

True cost of booking travel online may be understated

Do you or your staff opt to go directly to the Internet to find the "cheapest" and "quickest" business travel arrangements?

Larry Martin, president of HMS Travel Group in Santa Rosa, thinks the Internet's much-vaunted time and money savings may be illusory. "Cheaper," as it's mostly used," he says, "rarely encompasses the time cost of a corporate employee searching out and comparing a multitude of travel sites or taking care of the inevitable problems that arise with business travel."

And that's not all.

"Cheaper" doesn't always mean the best solution," he adds, "as most business travelers don't want to make multiple plane changes to arrive at their destination. Business travelers also want the ability to be able to make changes. Many Internet sites and fares don't allow this."

Add to that a corporate controller's need to generate travel management reports, together with the desire to negotiate preferred deals, and you have, in Mr. Martin's view, a compelling case for using a corporate travel agency.

"HMS Travel Group is the only Sonoma County-based company that has a business travel management department," he points out. "Just Corporate [Travel] was our primary competition, but it was sold at the end of last year

to a travel company based in San Francisco."

Don't think Mr. Martin a Luddite, though. HMS Travel hasn't shunned the Web world.

The company, in fact, has just adopted AgentNet, a desktop platform that allows his agents to navigate, book, and access travel information through the Internet.

"Our business travel department works solely on professional management fees, just like a tax advisor or attorney," he says. "The value we provide is that we give unbiased advice, which Internet sites do not, on what is the best fare for the occasion."

AgentNet, for example, provides instant access to over 33 Internet sites, giving HMS agents the ability to search and compare the full range of Web and reservation system fares.

"Our software compares Web fares to the reservation systems' published fares," explains Mr. Martin. "If the published fare doesn't match the best Web fare, we can request that class of service and get the Web rate through the system. That gives the business traveler the best of both the Internet and the travel agency worlds."

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