



Retail Strategies

OBAMA: WHO USES TRAVEL AGENTS ANYMORE?

by Dori Saltzman and Marilee Crocker August 22, 2011

Travel professionals responded with anger when President Barack Obama suggested last week that the Internet had made travel agents obsolete. But many also seized the opportunity as a teachable moment.

Obama was addressing a town hall meeting in Atkinson, Ill., when he used the travel agency industry to illustrate the point that automation and the Internet were replacing jobs.

"When was the last time somebody went to a bank teller instead of using the ATM, or used a travel agent instead of just going online? A lot of jobs that used to be out there requiring people now have become automated," Obama said.

Agents were not pleased. "The comment makes me very mad," said Ted Bradpiece, owner of Two Bears Travel in Los Angeles.

'Unfortunate choice'

Travel agent Debbie Gorman wanted to know "who booked Michelle Obama's trip to Spain?"

"I doubt President Obama booked that online," Gorman of Fun 'n' Sun Travel in Point Pleasant, N.J., said of the First Lady's recent trip.

"This could potentially do a lot of damage," said Peg Aikman, an independent contractor with Travel Experts. "Does our president really want to put more small businesses out of business?"

Sherrie Funk, co-owner of Just Cruisin' Plus in Nashville, said the president "made such an unfortunate choice of a business in trying to drive home a point. A professional travel planner that provides excellent service is a valuable resource.

"After all, not everything is as simple as raising the debt ceiling or getting bipartisan support," Funk quipped.

No disputing the facts

Not everyone in the trade dismissed Obama's remarks entirely.

"The President is correct, to a point, in saying that automation has changed the landscape in the travel industry," observed Karen McCrink, Vacation Travel Manager, Atlas Travel International. She noted that agents still "play a very important role in the lives of the traveling public."



Karen McCrink

Agency owner Jason Coleman, CTC, ECCS, said you can't argue with the fact that "efficiency has transformed our industry. We're all marketing, selling, and servicing today in different ways – with much greater efficiency and smaller staffs.

"I personally have never used a bank teller for my banking. I use self-checkout at the supermarket. I check in online for flights, and I buy books, clothes, and computers online," said Coleman, president and chief visionary of Jason Coleman, Inc., in Los Angeles.



Jason Coleman

These are all things that have become more efficient and as such led to a reduction in the workforce. The same is true of travel agents," added Coleman, who is chair of ASTA's Young Professionals Society.

Ill-informed comments

President Obama's understanding of the travel agency industry is sorely lacking, agents charged.

Travel agent Colleen Gillette surmised that "the president has not handled his travel arrangements in years and has no idea of the skill level needed in arranging his travel or his family's travel arrangements."

The president would benefit from an education about "how technology has lessened the need for tedious work and has helped to create a more sophisticated skill set within the travel industry. He need only take a look at the White House Travel Office for verification," said Gillette, owner of New Paltz (N.Y.) Travel.

'We are the Internet'

When was the last time somebody went to a bank teller instead of using the ATM or used a travel agent instead of just going online? A lot of jobs that used to be out there requiring people now have become automated.

President Barack Obama

AGENTS SEE A TEACHABLE MOMENT

Travel professionals are accustomed to having to correct the misperception that travel agents are extinct, and many have grown adept at doing so. Here's how agents handle such comments.

"When people ask, 'Travel agencies still exist?' I ask if they have ever had a problem booking a vacation online. Seventy-five percent of them say yes, and that is when I explain the benefits of using a travel agent." – Michael Schad, president of Seaward Travels, Orlando

"There is no replacing the peace of mind knowing you have a caring professional on your side period. When was the last time an online store came to your house to help you plan your trip?" – Raquel Segura, AiresLibre Travel, Pembroke, Fla.

Want to feel real pain?

"I point out that saving money by comparison shopping is a primary step in our service delivery. I elaborate on how trips of any magnitude should only be handled by professionals. Would you go to anyone but a dentist to get a tooth pulled? Want to feel real pain? Try handling international, multi-stop travel online without a travel agent. Call me when you're done pulling out your hair!" – Eileen Anderson, independent contractor, Travel Experts

"A travel agent is a psychiatrist, marriage counselor, and friend to all their clients." – Ellen Paderson, owner, Smiles and Miles Travel, Inc., South Easton, Mass.

"The public needs to understand that there are still some of us out there that provide a service, not just taking an order. We are there for them with the good, the bad, and the ugly. We professional travel agents provide something that an OTA cannot." – Ted Bradpiece, owner, Two Bears Travel, Los Angeles

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Drawing a distinction between travel agents and the Internet is erroneous, Coleman said. "The Internet is all of us as travel agents. Every agency or individual travel advisor that has a website is the Internet."



Colleen Gillette

And most agents do have websites with booking engines, as well as blogs and an active presence on social media outlets such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, noted Raquel Segura of AiresLibre Travel in Pembroke, Fla.

