

Business Travel Gets Personal: The Right Corporate Travel Agency For Your Needs

by Matt Hulett

(NAPSA)—Whether you work for a start-up or Fortune 500, if you travel for business, your company's choice of a corporate travel provider affects you. In today's environment, travel managers aren't the only ones thinking about how travel expenses affect the bottom line. Seemingly small travel decisions have a big impact on a business traveler's budget and productivity, so it's smart to have some knowledge about your company's corporate travel provider. Here are a few ideas to get you thinking about your current provider, and new solutions that may help.

The landscape of corporate travel has changed with online agencies entering the mix and creating new service options. Online corporate travel is a \$14.5 billion market that is growing rapidly within the \$188 billion U.S. business travel market, according to PhoCusWright, an online travel research company. One of the fastest-growing trends is using a corporate travel agency that provides the combination of an online booking tool, along with the human expertise of a full service agency.

Several online corporate travel providers cater to specific needs and offer a variety of full-service features, from assistance with international bookings to executive-level itineraries. To get the best of both worlds, a hybrid of full-service and online travel is the best bet. Below are guidelines to help find the right balance of online and full-service travel that's appropriate for your company.

Both large and small companies can benefit from this hybrid approach to managing corporate travel. One of the main ad-



vantages to consider with an online travel solution is cost savings. Reporting features alone allow companies to save money by tracking their travel expenses. In addition, small businesses can obtain added values and special rates through online travel solutions they normally wouldn't qualify to receive. Choosing an online solution with a full-service component enables your company to take advantage of all the above, while benefiting from a travel agent's expertise for more complex bookings.

The adoption rate—how quickly employees begin using the online service—has a significant effect on your company's travel savings. Generally speaking, the higher the adoption rate, the better your savings.

To strike a balance between an online and full-service travel solution, it's important to identify your company culture and booking patterns. Consider:

- Do you have easy access to the Internet?

An online solution is ideal for business travelers who have access to a computer at their job. For example, a restaurant would not benefit from an online solution because their employees do not have constant online access.

- Is there a need to book travel 24/7 or during business hours only?

Having access to online tools is ideal for travelers who need to book outside of normal business hours, so rates and routes are available immediately. If you prefer to have a travel manager handle the details, it's best to incorporate some level of a full-service solution.

- How comfortable are you with the Internet?

An online solution is more beneficial when business travelers are comfortable with the Internet and making their own travel arrangements.

- Do you need to cut costs?

If financial concerns are a factor, an online solution can provide tools to find the best deals, without the assistance of a full-service agent.

Companies that have a mixture of requirements and traveler habits no longer need to choose strictly online or full-service. The hybrid option is ideal because it provides a customized, flexible solution that addresses your specific needs at any time.

The bottom line is that the travel provider should be willing to work with your company to determine the service level best-suited for you and your fellow employees. No matter what mixture of online and full-service travel your company chooses, customer service is the key.

Matt Hulett, vice president of corporate travel at Expedia, Inc., has logged more than 100,000 airline miles and 100 hotel nights traveling for business this year. He is responsible for Expedia Corporate Travel's strategic initiatives, and tends to prefer the window seat.