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Personal Service Keeps Travel Agents in Business

By MARK A. STEIN

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Bill Catlette could spend less on air travel, but he has chosen not to.

A principal in a consulting firm, Contented Cows Partners, Mr. Catlette is on the road about 100 days a year giving speeches and training executives. He could probably save money by booking airline tickets, reserving hotel rooms and renting cars on the Internet.

But like many frequent business travelers, he prefers to arrange his trips through a travel agent - in his case, Gina Scott, who works in a one-agent office in Mr. Catlette's hometown, Collierville, Tenn., just east of Memphis.

"We realize that we can probably save a few bucks by working with Expedia, or direct booking with our preferred vendors," Mr. Catlette said. "But until they have a Gina, it's not going to happen."

Even in an era of Web-only fares, electronic tickets and automated check-in kiosks, many business travelers are sticking by their travel agents, for a simple, old-fashioned reason: personal service whenever they need it.

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Carlos Puma for The New York Times

Kelly Daoud, who operates his agency out of his house in Palm Springs, Calif., is often busy with work even when is supposed to be relaxing.

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"If I am driving down an expressway at 65 miles per hour and I need to change my travel plans at the last minute, Expedia is probably not going to take my call," Mr. Catlette said. "She will."

The last decade has been tough on travel agents. Airlines at first halved and then largely eliminated commissions on domestic flights, forcing many agents to add fees to ticket prices. That led many leisure travelers and business fliers to book their tickets on the Internet. Then the stock market turned and the economy slowed, dragging travel down with it. Finally, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks turned the slowdown into a slump.

The effect on travel agencies, particularly small ones, has been swift and painful. By one measure - companies accredited by the Airlines Reporting Corporation, which distributes tickets issued by the major carriers - the number of retail travel agencies fell more than 30 percent from the beginning of 2000 to the end of last year. The biggest drop came in independent agencies, mostly small ones with a single location; 6,400 fell off the corporation rolls in those four years, an attrition rate of more than a third.

Some travel agents survived by burrowing into a niche where suppliers still paid commissions, like cruise lines or packaged tour companies. Others focused on business travelers, winning their loyalty by helping them navigate the complex array of fares, discounts, rebates, waivers and certificates that airlines use to increase revenue.

These clients are not necessarily computer illiterate, says Elizabeth Elwell of Blue Dolphin Surf and Travel in the North Hollywood section of Los Angeles, but include people averse to bouncing among Web sites in search of the best deals. "The largest group of my loyal client base are savvy computer owners and Internet shoppers," she said. "However, these people lead busy lives and don't have the inclination to waste a lot of their time trying to find the lowest fare when they need to travel. They would much prefer to pay me to do it for them."


Stephen P. Bloom, a partner in two companies in Santa Fe Springs, Calif., is a case in point. He is on the road most of the year for his two businesses - the Allied Bakery and Food Service Equipment Company and Tesori Wines Inc. - and avoids arranging his travel unless it is a simple round trip.

"Once it gets complicated, there is no way you can do it yourself," he said. If he has to make multiple stops on a single trip - Los Angeles to New York to Omaha to Chicago and back to Los Angeles, for example - he would rather have somebody else shop for the cheapest fares and make the inevitable last-minute changes to accommodate unexpectedly long or canceled meetings.

He said he relied on his travel agent, Perla Georgino of Senator Travel, a

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family-owned firm in Beverly Hills, not only to book flights and handle changes but to navigate the airlines' complicated rules. She uses open-jaw itineraries that allow him to fly home from an airport that was not his original destination, advance-purchase waivers and other techniques to keep his travel costs low, he said.

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