so shop around, suggests Freedman. She also recommends taking advantage of local deals in the city you’re traveling to—not just for hotel stays but also for dining out and entertainment. Check sites like Groupon and LivingSocial to find them.

9. Book and fly on Tuesdays.

Oh, that commission: It’s why travel agents won’t tell you that it’s usually cheaper to reserve seats on planes on Tuesdays and fly on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. They may also neglect to mention that there are cheaper times during the day to fly. “6 a.m. flights are less expensive,” points out Freedman. “Although less desirable, there’s less of a chance they’ll be delayed.” She also advises signing up for travel e-mail alerts that share late-breaking deals, which in most cases, come out on Tuesdays. How low do these fares go? A few recent Tuesday airfares sent to Travelzoo Newsflash readers: $239 for roundtrip nonstop flights with taxes between Los Angeles, CA, and Lima, Peru, and $190 for the same between New York City and Puerto Rico.

10. Sign up (and use) a travel rewards card.

A travel agent won’t tell you that they make the bulk of their money on packages, so if you’re booking hotels, airfare or rental cars with rewards points, they’re losing big dollars. Still, Wasson recommends doing your homework before committing to a card—and then using it appropriately. “A lot of people sign up for every reward program under the sun, and 80% never get anything.” He suggests ordering one card and putting everything on it to reap the benefits. A good idea: Find a card (like AmericanAdvantage) that has an airport hub near you and choose a miles card accordingly.

The trajectory of the global airline industry is pretty much like that of an aircraft. At times it takes off for the high skies and at times, it dips to ground levels. In between these highs and lows, lies the story of the industry – of its survival, of the new and emerging trends that fuel its growth. What are the 5 trends that are driving and will continue to drive the airlines story in the future?

**Trend 1: It's a New Passenger Out There; Airlines will need to build 'Social' Pace to Create Brand Equity**

A number of leading global airlines have taken off on their 'social' flight and some are indulging in novel ways to engage with customers to build lasting relationships with them. Yes, it does mean stepping out of the corporate comfort zone and engaging real-time with the customer, but that's a feat airlines will have to achieve if they want to enhance brand equity and get a mind share of today's customer.

While some airlines have taken a lead in engaging with customers on social media and social media management, others are still wetting their feet. Among the recent innovative airline social media campaigns and initiatives are Virgin Atlantic's (VA) 'Looking for Linda', an interactive contest that got customers hooked with its unique concept; KLM's 'Meet & Seat' service where fliers can select seats alongside fellow passengers based on mutual interests in their social media profiles; and British Airways' Facebook application called 'Perfect Days' that encourages travelers to share a travel wish list and itinerary via a Facebook.

As social media takes precedence in the overall customer relationship management pie, airlines will need to look at building a large and robust resource pool that can respond to customer queries, complaints, posts and tweets round the clock.

As studies indicate, today the volume of social media communication for some of the world's leading airlines, ranges between 15,000 – 200,000 tweets and between 60,000 – 1,000,000 Facebook fans, but in the near future, the numbers will increase phenomenally. And as BBC presenter Nik Gowing observes in his study, 'Skyful of Lies and Black Swans', there is still a long way to go before airlines can actually become competent in the social media management.

It will thus, make strategic sense for airlines to partner with providers that can provide them with a readymade resource pool of social media experts and technology platforms that help enhance brand equity on social media.

**Trend 2: The Customer's World is Online and Offline – Maneuvering between both Holds the Key to Success**

The online medium – the Internet, represented by online travel agencies and Websites in the airline business, is today a powerful revenue generator for airlines. As indicated by market research data, almost 75 percent of air tickets today are bought online. e-Commerce and automation of business processes such as web check-in have largely enhanced the convenience of air travel. Added to that is the increasing popularity of the smart phone, which is expected to play an active role in customer relationship management and revenue generation in the time to come.

No matter how strong the online channel becomes, the offline channel or the airline customer service contact center will still continue to be a critical touch point between the airlines and its passengers, thanks to the 'personal' touch it brings. For many service-related complaints and challenges, passengers still prefer to 'speak' with a customer service agent. In many instances, customers often drop off from making an online purchase of air tickets or travel packages because of technical errors, slow Website speed, or during the billing process using debit / credit cards. Such customers can be retained by the intelligent convergence of the online and offline channels, either by the smart placement of the customer service contact center number or by activating a click-to-call feature either on the airlines’ Website or on the travel agencies' Websites. Where the online channel fails, the offline channel – the customer service contact center can take over smoothly to solve customer queries or problems.

**Trend 3: Analytics – An 'Altimeter' for the Airline Business**

With the proliferation of channels, the data generated in each channel is multiplying by the minute. This huge pile of data is a gold mine that contains very crucial information on passenger profiles, choices and preferences that can be leveraged by airlines to develop product offerings, strike away product / service offerings that do not appeal to customers, monitor challenges faced by customers and provide customized solutions, predict customer needs and preferences by the analysis of historical data and effectively cross- and / or up-sell additional products or services.

All this and much more in terms of sales, marketing and customer service can be achieved with the help of analytics. With its ability to extract crucial information from a huge pile of data that helps businesses make sound business decisions, analytics is emerging as a strategic enabler for the airlines business. For the airline industry analytics assumes importance in the form of social media analytics,contact center and speech analytics and revenue model analytics (particularly in the proration process).