"American travelers now have the choice of booking a quick trip on their travel agent's portal, or they can get the personalized service of a live travel agent they can trust," Segura said.

Consumers returning

President Obama might also be interested to learn that consumers are returning to travel agents – often because they're fed up with trying to book their own travel, agents said.

"New clients who call us usually lead with that opening line, 'I just got tired of trying to figure it all out on my own. There's just too much to choose from, and so that's why I am calling.' The tide is turning, and the president is obviously clueless about this," said Dena McDonald, manager of TIKI TRIPS® in Dallas.

McDonald also cited studies showing increases in consumer usage of agents. "Consumers are sick and tired of being overwhelmed with choices on the Internet."

'It's up to us'

Obama's comments renewed awareness of the need to educate the public about the value of agents and combat misperceptions.

"The public still has no idea what travel agents do," said Les-Lee Roland, travel counselor and owner of the Package Deal, Sarasota, Fla. Roland charged industry organizations, including ASTA, ARC and CLIA, and travel agents themselves with "dropping the ball in getting that information out, educating clients on our importance to them."



Libbie Rice

Libbie Rice, co-president of Ensemble Travel Group, observed that "it's the role of all of us, whether individual agents or consortiums, to counter that myth" that travel agents no longer exist.

Segura agreed. "Travel agents need to unite and emphasize over and over to the American public the value of the service we provide our clients, the same way any other professional services industry would," she said.

Yet raising travel agent visibility is more challenging today because so many are home-based, agents noted.

"I hear from some people that they have a hard time finding a travel agent because we are all in our homes now.," said Ellen Paderson, owner of Smiles and Miles Travel, Inc., in South Easton, Mass.

Harvey Chipkin and Nick Verrastro contributed to this report.

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Comments

August 22, 2011 9:14 PM

Ramon : There seems to be a ' Blind Spot ' both within our industry AND with Government officials , on the matter of " Home Based Travel Agents ". We are mainly the more experienced Travel Agents who have decided to get rid of ARC and yhe 'handcuffs ' and ' ill treatment ' afforded the ' storefront agency ' travel agents. Not being weighed down with airline issues and regulations , we are able to assist traveler who are spending REAL MONEY and from which agents CAN profit. We HBA do not have the mundane ' walk ins ' , spend time answering myriad domestic air questions and can spend ' Quality Time ' with real travelers... either in the passengers home or office , at Dunkin Doughnuts or even in the agents Home Office. I began in travel in 1954, some nearly 58 years ago. Becoming 'Home Based' was a very rewarding opportunity to really practice our Profession... BEING a TRAVEL AGENT

August 22, 2011 5:38 PM

Don : I tell shoppers that it's kind of like changing the oil in your car...you can do it yourself, or you can pay someone to do it. Booking travel is often like changing the oil in that it can get time-consuming or messy or both. Regarding the President's comments, it just goes to show once again that he really doesn't know near as much as he thinks he does. As a thinking American and a small business owner for 35 years, I already had plenty of reasons to pray he is not re-elected...this is just one more.

August 22, 2011 2:38 PM

Maria K : Dori: Given Obama's 2010 National Export Initiative, and his goal to double inbound travel to the USA by 2015, I wonder if the comment wasn't taken out of context for its sensational value. Travel agents are the ones who pull rabbits out of hats when online bucket shops and discounters leave them stranded at the gate. There's a place for the experienced traveler to do some of the DIY research prior to contacting the professional to handle the job, but the more experienced a traveler one is, the more one realizes the agents' value as a trusted logistics professional. Maria K Todd, MHA PhD CEO, Mercury Healthcare International ...and a former senior travel counselor with AAA's World Wide Travel Agency.

August 22, 2011 1:22 PM

Dori : This feedback requested by Travel Market Report came in after this article

had gone to press: "I believe this is an excellent opportunity for agents to create awareness of our value and economic impact. Not only in making the president aware of our existence and importance, but also the American consumers. Despite what the president may have a clear understanding of, there is a White House travel agency who is responsible for planning the travel for the president, the president's staff, press and other officials. In addition, travel agencies manage most if not all if the US government's major departments and military travel planning, which is the single largest purchaser of travel in the world..." -- Dwain Wall, senior vice president and general manager of Cruise One and Cruises Inc

August 22, 2011 1:06 PM

Dori : This feedback requested by Travel Market Report came in after this article had gone to press: "I believe the President was trying to make an off-the-cuff analogy in regards to a profession that he has no recent experience with. Technology is something that travel agencies need to understand and embrace in order to survive today. We can use it to our benefit, rather than look at it as the enemy or competition. If you look at it from a business perspective, online competitors are only really taking away low-yield business from us, like airline tickets, car rentals, etc... This gives us more time to concentrate on what we do best, which is providing excellent customer service with a personal touch (something technology lacks) to our high-yield clients with cruise and tour packages..." -- Matthew Oldenburg, Dodgeville Travel, Inc.

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