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Agent-locator tools evolve as crucial resource for retailers

By Kate Rice

Technology is driving more and more travelers straight into the arms of so-called traditional travel agents -- you know, the nonvirtual, flesh-and-blood types who actually talk to, listen to and advise consumers. At the same time, technology is also enabling the development of a number of matchmaking tools to help the traveler link up with a professional.

When the match works, it can translate into thousands, hundreds of thousands and sometimes more than a million dollars' worth of business for individual agents who use the sites. For many agents, these Web-based matchmaking sites have morphed into the best business generator out there for both repeat and referral business.

Agent-locator tools are nothing new. ASTA's Travel Agent Directory is more than 15 years old, according to Michelle Mueller, the Society's creative and Web services director.

Suppliers such as cruise lines and tour operators have long had agent-finder sites that help consumers connect with agents who have completed training on the supplier's products. In fact, Royal Caribbean International said traffic to its agent-locator tool has been growing, and it now attracts about 20,000 visitors per month.

Many destinations, including countries, regions and islands, have agent-finder tools on their sites that connect consumers with retailers who have undergone training in the destination. And travel niches, be it special-needs travel or small-ship cruising, also offer agent-finder tools.

Over the past half-dozen years, agent-locator services have expanded to include third-party sites such as [Zicasso](#), [Tripology](#) and [Cruise Compete](#). Agents pay for the leads they get from these sites.

Travel agencies are getting in on the action, as well. In the past year-and-a-half, a handful of agencies have developed their own agent-finder tools. American Express announced its Travel Insider program in 2011, and more recently, Travel Leaders announced its Agent Profiler.

The host agency Travel Experts has revamped its website to feature easy-to-search, customized pages about each of its independent contractors, including slide shows of them in exotic locales around the world, biographies and a summary of each agent's specialties.

The Travel Experts site is a perfect example of what contemporary agent-locator tools can offer: an online showcase for the agent's expertise and personality. Such sites are crucial to creating and nurturing the kind of complex, nuanced and collaborative relationship that typifies the agent-client partnership of today.



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Just as important, they're a key part of the changing consumer landscape that favors traditional agents.

The rise of the Internet, which broke the agent/GDS monopoly on travel information, was originally seen as a harbinger of the end of traditional travel agents. But the world is a big place, and consumers often found themselves overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information they were finding on the Web.

"Faith in technology has lost its sparkle," said Jeff Anderson, vice president of marketing for Avoya Travel, a host agency that repeatedly wins awards from its supplier partners for the sales volumes it achieves.

"While technology continues to improve, it doesn't have the same shine that it used to," Anderson said. "People generally know that the experts are able to find better deals. They can match customers with the right product better than some smart algorithm or technology that some engineer has written. The human factor has an edge here."



Tripology, owned by Rand McNally, has 18,000 agents in its network.

Men Gorleku, relationship manager for 6-year-old Tripology, which is owned by Rand McNally, said that requests range from a weekend cruise to the Bahamas to the trip of a lifetime in Bora Bora.

But he said that what really makes Tripology stand out are its experts.

Brian Tan, the former Silicon Valley executive who is Zicasso's founder and CEO, spends between 60 and 90 minutes interviewing agents about their experiences,

having them describe some of the unique activities they've planned or done themselves.

Cruise Compete says it is not just about pricing (up to five travel agents compete for a consumer's trip) but also about connecting prospective travelers with cruise experts who can help consumers plan their cruise vacation.

Zicasso, Tripology and the agency-locator tools really showcase the travel agent. Tan and his wife, Yuchun Ku, founded Zicasso because they found themselves spending as much as 50 hours planning the sort of highly experiential trip they took every year. He found that they often knew far more than the agents he could find. Tan wanted to find the top 10% of agents who could help him and others like him plan the vacations they wanted without taking a week out of their already overbooked lives.

For the initial screening, Zicasso uses an algorithm to match consumers with expert agents. But then a member of its staff of six makes the final decisions about which agent would be the best for the client. "We need to do our part to match qualified leads so our partners are not wasting time," Tan said.

Specialists have to maintain a rating of 4.5 out of 5 from its community of travelers. Zicasso features traveler reviews and photos of the trips that agents planned for them.



Brian Tan

The company offers training for agents and shares best practices, such as what agents should include in the first response that they email back to a potential client who has placed a query through Zicasso. It tracks sales and conversion rates. It does not charge agents a fee unless they make a booking.

The nature of vacations that Zicasso agents plan means that the average booking is \$9,000, not including flights, Tan said. Some Zicasso agents are booking more than \$1 million worth of business on their Zicasso leads alone, he said, adding that others are booking as many as 20 trips a month from Zicasso leads. The site typically draws 35,000 to 40,000 visitors a month, he said.

"What they're looking for is full-service capability around their particular trip," Tan said. "It's about saving time, not about saving money."

Tripology also features agent biographies, which it calls "personal statements." Agents can include their photos, describe their specialties and training and then describe themselves and the passions that drive them.