An altimeter measures the height of an aircraft above sea level – a crucial piece of information for the aircraft to remain aloft. Analytics equips the airlines business with crucial insights, in that sense, analytics is emerging as an 'altimeter' that will help the airline business stay aloft.

**Trend 4: Changing the Course in Revenue Generation**

Inadvertently rising fuel prices, dull economic conditions and increasing competition are realities that are biting into the revenue generating potential of the global airlines business today. Airline companies are thus exploring newer ways of changing the course in revenue generation. Some of these strategies include tapping alternate revenue generating streams such as selling ancillary products and services across the value chain or stopping revenue leakage via the total revenue integrity route.

The ancillary route is an important revenue generator for airlines today. According to a PwC report, the top five U.S. carriers generated more than US$ 12 billion in ancillary revenue during 2011. Services that are emerging as hot favorites in the ancillary services menu include paying for checked baggage, booking a preferred seat and wi-fi connectivity. Most airlines are faced with the problem of revenue leakage at various levels of the business and are now actively looking at reining in this challenge by initiating a total revenue integrity program. Airlines must look at total revenue integrity program that cuts across multiple processes including ticketing processes, e-ticketing, departure control and customer relationship management.

**Trend 5: Increased Focus on the Regulatory and Standardization Route**

Regulations and directives on standardization will continue to dominate the airline business environment now and in the future. Most of these regulations are related to finance and accounting, environment and consumer rights. For instance, while airlines in the European Union are penalized for emissions above the limit specified by regulatory authorities, American airlines are adapting to the new pricing rules set by the U.S. Department of Transportation, wherein airline companies will have to include all taxes and fees while advertising fares for their flights.

While regulation envisages increased safety of passengers and improved sustainability of the business, compliance adds to the total cost of operations. It is a cost that airlines must bear on their own - without passing on to passengers. Since new regulations are a given for the global airlines industry, airlines must engage in a compliance program that can optimize business processes and transform operations.

In a bid to ease the effect on various environmental factors on the revenue of the global airlines, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) has introduced a directive – the Simplified Interline Settlement (SIS) that aims to standardize and speed up the interline billing and settlement in the industry. Here again, as airlines take the plunge towards standardization of the interline billing and settlement process, they will need to carefully look for a partner and a program that will be cost-effective and help process optimization.

**Five myths about travel agents**

Everett Potter, Special for USA TODAY 5:01 p.m. EDT September 25, 2014

Mention the phrase "travel agent" to many travelers, regardless of age, and they can't imagine why they would ever use one. It's easier and faster than ever to book a hotel, airline ticket or car rental online, and there are user reviews everywhere, so why would anyone need an agent? We found out when we looked at some of the myths about how they work.

**1. I can easily book the same trip on my own without using a travel agent.**

Sure, you can book a trip yourself, but it may not be the same trip that you'd get through a travel agent.

"If they book it themselves, they're just a credit card number" to a travel supplier, says Anne Morgan Scully, president of McCabe World Travel, a Virtuoso agency in McLean, Va. "I make a point of knowing the general manager of the hotel where they might be staying and I usually call the GM the night before one of my clients arrives and see if they might be upgraded. If they book with a good agent, they're known on arrival."

Agents are especially useful on specialized trips, whether it's a honeymoon, a cruise or an adventure travel vacation.

"Anyone can book a hotel room and a rental car but I sell romantic trips and adventure travel to Africa," says Jonathan Haraty of Jon's Dive & Travel Services in East Longmeadow, Mass., a Tripology agency. "Do you want to take a chance on booking your own hotel or safari camp in Africa? Will someone be there to pick you up in the airport in Nairobi? I know people who've been stranded when they arrive. That's one reason you need an agent."

Much of Haraty's time is spent working with honeymoon clients and helping them decide which resort is right for them.

"They can read all of the hotel and resort reviews on the Web that they want," he says. "But will they really be happy at an all-inclusive resort? Do they plan to go out every night? What kind of room do they really want? The answers aren't readily available on the internet."

Both Scully and Haraty note two things that agents can do better than just about anyone else. A good agent is often able to get a hotel room when the hotel website or front desk says that they're "full."

"It's simply knowing who to call," says Scully.

And when you're stranded because of a canceled or delayed flight, there's nothing like e-mailing or texting your travel agent to get you on another flight. They can often do it much faster than the airline.

# The incredible consolidating travel industry

Bill McGee, Special for USA TODAY 7:04 a.m. EST March 4, 2015

Let's say you're shopping for a vacation. You visit three different online travel agencies (OTAs): Expedia, Orbitz, Travelocity. You compare prices among four budget hotels: Days Inn, Howard Johnson, Super 8, Travelodge. You compare rental rates at Hertz, Dollar, Thrifty. You even consider a cruise on Carnival, Holland America, Princess.

But since you haven't clicked the "about" pages on these sites, you're unaware all the brands within these four sectors are sister companies. In fact, the wide world of travel is much smaller than many consumers realize, with the latest consolidation occurring in online travel.

Before the proverbial ink had dried on Expedia's acquisition of Travelocity last month, Expedia recently announced its [acquisition of Orbitz](http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2015/02/12/expedia-is-buying-orbitz-worldwide-for-12-per-share/23283797) for $1.6 billion. In fact, Expedia has been gobbling up other OTAs for 15 years now, leaving about 80% of the U.S. landscape dominated by just two major players: Expedia and The Priceline Group. Unless, of course, Expedia buys Priceline next month (or vice versa).

