

The Changing Face of Travel Agencies

By Jennifer Wake

With the introduction of online companies like Expedia and Orbitz.com, as well as the drastic reduction in travel agent commissions offered by airlines, today's successful travel agents must embrace technology in order to find their clients the best accommodations and the best deals.

The biggest myth, says Moraga Travel owner Doyle Litchfield, is that people can find cheaper tickets on the Internet. "We have had clients call us with a fare they've found on the Internet, and we very often can beat that price, and get them better times and connections," he said. "People have a huge number of choices on the Internet, but if they want valuable advice to try to sort out all of their various travel options, then they really need to talk with a qualified travel agent."

During the past 13 years, the number of accredited travel agencies has dropped from about 34,000 in 1994 to approximately 19,000 agencies today. Most of the surviving agencies now charge nominal fees for services, with many utilizing technology or acquiring other agencies as a way to expand their operations, says Orinda Travel president Alan Reader.

Last April, Anderson Travel merged with Orinda Travel, increasing its staff to include Anderson's five travel consultants as well as several independent contractors, some in different states, who each bring in their own clients away from the local area. Orinda Travel consultants can pose travel questions to more than 5,000 travel experts through an Internet chat room offered through their consortium, Signature Travel Network, to find answers to tough questions when customizing a trip. "We have



access to resources unavailable to the general public," Reader said.

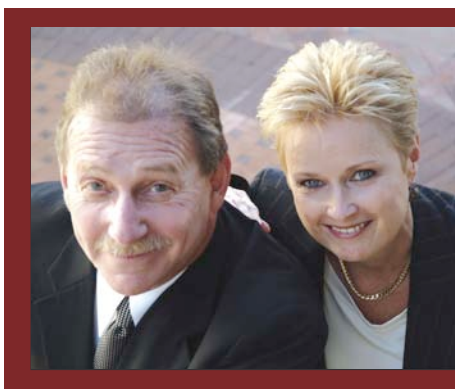
Both Reader and Litchfield agree that the Internet has been beneficial.

"We have so much information now at our fingertips and can access it over the Internet immediately, where in the past it was all in books or on paper," Litchfield said. "We can share the information on our website with our clients in order to help them to better understand what they want."

Clients can do in-depth research at agency Web sites such as www.orindatravel.com or www.moragatravel.com, or visit travel supplier sites to identifying things like golf accommodations, or tropical island locations before speaking with a consultant.

Reader describes travel agencies as consultative. "Having an understanding of the client, the travel counselor can make recommendations to customize a trip to meet your needs," he said. "Our consultants know what they are talking about because they've been there in most cases; there's nothing better than a personal recommendation."

"After clients give us a try and actually use our services," added Litchfield, "they completely understand the value."



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