

Travel Agent

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The Industry: Travel Technology

In the Nick of Time

New technology helps agents sell to the last-minute market

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Agents are becoming accustomed to filling a leisure travel request for a trip in as little as three days, as more customers put off making travel plans. But to satisfy clients, agents must have information at their fingertips to compete with last-minute bargains on the Internet.

To get the message out to clients, a company called Xpedité is helping with a Web-based e-mail management system called messageREACH. When an agency has a good deal for a trip, it can distribute it to hundreds of potential travelers. The system also collects the responses and categorizes them for customer profiling and a targeted response. It also can be used to communicate with suppliers and customers by e-mailing reservation confirmations and selling electronic tickets.

According to Brad Clark, director of industry marketing for the travel and transportation vertical at Xpedité, the company can segment lists by region of the country, or by interests such as cruising. The system also can be used to deliver itineraries and confirmations, he says, with the agency's logo, a picture of the cruise ship, driving directions to the airport or port, or any other art the agency wants to use. Clark says that it is also a good tool to use for "irregularities such as cancellations, bad weather or flight delays." Xpedité can point

customers toward a Web site to rebook their own flights if they were canceled. It also has a voice-message service that can call customers and alert them to flight problems, and is equipped with a hot-link key transfer that directs the customer to the airline, agency or other supplier by pushing a button. Agents also can opt to use a fax service if they believe that would work better to get last-minute specials out instead of e-mails.

The price of the system varies depending on how complex an agency wants it to be. Xpedité uses a professional services organization that charges an hourly rate to sit down with an agency and tailor the product to fit their needs. More information can be found at [www.xpedité.com].

SALES ESCALATE

These types of tools are needed as travelers continue to be wary of booking in advance because of economic and security concerns. Bob Alpert, vice president of strategic alliances for Site59, says there was a learning curve for consumers to overcome in their thinking that only the best deals could be found if purchased several weeks in advance. "We are re-educating them that it is possible to buy your travel close-in," he says. "We are all about stimulating in-



Xpedité helps agents push deals to clients with Web-based technology.

cremental demand." Since Site59 was purchased by Travelocity—and because it has promotional deals and links on CheapTickets, Delta.com and others—it is receiving more exposure each month. Site59 reports that in January of this year, transactions were up 271 percent over January 2002.

Agents also are accessing Site59 deals through Worldspan's Go! and Sabre's eVoya desktop. Agents earn 5 percent commission with no caps through Site59's Agent59. When an agent books through Agent59 or the GDSs, the booking can be customized so that it appears to come directly from the agency.

Site59 also is not simply a list service for deals. The company actively watches for events and tries to put packages together, and sends

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ideas to agents in its newsletter. For example, it built special air and hotel deals around last month's Grammy Awards in New York. And recently Site59 promoted Bermuda when it was 83 degrees in January, instead of its normal 65 degrees, and sold "a ton" of trips to the destination. "The agents who use Agent59 are very loyal," Alpert says. "Once they find us, they utilize us a lot."

However, agents are seeing more competition from another site specializing in last-minute travel—11thHourVacations.com. The site is offering charter air fares to travelers, saying that for the first time ever, consumers can book these fares "without the assistance of a travel agent."

The site has added 35,000 charter flight options to its offerings. Users can buy them separately or bundle them with vacation packages. The charter flights are mixed in with the published and negotiated fares shown on the site.

Ironically, although consumers often think

they are saving money by waiting to book, surveys show that those on last-minute, unbudgeted trips spend on average 25 percent more than the average traveler.

ADVANCE NOTICE

Site59 sells most of its business seven days in advance. It has yet to see a lessening demand for air travel; it also may consider selling cruises, and it now offers getaways from 56 U.S. cities. And watch for more innovations in the near future from Site59, which is about



to allow users to choose their airline.

Travelers are clearly booking much closer in to the departure date, says Keith St.

Clair, chairman and CEO of Travelers Group. That is in part why Travelers has launched cruiseleaders.com and hoteleaders.com; it saw the need to take its business online. Hoteleaders.com, for example, offers agents discount rates at more than 7,000 prop-

erties with a liberal cancellation policy. That policy is especially important, given the harsh winter that much of the country has experienced this year.

St. Clair says the industry has done itself a disservice by conditioning customers to expect a better deal if they wait until the last minute. Agency's must open themselves up to an e-distribution channel for existing customers, he says. One way they can help is to provide a supersite for customers such as corporations, so that their employees can view hot deals. "That gives us hundreds of customers for little cost," St. Clair says, adding that people do not want to search many sites, but like to use ones that have brick-and-mortar support behind them.

The bottom line for travel agencies is the time it takes to serve this new breed of customer. Says Site59's Alpert: "We've heard from so many clients that consumers say to agents, 'I want to go away this weekend.' For an agent, that's a lot of work to put together at the last minute." ■

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