Travel industry executives, analysts and regulators debate whether such consolidation inspires healthy competition. But the real question is, does all this consolidation help or hurt consumers?

**800-pound gorillas**

What's happening with online travel is mirrored in every sector of the industry, leaving travelers with ever expanding mega-corporations. Consider:

**• Airlines**

Over the last decade the U.S. airline industry has undergone the most dramatic consolidation in its history, leaving travelers with just three major network carriers -- American, Delta and United. Kevin Mitchell, chairman of the Business Travel Coalition, notes: "Most consumers cannot get all their needs met by one of these airlines. In fact, there are thousands of monopoly markets, and as such, imperfect competition, and no true product substitution for many trips."

Airline mergers differ from other travel mergers: Acquired brands continue operating under their own names in other travel sectors, but when airlines merge, the weaker name is retired and the company often contracts flights, routes and hubs. Brands are eliminated even in "reverse mergers," such as when America West merged with US Airways (which then merged with American).

My views on airline consolidation have been very public in recent years; I've testified in Congress for Consumers Union in opposing several recent mega-mergers. I've written about it here, in [2010](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/travel/columnist/mcgee/2010-04-28-airline-mergers_N.htm) and [2013](http://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/columnist/mcgee/2013/02/27/american-us-airways-merger-fares-rise-bill-mcgee/1949625).

**• Car rentals**

Consider a major U.S. airport offering nine major rental brands: Alamo, Avis, Budget, Dollar, Enterprise, Hertz, National, Payless and Thrifty. Quite a lot of choice, no? In fact, those nine brands are owned by just three corporations:

\* [Avis Budget Group](http://www.avisbudgetgroup.com/company-information) operates Avis, Budget and Payless (and Zipcar)

\* [Enterprise Holdings](http://www.enterpriseholdings.com) operates Alamo, Enterprise and National

\* [Hertz Global Holdings](http://www.hertz.com/rentacar/abouthertz/index.jsp?targetPage=CorporateProfile.jsp&c=aboutHertzCompaniesView) operates Dollar, Hertz and Thrifty

**• Cruise lines**

Consolidation has been rampant in the cruise industry for decades, as have concerns about such consolidation. Back in 2002, the Federal Trade Commission conducted a [10-month investigation](http://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2002/10/ftc-closes-cruise-line-merger-investigations) before voting 3-2 to allow Princess Cruises to be acquired by Carnival rather than Royal Caribbean. However, the dissenting opinion noted, "there is a substantial likelihood that either merger will significantly lessen competition in violation of the Clayton and FTC Acts."

Such concerns focus on a handful of corporations controlling multiple brands worldwide, such as:

\* [Carnival Corporation](http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=200767&p=irol-prlanding) owns nine lines, including Carnival, Costa, Cunard, Holland America, P&O, Princess and Seabourn

\* [Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings](http://www.nclhltdinvestor.com) owns Norwegian, Oceania and Regent Seven Seas

\* [Royal Caribbean Cruises](http://www.rclinvestor.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=103045&p=irol-irhome) owns six lines, including Celebrity and Royal Caribbean

**• Lodging**

The largest sector of the travel industry contains hundreds of brands and thousands of properties, so competition would seem to be robust. But consider that only seven companies own more than 80 major brands. In many cases the sister companies are not direct competitors, but in some cases they are:

\* [Carlson Rezidor](http://carlsonrezidor.com/our-brands) operates eight brands, including Country Inns, Park Plaza and Radisson

\* [Choice Hotels](http://www.choicehotels.com/en/about-choice/ourbrands?sid=x2TNdi.BOwfUgskwg.5) operates 11 brands, including Clarion, Comfort Inn, Econo Lodge, Quality and Rodeway Inn

\* [Hilton](http://www.hiltonworldwide.com/portfolio/) operates 11 brands, including Conrad, DoubleTree, Embassy Suites, Hampton, Hilton, Homewood Suites and Waldorf Astoria

\* [InterContinental Hotels](http://www.ihg.com/hotels/gb/en/global/about/brands) operates 11 brands, including Candlewood, Crowne Plaza, Holiday Inn, InterContinental and Staybridge

\* [Marriott](http://www.marriott.com/marriott/aboutmarriott.mi) operates 18 brands, including Courtyard, Fairfield Inn, Marriott, Renaissance, Residence Inn, Ritz-Carlton and Springhill

\* [Starwood](http://www.starwoodhotels.com/corporate/about/index.html) operates nine brands, including Le Méridien, Sheraton, St. Regis, W Hotels and Westin

\* [Wyndham](http://www.wyndhamworldwide.com/about-wyndham-worldwide/our-brands) operates 14 brands, including Baymont Inn, Days Inn, Hawthorn, Howard Johnson, Knights Inn, Ramada, Super 8, Travelodge and Wyndham

**Shrinking online travel?**

OTAs are not as plentiful as many consumers believe. Expedia owns 12 travel brands, including Travelocity, Hotwire, Hotels.com, CarRentals.com and Egencia; Priceline owns Priceline, Kayak and Booking.com. As Charisse Jones [noted](http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2015/02/12/expedia-is-buying-orbitz-worldwide-for-12-per-share/23283797), some travel companies are concerned about an Expedia-Orbitz marriage. The president and CEO of the American Hotel and Lodging Association stated, "this most recent merger raises questions, and appears to be counter to the goal of creating more consumer choice."

