



travelBulletin

INDUSTRY UPDATES

These are the services agents should never offer

✚ *Travel Industry article, authored by Max Najar is Director and Manager at Axis Travel Centre.*

I remember when I started in the 1970s as a humble travel agent and we supplied and authenticated clients' passport application forms, securing signatures and photos and forwarding these onwards for passports to be issued. We also provided paper copies of a country's visa and applied for visa, plus we supplied and had verified individual yellow vaccination booklets so clients could get a health stamp to enter countries.

This wonderful, personalised service is now a distant part of travel agent history – and for very good reasons.

Securing a visa

Securing any visa is not a guarantee of entry. It is merely a pre-entry invitation to enter a country, with the final verdict given by the incoming immigration officer. The analogy I use is that it is like being sent an invitation to attend a party. You go to the front door; the host looks at you and determines that he/she does not want you to enter for any unexplained reason. You are denied entry – and that is it.

Part of preparing for an overseas trip these days is checking if a traveller requires a visa or an entry permit, or if they can apply for a visa waiver. In addition, there may be various health requirements or an entry permit needed to gain entry. All of this requires time, energy, an online application or some physical paperwork, often with costs and delays. This can be annoying.

If you want to be cynical then yes, most countries probably implement documentation barriers as a form of revenue and to maintain the employment of their public servants. We are made to think that these checks are to verify the veracity of a person's credibility to enter a country, leaving us all with no choice but to comply. This cynicism can be amplified if you consider that in today's world, we might be able to rely upon levels of technology, using various ID checks that have a common thread internationally, allowing most countries to efficiently share information at the highest levels. You can be the judge.

That being said, these are the services I would strongly discourage agents from offering:

Advising health requirements This is another minefield that can explode upon us all.

I am not a medical doctor, nor are most professional travel agents and travellers – so how does an advisor know the metabolism of a traveller, their ailments, diseases or allergies, or in fact, whether they are fit enough to travel or not?

Also, how do we know if they have truthfully and accurately advised us of any pre-existing medical conditions or previous claims that may disallow them, or add conditions and costs to their travel insurance policies?

Most travellers are wonderful humans who believe that they know their medical conditions, but this area of health should be ascertained and verified by registered medical practitioners – hence this area is an absolute no-no that agents need to keep away from. Disclosure failure can totally annul some or all travel insurance claims, so I say: do not offer these services.

Giving an opinion might be acceptable but certainly not advice. If the traveller cannot complete the forms, then ask them to use a trusted family member or friend to interpret or assist.

The array of international travel requirements is ever-changing and can be confusing, so it is no wonder that accredited ATIA travel agents cannot oversee or advise of such requirements as part of their already complex and demanding roles.

If that travel agent becomes involved in advising or filing in applications, they then become legally accountable for what is written in those applications, leading me to once again say: do not offer these services.

Advising customs rulings–inbound or outbound Every country has their own rules as to what you can take out of that country and what you can take into it.

This applies not only to goods and foods, but also to the amount of cash you hold onto and what appears on the phones, laptops and papers within your possession. Officers will often conduct 'spot checks', which can result in either zero issues or huge fines, reprimands, deportations, and more.

This area is quite complex and usually entails huge amounts of reading and product knowledge. The only trusted way of dealing with customs issues are to read in detail or phone in advance the respective legitimate custom departments – and not accepting advice from most family members, friends or websites.

Professional travel agents need to be aware of ever-changing rules and regulations – especially nowadays – that are being issued by the USA, Brazil, Eastern Bloc countries and China. I say **DO NOT OFFER THESE SERVICES!** **DO NOT RELY UPON GOOGLE**, "I WAS TOLD..." or many other **FAKE** websites!

Clients who rely on Google can easily be fooled, pay extra money, get the wrong (false) visa, and hand over critical personal data, including their travel itinerary, such as when they not going to be home as they innocently

reveal their home address and their credit card details. Taking such risks can easily result in a traveller being denied entry upon arrival because what they thought of as being 'official' turned out to be a scam.

A qualified travel agent knows the authorised bona-fide websites and can guide travellers. It is a known fact in the travel industry that even airline staff, tour operators and cruise staff have been fooled by document copies that appear authentic, or the wrong data has been provided. As with travel agents, they cannot be held totally responsible as it is the traveller that must research and obtain correct documentation.

It is far too late to attempt to argue when you arrive at a foreign immigration counter! Secure authentic advice.

Additional factors to consider

1. Most Governments require a visa to be applied for personally by each client, especially when financial details are required. A travel agent risks transgressing various privacy laws if the agent is in possession or aware of a client's financials and personal data – even if they volunteer such information to the agent to assist in an application.

2. Most travellers only give travel agents the front page of their passport photo and data. This is one page out of around 50 pages. As most travel agents only receive this page, they rarely see the entire physical passport, so they cannot be expected to know or decipher the other pages, let alone read foreign language stamps, verify government notations or substantiate the "truth" of what a traveller may state about his/her past court charges or criminal offences.

Additionally, most countries require each passport to have at least two clean-clear pages to allow them to stamp their visa onto it whilst other countries will issue a separate paper page visa or health document that has restrictions or 'denial of entry' stamps that the traveller may forget to show you or tell you about.

3. Everchanging regulations occur that not even smartraveller.gov.au, endorsed by the Australian Government or any other countries' official websites, can keep up with. Some regulations change daily.

Take for example the most recent change from Brazil, which has quickly changed its visa requirement for Australians. And how about the Trump clampdown that now involves scrutinising each incoming traveller, which includes spot checks demanding a traveller's phone and password access to their devices, their social media history, locating "foreign words" or "any phrase, membership notation or threatening word that may cause distress or a security breach" as they search through a traveller's social media links or through a traveller's papers, complemented with maybe a few hours of interrogation, and then potentially face deportation, solely at the immigration officer's discretion?

The newest Trump directive has also infiltrated USA domestic flights plus rental cars that cross into Mexico and Canada borders, where photo ID is required with ad-hoc body searches required with extra time needed to be allocated to pass security channels.

Add to this the new UK entry card requirement or the multiple delayed European Schengen ETIAS Visa due to apply in 2026 that requires a ridiculous fee of €7 EUR (suggested) that will not even cover their admin costs.

Add further to this as many Eastern bloc European countries and some South American countries are demanding a traveller's financial details, plus five years' worth of bank statements before a visa is granted.

4. Most, if not all, travel insurers will not compensate the traveller if a visa is denied or if a traveller has not taken "reasonable care", or other PDS conditions that may dismiss a claim.

Experienced travel agents are usually brilliant and highly qualified in delivering travel solutions, but the abilities of qualified doctors and immigration/customs officers are not within their skillset.

In summary, travellers should: Diarise and do what is required and apply for a visa, any entry permit, required health precautions and abide by custom regulations as soon as is relevant to give you "peace-of-mind";

- The responsibility of securing correct visa and associated travel paperwork etc should always be the responsibility of the traveller;
- Refer to an ATIA-accredited travel agent and distrust most of what is online to avoid compromising your money and travel plans;
- Use smartraveller.com.au as a solid – although not perfect – reference point;
- Note that any country can keep a traveller's data/records for future reference when they next visit, or they can pass it onto any other country they wish and the traveller might even be placed onto an Interpol security listing;
- Do not think for one second that Superman or Superwoman, or even Rambo, will come to your rescue if you neglect any of these steps and land in a sticky situation..



• *Max Najar is the Managing Director of Adelaide-based Axis Travel, an agency which has now been around for nearly 50 years.¶*