

TRAVEL INDUSTRY EXPERTS: TECHNOLOGY CAN'T REPLACE TRAVEL AGENTS

by Andrew Sheivachman / February 03, 2015

OTAs. Big data. Metasearch. Online reviews.

Should agents fear the future of travel, or embrace it?

The world of technology has evolved to process traveler data and make information more available to consumers. But a group of travel experts at the recent New York Times Travel Show said travel agents still offer the one thing the internet can't: creativity.

"The web still doesn't think creatively; it only thinks in a linear way," said Peter Greenberg, CBS News travel correspondent, at The New York Times Travel Show's spotlight panel entitled *Forecasting the Future of Travel – Where Will We Be in the Next 10 Years*.

"The biggest myth out there is that everything is online: It's what the travel providers want to make available online," Greenberg said.

The discussion jumped from limitations of technology in serving travelers to the benefits afforded travelers by real-life travel agents.

"Big data solves a lot [of problems], but it doesn't solve the surprise and delight of discovery," said Aribella Brown, editor-in-chief of Fodor's Travel. "There's no way to get an experience like that except with a travel agent."

A not so wide web

The panelists overall seemed to be excited about the innovations that travel technology can bring to leisure travelers.

Smart customization based on customer preferences and data will be the golden goose for OTAs, but those on stage said the technology isn't quite ready for public consumption.

"[Travel agents] are the petri dish of customization," said David Pavelko, director of Google Travel. "There's a lot more than price that goes into value."

For Pavelko, agents have the added advantage of being able to combine online reviews and information with their already strong knowledge of the travel distribution system.

"The beauty of being a travel agent [today] is that there is a plethora of content online at your disposal to use to inform those targeted decisions you are making for clients," said Pavelko. "You had a lot of work trying to figure out hotels 15 years ago."

Greenberg, however, is skeptical of the value of online data in providing accurate information to travel professionals.

“I trust citizen journalists as much as I trust citizen surgeons,” said Greenberg, referring to the assertion that agents should trust online reviews. “That trial and error can be very costly if you’re given bad advice.”

Others agreed that complex travel remains very difficult for the average consumer, despite the litany of online review sites available today.

“Sophisticated travelers still very much depend on human travel agents,” said Wendy Perrin, travel advocate for TripAdvisor. “Dozens email me each week asking me to connect them to the right travel agent for their trip.”

More, and less, competition

There was some contention around online booking opening travelers up to more varied vacation options.

Some said the plethora of online options empowers consumers to make the best vacation choice.

Others said that claim is a ruse; suppliers limit what is available online, pushing consumers to the options that make suppliers the most money.

“The airlines are not concerned about [the traveler] or competition [from other airlines] anymore,” said Greenberg. “They are allocating their planes to where they have the most yield, and not where you want to go.”

On the same note, the tour packages or local options available for group bookings online may not always be the best fit for the individual groups trying to book them.

“Groups need a lot of local recommendations,” said Brown. “Having those contacts in a destination is more than just where the top places to stay and eat are; it’s which service providers are best.”

The future for agents

Looking to the future, the panelists encouraged agents to take advantage of all the help technology can give their business.

Agents should work from home or use mobile technology to better serve clients in other regions. They should also embrace the world of online reviews instead of rejecting it.

“This is a world in which people want to read reviews, and reviews are the best articulation of

the value of a travel agent,” said Perrin, who encouraged agents to put forward client reviews and testimonials.

“If your clients can articulate what you added to their trip, what could be better [for your business]?”

Soon, sites and apps will do a better job anticipating what travelers want during the travel discovery process. And perhaps agents can take a cue from personalized technology in how they treat clients.

“Websites and apps are going to be able to predict the trips you want, and even book them for you [automatically],” said Perrin.

“A takeaway from that is for travel agents to think about what is going on in their clients’ lives.”

Brave new world

Google, in particular, is looking to build this world of automated service.

“The service element is key to all this,” said Pavelko. “Rather than you always having to ask for certain things, we know certain cues and can serve things up to you.”

But overall, even Pavelko admits that online travel jobs have not done a great job of inspiring potential customers to travel.

“The digital game has done an average job in the inspiration age,” he said.