[Traveling together: Expedia to buy rival Orbitz](http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2015/02/12/expedia-is-buying-orbitz-worldwide-for-12-per-share/23283797/)

One expert believes choice will diminish behind the screen. Cheryl Rosner, who served as president of both Expedia Corporate Travel and Hotels.com, asserts, "No matter which of the 'storefronts,' for want of a better phrase, that a consumer is engaging with, whether it be Expedia or Orbitz, the content or offering with regards to inventory and pricing, is going to be the same."

Ironically, [reports](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/14/us-airlines-expedia-m-a-idUSKBN0LI01Q20150214) quote a spokeswoman for Airlines for America, the industry's trade organization, declaring these acquisitions will "strengthen Expedia's position in the distribution chain and could have implications for consumers, travel agents and airlines." This "do as we say, not as we do" strategy conflicts with how the U.S. airline industry fiercely fought all of us who warned of the dangers of consolidation, while airlines spent untold millions lobbying for mergers. Yet airlines suddenly are worried about consolidation's "impact on consumers and competition"?

**Weighing the benefits**

In a [conference call](http://files.shareholder.com/downloads/EXPE/3993296387x0x809250/1CAA4BDF-9218-461D-B36B-12EB07DA26D4/EXPE-Transcript-2015-02-12T13_30%20-%20final.pdf), Expedia CFO Mark Okerstrom acknowledged his company is "relatively large" in the OTA segment, but added, "in the grand scheme of things, we are only a small player and we think our overall share is single digits." Clearly this will be Expedia's strategy if in fact any government agencies decide to challenge the merger: Online travel is a $1.3 trillion industry, so why fret since no single company dominates?

What this argument ignores is much of that huge industry is comprised of individual branded sites owned by airlines, hotels, rental cars, cruise lines, packagers. Veteran travel journalist James Shillinglaw [noted](http://www.travelpulse.com/news/travel-agents/travel-insights-is-expedia-too-big.html) the sheer size of online travel -- particularly direct-to-supplier sites -- dwarfs Expedia and Priceline, but in the third-party segment, Expedia "is now an even bigger giant than it already was."

One would expect competitors to howl the loudest, yet last week the CEO of Priceline [stated](http://consumertraveler.com/columns/reading-columns/mileage-plus-now-fare-based-priceline-ceos-on-expedia-orbitz-portable-travel-seat/): "I don't see the deal that Expedia's made, if it passes, as being a negative for our group."

Mitchell has vocally fought airline consolidation, but supports Expedia-Orbitz, asserting "it's not always the number of participants that make a market functionally competitive or not." He cites robust competition between airplane makers Boeing and Airbus, and states, "This Expedia-Orbitz development is on balance pro-competition and pro-consumer, in my view ... Strong, independent distributors are necessary to keep the airlines honest on their websites and in their offerings elsewhere to consumers."

Are there residual benefits for consumers when travel companies merge? Some analysts assert consolidation breeds financially stronger corporations, and some suggest financial benefits -- such as greater purchasing power -- produce greater benefits for travelers. Others point to cross-pollination, such as stronger reward programs.

But there's a long history of consumers not benefitting from mergers and acquisitions. And in most industries, customers are best served when competitors fight fiercely to please them, not link arms as siblings. Gobbling up the competition may help a parent company's bottom line, but it weakens the marketplace for consumers.

# Tour Operators Have Mixed Reactions to Latest Loosening of Cuba Restrictions

[Tour Operator](http://www.travelpulse.com/news/tour-operators) | [David Cogswell](http://www.travelpulse.com/bio/david-cogswell) | September 21, 2015

New steps taken by the Obama administration to further reduce restrictions on trade and travel with Cuba are being welcomed by U.S. tour operators, but with little enthusiasm because the changes will have little immediate effect on travel.

The lifting of restrictions on travel has already overtaken the capacity of Cuba to handle the increased flow of tourists.

Modified regulations are set to go into effect Sept. 21 and are designed to ease the flow of business between the countries in the fields of travel, telecommunications, banking, Internet-based services and business operations in general.

The current changes in rules will not affect who can visit Cuba, but they will open some possibilities for travel by offering the chance for transportation companies to become licensed to provide transportation to Cuba.

New rules will make it easier for U.S.-based firms to export computer and Internet technology to Cuba, will also eliminate caps on the amounts of money that can be sent from the U.S. to Cubans and will allow American travelers to open bank accounts in Cuba.

Under the new rules, U.S. firms can export civil aviation equipment to Cuba. Internet-based educational courses will be allowed onto the island and disaster relief will be allowed by the U.S. government.

Though the relaxing of restrictions is incremental, any sign of reduced barriers to travel to Cuba is welcomed by American tour operators, who are already enjoying a boom in demand for travel to Cuba.

“This is tremendous news,” said John Stachnik, president of Mayflower Tours. “Last week was our highest week yet for sales of our programs to Cuba. Yet the greatest single barrier we have had to face with prospective travelers is that they fear 'regimentation' more than anything. They want an experience that allows them to have organized independence and this will certainly bode well as we move forward with plans for upcoming departures.”

