

The Atlantic

Who Uses a Travel Agent in This Day and Age?

Industry veterans such as Kerl Commock say that some travelers still prefer booking through an agency because it saves them time and makes flight cancellations less stressful.



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BUSINESS

The travel industry has seen a lot of changes in the last two decades. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of full-time travel agents in the U.S. dropped from a [high of 124,000](#) in 2000 to around [74,000 in 2014](#). The business model of travel agencies has changed, mostly due to the rise of online booking but also due to the popularity of telecommuting, which has rendered many business trips unnecessary.

More recently, there's been talk of the [travel industry bouncing back](#) as the economy recovers. Based on a survey of 14,000 households, the American Society of Travel Agents reports that it is currently seeing [the highest numbers of consumers](#) booking through travel agents in three years. The most common reason provided for doing so? Travelers said it saved them time. Though travel agencies' business isn't expected to return to pre-internet levels, online booking has, even as it has flourished, shown travelers the frustrations that can come with booking travel themselves—and that outsourcing the stress of arranging travel can be worthwhile.

Kerl Commock lives in Orlando. She's been working as a travel agent for over 30 years and currently works at Balboa Travel, a California travel agency that has been in the business for nearly half a century. I talked to Commock about the stresses of booking travel, TSA lines, and the rise of online booking. A lightly edited transcript of our conversation follows.

Bourree Lam: How did you start at Balboa and when did you start working as a travel agent?

Kerl Commock: I started with Balboa through a friend. We worked together in Texas, and she was working with Balboa and called to recommend me to work as a travel agent. I've been a travel agent for 32 years. I've done just about everything in the industry. I started off with vacation. I've done military—my husband is in the military so I worked on a military base. I've done student travel; I used to work at a travel agency at American University. And now, I do corporate.

Lam: What does that entail?

Commock: There's two parts. There's leisure, which is your vacation department. With corporate travel, we largely focus on corporations that book travel for their employees for their meetings and business travel. I find out what their travel need is—air, hotel, cars, limos, car service, domestic train and track, Euro rail—and book whatever the clients need.

Lam: Is booking corporate travel harder or easier than vacation or student travel?



Kerl Commock of Balboa Travel

Commock: It's easier, and it's different too. They're going to a particular destination, so especially if they're going to a meeting—"I need to be at this place, on these dates, at this time"—it's within certain parameters we follow depending on the account we're working on. Businesses have different travel policies: whether they can fly business class, etc. If they have a particular airline or hotel preference, they'll tell you.

With vacation travel, it's different. You might have a client come in, and they're not sure and they're more flexible. They might want to go on a cruise. They may want to go to the Caribbean. You pretty much have to lead them in a direction. They're relying on you to help them get to where

they want to go. It's also their budget. They know how much they want to spend.

Lam: How have you seen things change in the last 30 years?

Commock: Well of course, the internet! [Laughs] At one point, we used to have a local travel agency that people go to, and they sit down and talk. It's open during certain hours. Now, with the internet, everything is available to [the clients] at their fingertips, whether it's 1 a.m. or 6 a.m.—they can go on their computer and research or book anything at anytime. So the internet really has been a big factor in the industry. Balboa is a 24-hour operation: We have our regular business hours, but our after-hours agents are there to assist in case of emergencies. That makes us accessible to both our domestic clients and clients overseas.

Lam: How have you adapted to the rise of online booking?

Commock: The good thing with having a travel agent is our knowledge. Most of us have been in this industry for a very long time, so we know some of the ins and outs of travel. With our reservation system, we can access the lowest fares and we can see all the airlines.

Also, the different types of fares: Sometimes you're looking at the lowest fare, but that might not be the best value. A lot of the airlines are having these instant-purchase, non-refundable, no-changes tickets, and all that. We can advise them that for a little bit more, you can have tickets that you can change for a nominal fee, or provide you with a seat assignment, or change the date of departure. Sometimes, the lowest fee might not be the best value. This is where we need to assist them, in making these decisions. Even with the hotels, we have different programs that we use.

Another thing too—and I've seen this recently, in the last couple of years especially—there's been a lot of weather delays. There's been so many weather delays, and we have our clients calling us ... they're standing in line, their flight just got cancelled and we've been able to assist them immediately. For example: “There's another flight in an hour, let me see if I can get you onto that flight. Let me see if I can get you on another airline.” And it gets them out of that line, it gets them out from being on hold with an airline for half an hour and gets them to their destination. This is where our value comes in. Booking online, when there's an issue they have to make a phone call and hold. That's time they're wasting, and we can get them to their destination quickly.

Lam: It seems that using a travel agent, even though there's a cost, can help people feel less frustrated in stressful travel situations. Do you get a lot of clients calling who are stressed and looking to you to solve their problems?

Commock: Yes, we do. With travel, there's so much uncertainty. And we're here to help alleviate that stress. Even the TSA line, it might be longer than anticipated. They might miss a flight because of that. Whatever the reason, they have us and they can call. I have clients calling from the taxi: “I'm going to miss my flight, I don't think I'm going to make it! What can you do?” I can try to get them on another flight in an hour. Service: That's what the travel agency provides that makes us viable today.

Lam: Do you use a travel agent? Or do you use your expertise to book travel for yourself?

Commock: [Laughs] Despite being in the travel industry for so long, I don't use one. I rely on my own expertise and all the other Balboa

employees that are here to help me if there's something I need assistance with. We rely on each other. We have so many people here who speak different languages, too. So if we get a call and there's someone who speaks Spanish, or Portuguese, we can get another agent who can assist. I know I have resources here.

Lam: What's the hardest thing about your job?

Commock: My hardest thing is overcoming the perception that clients can book online and not recognizing the value of booking with a travel agency. They have a computer that they can go to at any time, feeling like after they hit purchase that's it. We have that added value that we're going to help them beyond that ticket, if there's an issue or weather delay. You're not just purchasing a ticket—you're purchasing our services.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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