

CHICAGO CONSUMERS'
CHECKBOOK
Highlights: Travel Agencies

There aren't as many travel agencies as there were before the Internet Age, but many of those still standing have survived because they offer superior service and expertise. And there are definitely times when a great agent is just the ticket. *Chicago Consumers' Checkbook*, available at www.checkbook.org, can help consumers find skilled agents for their travel needs. Highlights from Checkbook's report include:

Why Use An Agent?

- Expertise can be very valuable when planning travel. Since most travel-related commissions have dried up, agencies now charge fees for most services, so using one usually costs more than self-booking. View your transaction with an agency as paying for expert consultation.
- Besides having someone else doing all the research and booking, you may benefit from an agent's firsthand experience at your destination or contacts with locals.
- A good agent may have awareness of—and access to—special money-saving deals and promotions.
- An agent can alert you to security warnings, travel documentation needs, and other details.
- If you will be traveling with others, an agent can coordinate arrangements for the entire group.
- An agent can be especially valuable in accommodating any special needs or special interests.
- If you have problems with a hotel or other service at a distant destination, it might be helpful to have an agent as a central source of help and leverage.

How to Find the Right Agent:

- Do your homework. In Checkbook's survey, some area agencies received very high marks from their customers, but other agencies got ratings that indicate you'd be better off elsewhere.
- You'll want to work with an agent who has recently visited your destination or at least has onsite expert contacts and books several trips a month there.
- One indicator that an agent has a solid base of industry knowledge is qualification as a Certified Travel Associate. To be a CTA, an agent must have 18 months' experience in the industry, complete a CTA educational program, pass an exam, and meet continuing education requirements.
- If your agent is slow to respond to your communication, is unable to answer (or find answers to) your questions, inaccurately describes destinations, or misses other details, consider a change.
- You'll want an agent who works hard to find the best deals and is not biased toward travel suppliers that pay higher commissions. Be concerned if an agent keeps steering you to one chain or supplier.

Tips for Working with an Agent:

- Perform at least some travel research on your own. Knowing the basics, including information about deals, will help you determine if your agent is incompetent or lazy.
- Shop on your own if your flight requirements are complex. Shopping may also turn up package deals agents may not be aware of.
- If you know exactly which flight, cruise, etc., you want, and if the airline, cruise line, etc., pays commissions, consider doing your agent a favor by letting him or her handle the booking. Giving an easy commission should build goodwill that might result in lower fees later on.
- Even if you regularly rely heavily on one agent, consider using a different one to help you with trips that require special expertise if your regular agent doesn't have a lot of history with the destination.
- If you use the same agent often, let the agent know that you sometimes will check other options so the agent does not become complacent.
- Pay by credit card so you can protest the charge with your credit card issuer if there is a problem.

Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.