Although American travelers continue to move toward preferring greater independence when they travel, Cuba is a special case. Independent travel in Cuba will continue to be difficult for the foreseeable future not only because of the restrictions by the U.S. government, but because of the limits in capacity and the infrastructure in Cuba. So people-to-people travel continues to be the most attractive and effective means of traveling in Cuba for most Americans.

Though people-to-people travel is highly restricted, it also provides maximum opportunities for personal interaction and cultural exchange with the natives, opportunities that are increasingly desired by American travelers in virtually all destinations.

“Ironically our programs, which operate under the people-to-people banner, have been coming back with ratings that go through the roof,” said Stachnik, “so we do not want to lose too much of the flavor of Cuba by creating only independent vacations, rather than the life-enriching experiences we promise our travelers.”

Tour operators believe that the additional opening of trade between the two countries will encourage more travel to Cuba by those who want to see the island before the changes that will inevitably come as relations between the two countries continue to open.

“I think these additional steps encourage the continued growth of people-to-people travel to Cuba,” said Robert Drumm, president of Alexander + Roberts. “This ‘deeper green light’ makes the appeal of visiting Cuba at this transitional time greater, before Cuba experiences wider change.”

“As Cuba continues to enhance and improve accommodations, restaurants and activities, many Americans will become more and more intrigued with the prospect of visiting,” said a spokeswoman for Collette, the Rhode Island-based tour operator. “These changes will increase economic development and will aid in tourism as well.”

However, while the relaxation of restrictions can increase the flow of visitors to Cuba, it does not in itself provide more places for them to stay when they get there.

Ronen Paldi, president of Ya’lla Tours, said that the rate of the relaxation of restrictions has already outpaced Cuba’s capacity to accommodate those who do travel to Cuba.

“This change will have no effect because Cuba, as is, is oversold,” said Paldi. “There is not enough space at the hotels, and ‘easing more the embargo’ will only create more pressure on a limited infrastructure.”

On the other hand, the limited capacity of Cuba makes the support provided by the people-to-people model of travel more attractive and practical.

“The main issue is really hotel space,” said Gianni Miradoli, CEO of Central Holidays. “Cuba cannot accommodate mass traffic currently. The number of Hotel rooms that can be utilized by the American market (four and five star properties) are very limited and consequently only tour operators that can assure blocks of space can work with Cuba travels.”

“The practical issues of a weak tourism infrastructure — and extraordinarily limited hotel availability suitable for American travelers — makes people-to-people touring by land or water the most appropriate way to visit this beautiful and arresting island,” said Alexander + Roberts’ Drumm.

The full text of the new regulations will be unveiled on Monday.

“What I’ve read so far is positive,” said Tom Popper, president of Insight Cuba, “but it won’t affect tours and travel in a significant way. However, the Department of Treasury said the new regulations will come out on Monday, so let’s see what they say.”

# Packaging All-Inclusives

Wholesalers are your best ally in booking all-inclusive resort vacations

[Vacation Agent](http://www.travelpulse.com/articles/vam) | [Tour Operator](http://www.travelpulse.com/articles/tour-operators) | [David Cogswell](http://www.travelpulse.com/bio/david-cogswell)

“Make your clients picture themselves ina particular place.” — Tim Mullen, Apple Vacations

The all-inclusive pricing model has spread like wildfire through the resort industry. At this point the market is almost flooded with all-inclusive resorts in many destinations. Such a wide variety of choices makes the selection process more difficult, at least for anyone who wants to explore the possibilities and settle on the best selections for their personal tastes and preferences.

That’s why working with wholesalers who package all-inclusve resort vacation can be a great resource for agents.

Wholesalers occupy a well-trafficked point at the center of the travel industry, because they work with the suppliers of all the necessary components of an all-inclusive resort vacation package. And because they buy in bulk, they get the best deals for your clients, usually offering better prices than consumers can get purchasing directly one-off from those same suppliers.

Wholesalers have intimate knowledge of destinations, especially the tourism and hospitality sectors. That knowledge gives them the power to make good decisions that would be hard to make for anyone who has never been to the destination.

The well-educated person, it is said, is not one who knows the answer to every question, but rather knows how to find the answers. For the travel agent, the wholesale tour operator/vacation packager/destination manager is the ideal source for destination expertise.

The wholesaler serves the travel agent in a similar way that the travel agent serves the public: as consultants and an authoritative source of information about each destination. That kind of mastery also applies to the niche market of all-inclusive resorts.

Vacation Agent asked some of the top wholesalers for tips for travel agents on how to sell all-inclusive resorts through their companies.

**It’s all about all-inclusives:** The first step to selling all-inclusive resorts is to recognize the popularity of the product. “The all-inclusives have been associated with Mexico beach vacations for more than 20 years, but lately the luxury all-inclusive market has really grown,” says Tim Mullen, president of Apple Vacations. “You know the Secrets and the Dreams and the Zöetry, but even the middle-of-the-road clubs have added their all-inclusive offerings. Iberostar, Riu — they’ve added their Palaces, their Grands; Palladium has added its Premiere Club. So it’s taking what was successful and improving it.”

