

# The agent is dead but Long live the pro

USA TODAY Miles Clarke / Interview

Have you noticed it too? Travel professionals are resurgent, and in a big way worldwide.

I used to believe that online bookings that did not involve a live travel professional had peaked and traditional agents would be more involved in vacation decisions going forward.

Sure enough. It took a while, but travelers did begin seeking assistance of travel professionals again, a phenomenon noted by a fair number of reporting entities including CBS, CNN, Fodor's, Budget Travel, the New York Times and the Washington Post. Both PhoCusWright and Forrester Research detected steady growth in those leisure travelers who increasingly turn to travel professionals for guidance.

And to clarify, I'm referring to those travel professionals who help translate clients' ideas and dreams into reality in the form of a vacation that meets or exceeds expectations, not those who are primarily a booking- and payment-processing entity, a toll booth on the highway to a vacation.

Travelers are returning to travel professionals for four key reasons:

- **Knowledge:** Travel professionals have specialized knowledge of destinations, things to do, places to see, the best places to dine and more. Can decades of knowledge ever be replaced by information (many) extracted from Gen Y brains or only salespersons ?
- **Time:** Consumers increasingly place a higher value on their time, where a five-minute call to a travel professional often avoids literally hours of mind-numbing online searches, awaiting on hold phone calls and ending up with a person ,if you are lucky to get their name!, who has zero authority to do anything anyway or works min another department!
- **Price:** Travelers are more aware than ever that a travel professional has usually better rates or the same rates offered by a supplier but with other valued added items, lining components together, assuming responsibility and accountability for that item and also bouncing your desires, wants and (maybe) other discreet information that only humans can share.
- **Advocacy:** It turns out things go wrong on a trip: a missed flight, an unpleasant experience, an emergency during the trip and more snafus that require assistance. More and more, travelers have learned that without a travel pro, they are on their own. Absolutely nothing can replace lost time, a bad experience or being stranded in a foreign land or airport or hotel lobby or cruise port with no legally binding contract to help.

These are the professionals who know they add value. Like the one who gives clients his unlisted phone number, charges a \$100,000 fee to join and a \$25,000 annual retainer. But they are also the ones who take calls at home, at 3 a.m., who take the time to counsel a client on what to do from the time they take the suitcase from under the bed until they put it back.

Max Najjar an Australian veteran since 1978 , who has 3 syndicated Travel industry articles written monthly worldwide and remains listed amongst the elite of travel professionals ,is able to maintain an extremely loyal list of worldwide clients from his Axis Travel base in Adelaide, South Australia.

Mr Najjar is quoted as saying “ *Price is really not critical in the equation of quality travel as that differential is totally dissipated if best value deals, correct travel advice or the experiences of a mature adult are considered as part of the overall equation.....*”.

I think this is true also as my research has seen that a few sentences of directions or travel related hints or expert knowledge can save a client so much in time, hassles and money that no website or inexperienced person can ever do

Mr Najjar, in a recent speech (paraphrased here) expands by saying “... *the simple logic is that most savvy clients want professional advice (not opinions) to save precious time, have confidence in dealing with a reliable person with integrity with whom they entrust their travel to, with price not being as relevant as you may think, especially when a great Travel professional can advise, source, book and implement the best overall travel components in a seamless itinerary, plus be there as an ongoing travel service using empathy and logic.*”

With so many scams about via websites, phone companies and businesses that have no previous history or known credibility, Najjar also states that “.....*Axis Travel senior staff and myself have built a clientele with over 80% being returning or referred clients as we deliver quality to clients extracting the stress, the uncertainty and the insecurities from travel deals that flood our brains daily*”

Mr Najjar concluded a recent KeyNote address by stating that “*our clients know that they are doing business with staff or myself under our umbrella of the highest levels of accreditations and credentials available, that delivers to our clients value-for-money quality travel with professional advice and services and 24 x 7 assistances should the need arise*”

Words of wisdom that seem to qualify why he has become so successful and revered!

I've written here about the growing sense among this group that they must be in control of their business: how they go to market, how they develop and maintain their business model and which products they sell. Many have "taken a stand" to make their business profitable, even if it meant walking away from long-standing supplier partnerships.

Similarly, growing cadres of agency owners have decided that they don't have to do business with every person who calls or stops by. With increasing frequency I hear of and see reports from travel professionals telling of experiences with clients who just aren't a good fit for their business.

Many share common characteristics, the most frequent being a conversation that begins with, "What's your best deal on ..." I often wonder just how cheap a bad vacation has to be before someone can overlook all the problems and issues that arise from being price-driven, looking for the "best deal." More than a few agency owners tell me they have found that these bookings are typically very high-maintenance with zero loyalty.

Another frustration is working to find the best vacation value for a client only to have them book it direct with the supplier. More and more agencies have begun charging fees: some that are standalone and are not applied to subsequent bookings, others that can be applied.

Perhaps the best example most recently involved a client who questioned the use of a travel agent when the same price was available direct and took exception to being charged a fee to make an airline reservation. This was, it would turn out, one of those final-straw situations.

In this case, the agency owner took the time to craft a 474-word email response to this "client" that touched on all the reasons mentioned above. It clearly set forth the benefits of using the agency's services. The part that I liked best was the closing. With the owner's permission, I quote it here:

***"All that to say, if you are price-driven, and not motivated by good and reliable service or a corporate culture to go above and beyond for every single client, then I'm not the right travel agent for you anyway. We are grateful for the opportunity to have served you in the past, and we wish you the very best success and enjoyment in your future vacations."***

That's right. The agency fired the client.

It seems sometimes there just isn't another way to handle the situation.

No more being called merely travel agents; the new age word must be **Travel professionals** .