**Take advantage of the wholesale proposition:** Wholesalers provide many advantages for travel agents and clients. “With many things in travel you can buy component, component, component,” says Mike Going, president of Funjet Vacations. “The value of a wholesaler is that we aggregate all the product, we vet the product, we grade the product, make sure it’s meeting our operational standards, our client satisfaction standard, so that every resort we’re carrying in our product portfolio is, if you will, Funjet — or Mark Travel — approved, and [the resorts] are generally very supportive of the agent community.”

“When people can consolidate their hotel, air, ground transportation, features, it’s just a better transaction for the agent and client.” — Mike Going, Funjet

Going adds, “For someone booking directly there’s no real price advantage. So when people can consolidate their hotel, their air, their ground transportation, features and attractions with the wholesaler or the aggregator, it’s just a better transaction both for the agent and ultimately for the client.”

**Tap into the wholesaler’s knowledge:** Because wholesalers work closely with hotels and destinations they are excellent sources of current information on products and properties in the market at a given moment. Wholesalers are the travel agent’s key to what each destination offers.

“Knowledgeable travel agents know that working with a wholesale travel provider such as Pleasant Holidays can be a win-win for themselves and their clients,” says Jack E. Richards, president and CEO of Pleasant Holidays. “The tour operator has a vast network of resources that can often make the difference at each step of the journey — for both agents and their clients.”

“A travel package is a convenient way to get a great value for less money, all in one price.” — Jack E. Richards, Pleasant Holidays

**Drop your clients a line:** Don’t sit on your hands waiting for clients to call, says Harry Dalgaard, president of Avanti Destinations. “Go after them,” he advises. “Pick a few different packages to a few destinations that you love, add in a few special experiences. Then send them off to clients who you believe would love them. This way, you’re reconnecting with them, telling them you were thinking of them and sharing your knowledge and passion about a few destinations. FIT is personalized and that makes all the difference in this current market.”

**Get to know your client:** “Don’t be afraid to ask questions,” says Jim Tedesco, director of marketing for GOGO Vacations. “The more you know what [your clients] want, and at what budget, the more you can help them. That’s what will turn a client into a repeat customer. Simple questions — if they prefer pool or beach, nightlife or quiet environments, direct flights or are fine with layovers — will help narrow down what they want and will help your wholesaler help you find the right place for them. Never be afraid to follow up your recommendations by asking for the sale. It shows confidence in your knowledge.”

**Three simple questions:** Mullen of Apple Vacations offers three principal questions to ask clients: “How far are you willing to travel?” is one. “Most consumers want to fly no more than three or four hours, which really narrows down many destinations to those with nonstop flights,” he says.

“Second question: What types of hotels or hotel brands do you typically stay at on vacation? This will help define the budget and hotel level of service one is willing to accept. And finally: Are you interested in an all-inclusive? If so, then really the destination offerings can be truly defined to Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica for the most part.”

**Listen actively:** Avanti’s Dalgaard says, “Active listening is the key to directing a client to a travel product that is tailored to his/her interests, timing and budget. Travelers love to talk about their travel experiences and things they have heard from friends. It means listening to what they say and hearing what they really mean. If you pick up clues in the conversation, you can make travel-wise suggestions and also introduce new places to visit that will surprise and delight them.”

**Emphasize value:** One of the most important things wholesalers bring to the table is value. The fact that a wholesaler can buy in bulk and combine components in a package at a better rate than consumers can purchase individually is not always evident to clients. It must be pointed out.

“Just like when you run into your local diner and order the lunch combo, buying a travel package is a convenient way to get a great value for less money, all in one price,” says Pleasant Holidays’ Richards. “Pleasant Holidays works with hotel partners to obtain exclusive rates and added values that are then packaged with airfare and other products to create a comprehensive vacation package. Added values may include daily breakfast, spa discounts, kids-stay-free offers or guaranteed connecting rooms. So travelers who think they can only afford hotel and air are often pleasantly surprised with the extras that truly make a vacation memorable. Agents should review the total package price when comparing quotes as airline, flight schedules and room categories may be different.”

**Show and tell:** “A picture is always worth a thousand words,” says Apple’s Mullen. “Make your clients picture themselves in a particular place or with a specific room view or in a special restaurant or beach. Show them pictures or videos of your fam trips or from your past customer experiences. To the best of your ability let your clients see for themselves the destination and hotel you are selling them.”

**Build partnerships:** As you determine which wholesalers are best for you and your clients you will want to form partnerships with them. It starts with researching, using your intuition to decide which wholesalers are best for you and gradually narrowing down the possibilities so you can focus your buying power on the few that are most appropriate to your needs. The partnership gives you buying power and clout with hoteliers.

“Usually, if you book a hotel yourself, you’ll be quoted the rack rate,” says John Hanratty, senior vice president of travel agency engagement for The Mark Travel Corporation’s managed brands. The wholesale rate, he adds, will be substantially cheaper and hotels are careful not to undersell the wholesalers they rely on to ensure that their hotels stay well occupied. “Most partners wouldn’t knowingly undersell us. If we found that to be the case, we’d be all over them,” Hanratty says.

**6 Reasons You Need A Travel Agent**

Over the past 15 years, the number of “do-it-yourself” travelers arranging trips online has soared. Fewer than 10% of leisure travelers now use a travel agent, according to [PhoCusWright](http://www.phocuswright.com/), an industry research firm.

Yet, even for experienced travelers, planning and booking complicated trips online can prove daunting:

* First there’s deciding where to start a search, with choices including online travel agencies like Expedia, travel aggregators like Kayak, direct sites for hotels, airlines etc., and user-review sites like TripAdvisor.
* Then there’s reading fine print and weighing the cost of hidden charges — unbundled airline fees add an obstacle to comparing apples to apples.
* Finally, there’s the time it takes to put together all the disparate and often non-refundable pieces.

(**MORE:** [How to Customize a California Wine Country Visit](http://www.nextavenue.org/article/2014-09/how-customize-california-wine-country-visit))

No wonder some consumers are circling back to travel agents.

**The New Travel Agents Are Advisers**

The new breed of agents operates differently than those of the past. Rather than merely booking transactions or acting as order-takers, agents now function as travel advisers. They work collaboratively with clients to sort through vast amounts of information and make informed decisions, much like financial advisers assist clients in managing their money.

(**MORE:** [6 Travel Tips for Midlife Adventurers](http://www.nextavenue.org/blog/6-travel-tips-midlife-adventurers))

“My husband and I are going to Sicily at the end of the month and to Budapest in December,” says frequent traveler (and Next Avenue contributor) [Carol Cassara](http://www.nextavenue.org/expert/carol-cassara) of San Jose, Calif. “Our agent knows our preferences for air travel — which cabin and where we like to sit, what kind of layover we prefer and which airlines we like to fly. It would have taken me days to compare all the options.”

The PhoCusWright.com study found that consumers who use travel agents tend to be older (two-thirds are 45 and over and nearly a third of agented bookings come from people over 60). These individuals also tend to spend more, and to book more complex trips.

But even travelers who use agents still want hands-on involvement in researching their trips online. A study by [Travel Weekly](http://www.travelweekly.com/Travel-News/Travel-Agent-Issues/2014-Consumer-Trends/) notes that 72% of those who used agents over the past year also used review sites.

**Six Reasons to Use A Travel Adviser**

According to PhoCusWright, about 35% of those booking travel offline do so because they want personal service. Here are six other reasons you might consider using a travel agent/adviser:

**1. You’re not a travel expert.**

With their training — and being well-traveled themselves — good travel advisers can offer you options you might not have considered. Some travel advisers are generalists; others specialize in niches, such as [cruises](http://www.nextavenue.org/article/2014-06/why-cruises-are-ideal-boomers-traveling-solo), or in [multigenerational group travel](http://www.nextavenue.org/article/2014-07/6-ways-make-multigenerational-vacation-fun) or in particular geographic destinations. If you book a cruise through an agent, he or she is likely to be familiar with various lines, sailings, cabins and excursions. Some agents even have subspecialties, such as riverboat cruising.

**2. You want to get it right**.

Some trips are more complicated than others. For example, foreign travel is more complex than traveling to the next state. Or sometimes the stakes are too high to make a mistake when you are planning a big trip to celebrate a special birthday or anniversary or a trip that involves coordinating itineraries with friends or family members. Even on city tours or shore excursions, an agent may be able to point you to the most knowledgeable and English-proficient guides.  
  
**3. You don’t have advisers’ money-saving connections**.

Travel agencies have consolidated and banded together into large consortia, affording them unusual leverage to negotiate with travel suppliers on behalf of their clients. For example, [Virtuoso](http://www.virtuoso.com/), one of the largest networks, ([Signature Travel Network](http://www.signaturetravelnetwork.com/) and [Ensemble Travel Group](http://www.ensembletravel.com/) are others) encompasses 340 travel agencies employing 8,900 travel advisers in 20 countries. With $12.5 billion in purchasing power, Virtuoso advisers are able to secure hotel upgrades, rooms with the most desirable views or extra amenities like complimentary breakfasts and spa credits. As a client of a network, you are not only treated like a V.I.P., but benefit from these no-cost perks.  
 **4. You don’t have time to waste**.

Researching and organizing a trip takes time, patience and perseverance. Users of the website [GetHuman.com](http://gethuman.com/) (which offers tricks and shortcuts to reach various types of overwhelmed call centers) report the average wait time to get American Airlines, Delta Airlines and United on the phone as 14.3, 14.9 and 13.5 minutes, respectively — under ordinary circumstances.

“In cases of major storms, during the holidays, and even when company websites crash, we see a huge influx of users trying to reach the airlines by phone. Wait times can be well over an hour, if the user gets through at all,” says Adam Goldkamp, COO of GetHuman.com.

**5. You want a safety net in case things go wrong**.

Travelers realize that even after a trip is planned, things don’t always turn out exactly as expected. A flight is cancelled, a piece of luggage gets lost, a passport is pilfered or a grandchild falls ill with a high fever on foreign soil. When “stuff happens,” it is reassuring to have someone you can count on to resolve problems. You don’t want to be the one hanging on your cell phone to rearrange a flight. Many travel advisers offer clients 24/7 backup by phone and email.

**6. You want a bespoke trip.**

“What really sets a true luxury travel adviser apart are the little things that are unexpected,” says Shawna Huffman Owen, a Virtuoso advisor associated with family-owned [Huffman Travel Ltd](http://huffmantravel.com/). “We tailor-make experiences like arranging scavenger hunts for families in The Louvre or helping older travelers who need baggage assistance on trains. We create something that can’t be ‘Googled’ — a personal experience,” she says.

**The Bottom Line**

Travelers need to do some homework to find an adviser who meets their needs, presumably based on some mix of chemistry, experience and cost.

Fee structures vary by agent as well as by the amount of research entailed in planning a particular trip. Using an agent may cost a traveler $50 to book an airline ticket alone, for example, or a flat or hourly fee to plan more complex trips. Agents earn commissions on some products as well (paid by suppliers).

According to the American Society of Travel Agents ([ASTA](http://www.asta.org/)), only six states regulate the registration of travel agencies and/or regulate how travel is sold (California, Florida, Hawaii, Iowa, Nevada and Washington). Finding someone to provide any kind of personal service requires due diligence.

“The best way to find a travel adviser is to ask a friend for a referral,” says Huffman Owen.

While using an agent can be more costly, it can save time and disappointment. “Travel advisers manage your most valuable and non-renewable asset: your leisure time,” said Matthew Upchurch, chairman and CEO of Virtuoso, at a recent conference. Then he quoted Warren Buffett: “Price is what you pay, value is what you get.”

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**Why You Still Need a Travel Agent**

A few years ago, a good friend took an international trip with a two-stop flight itinerary. Afterwards, he reflected on how beat up he felt when it was over: "Adding that third airport into the mix seemed to add a ton of extra travel this year; it was rough."  
  
I asked how he booked the flights. He said that he'd used one of the big travel booking sites, and that the itinerary he purchased was the best combination of duration, flight times and price he could find. My response: "Next time, call my travel agent first. You'll feel a lot better when it's all over."  
  
The following year, he did just that, and the agent came up with options that he could never have found himself using a single booking site -- specifically, a short and affordable Southwest flight that put him in an airport with countless options for direct flights to his final destination. What would have been another expensive, six-flight endurance test was replaced by a far less demanding trip.  
  
I use my travel agent on about 50 percent of all my trips that involve air, so when CNN marveled that [travel agents may be making a comeback](http://edition.cnn.com/2009/TRAVEL/08/12/travel.agent.comeback/), I had to agree.  
  
The Return of the Travel Agent  
Why? Personally, I've found that the likelihood of using a travel agent increases in direct proportion to the abundance and complexity of travel options you can find on the Internet. Many travelers are discovering the following:

 In offering more options and amenities, online travel sites have actually made it more confusing to figure out what they are selling, not less so.

 The explosion of restrictions and fees -- many of which are not obvious to the casual travel buyer -- further muddies understanding of the bottom line on any itinerary.

 The absence of popular airlines from major booking engines -- the juggernaut Southwest being the most glaring -- eliminates what could well turn out to be a specific traveler's absolute best itinerary.

 The big online travel sites got too smart for their own good; by tidying up and repackaging all the data each according to their own assumptions about travel purchasing, they show us what they think we want to see, but not always what we really want to see. That is, by becoming "online travel agents," rather than mere booking sites, they end up in competition with real travel agents, who can usually do the work better than computers can.  
  
 And my number one reason to use a travel agent for booking flights: the reduction in flight capacity by the airlines has resulted in significantly more full flights on the routes I fly. At the same time, the booking sites have gotten only marginally better at offering seat choices and at seating companions together. Just try to book your family on a multi-flight trip and you'll see what I mean. Travel agents can hack their way through all this stuff.  
  
It has gotten to the point that many travelers truly dread the moment they have to sit down at the computer to research travel. Seems like a good time to call in a pro, no?  
  
If this describes you, or even just your next trip, here are some tips and guidelines for choosing, communicating with and evaluating a travel agent. For more info, including how to find an agent, when to use a professional and when to do it yourself, and some potential conflicts of interest to consider, see [How to Find the Right Travel Agent](http://www.independenttraveler.com/travel-tips/travelers-ed/how-to-find-the-right-travel-agent).  
  
Choosing a Travel Advisor  
To deserve your loyalty and money, a travel agent must provide a service that is better, faster and more affordable than you can do yourself -- or naturally you would, in fact, do it yourself. When searching for a travel agent, I suggest asking the following questions:

 What are the fees? This will help you figure out for which types of travel you might need help, and for which it will be worth the investment of time to do it yourself. See below for more on fees.

 Is the agent comfortable working entirely by e-mail? Part of the point of having a travel agent book your trip is that you are freed up to do other things while the itinerary research is taking place. As such, you need a travel agent with whom you will not have to sit on the phone while she's researching your trip, or to have to make multiple phone calls to nail down the flights or hotel that you prefer. She should be able to do all of this by e-mail, with response times measured in minutes or hours, not days. My own travel agent has come to expect nearly instantaneous e-mail replies from me in return.  
  
 Is the travel agent open to suggestions from you, the customer? For example, if you go out and find a decent fare and flight combination, but for whatever reason want some of the services a travel agent can provide, does he check into the flight you suggested or simply ignore your input?

 Is there a 24-hour solution line you can call if you get in a jam? For example, say you're flying on a Sunday night red-eye from west to east, and your flight is delayed or canceled. Is there someone you can call at 10:30 p.m. to try to get you on the best next flight, or at the very least into a convenient and affordable hotel? Note: Not all travel agents provide this service, so if you find one, consider yourself lucky.

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