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Tripology provides training, suggestions on how to create a compelling personal statement and how to vet prospective clients. It provides suggestions on the type of information to provide in the initial email responding to a trip query. It stresses the importance of responding promptly to a trip query, and it even offers tips on how to make sure that agents have an attractive photo of themselves.

Zicasso, founded by former Silicon Valley executive Brian Tan, typically draws 35,000 to 40,000 visitors a month.

about 5,000 agents are active in the network, including the 20% who are "super users."

To make sure they are providing agents with qualified leads, both Zicasso and Tripology require a certain amount of time from buyers, as well. Tripology has buyers fill out a form, then write a paragraph describing what they're looking for. Then it will provide buyers with three agents who specialize in the type of travel the buyer is seeking.

Consumers spend five or 10 minutes filling out Tripology's trip request form, Gorleku said, adding that Tripology has 18,000 agents in its network and just made its 150,000th referral. He said

Zicasso features dream trips that its travel agent partners have designed. Once buyers have submitted their trip request, they get a complete portrait of three agents with expertise in the trip they want to plan, including contact information, the agent's website and more reviews of the agent's work.

Agents, in turn, decide which leads they want to pursue.

Finder tools created by travel agencies also tend to focus on the agent, not the product. Travel Leaders randomly rotates agent profiles in the upper right-hand side of the "Why use a travel agent" section on TravelLeaders.com. These profiles include photos of agents, their descriptions of themselves, listings of the destinations they know well, their specializations, certifications, the languages they speak and other skills.

Consumers can also search for an agent by destination knowledge, travel interest, desired agency location or an agent's name. They can click on an email or telephone icon to contact the agent immediately.

American Express doesn't just vet its Travel Insiders; after selecting them, it gives them specially designed training for the program, said Tony Gonchar, vice president of the American Express Consumer Travel Network.

After American Express launched the program in 2011 with just a handful of experts and a few destinations, it saw a "significant rise in unique visitors to AmexTravel.com as well as an increase in business," Gonchar said. The program now features 330 agents who specialize in 80 of the most popular destinations throughout the world and 20 special-interest categories.

Travel Experts' agent pages feature attractive photos of agents and slide shows of them in exotic locales around the world. Agents list their top destinations, their specialties and their recent trips. A colored map at the bottom of the page shows all parts of the world they've visited.

ASTA has been refining its Travel Agent Directory over the years, and consumers can now search for an agent using a variety of criteria such as city, state, country, destination, language, specialties, ASTA certifications and more.

"We have 183 other options," Mueller said.

The directory offers 20 ways for consumers to contact agents, including phone and fax numbers, email addresses, social media identifications, Skype contact information, website addresses and a "Get a Quote" icon. ASTA publicizes the directory in a variety of ways, through consumer media and on its consumer site, TravelSense.org. It's also optimized for search engines and Google.

Mueller said agents are contacted an average of 54 times a year via the site.

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How some agents met their match

Jamie Bachrach, owner of the Wandering Puffin of Plymouth, Minn., started using Tripology in 2007 and has sold nearly \$1.2 million worth of trips from the leads he got.

Bachrach specializes in Central and Eastern Europe. To help make sure he gets qualified leads, he has placed a sample itinerary on his personal statement page in Tripology, along with his credentials.

Bachrach, who is on his third career -- he was an educator and a chef before entering the travel game -- chooses his leads based on his gut. If something "feels funny," he won't do it. He uses ClientBase to keep in touch with all of his customers, including those he gets through Tripology.

Susan Wilcox, owner of Tortoise and Hare Travel in Davis, Calif., said she found Tripology to be invaluable in helping her build the business she started three years ago. On average, she said, she makes a sale on 12.1% of her Tripology leads. But one lead from Tripology doesn't mean just one trip. She's found that she gets repeat and referral business from many of these leads.

"The referrals multiply by many times the income I received from that initial trip," she said. A few families just keep coming back or referring their relatives.

Wilcox, an archaeologist-turned-travel-agent, looks for leads that resonate with her. It might be someone considering a stay at an eco-lodge in Central America, or it could be cultural.

She recently booked a trip to Machu Picchu, helping a couple fulfill their lifelong dream, and she's booking a trip to Europe for a couple traveling with their son to celebrate his return from his second tour of Afghanistan.

Wilcox doesn't just take leads from Tripology. She has taken specialist training with a variety of suppliers and destinations. She recently got a query from a retired biologist planning a trip to Alaska with her son, a birdwatcher. They found Wilcox on the Inner Sea Discoveries website, where she is listed as a certified "Adventurist."

Susan Geringer, owner of Geringer Global Travel of Westport, Conn., is booking a three-and-a-half-week tour of India for a group of five travelers from Australia through Zicasso. They are retracing the paths of ancestors who lived in British colonial India in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Geringer, a former psychotherapist, specializes in India and often plans trips that include Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka.






Csilla Dali, owner of Global Voyages in Chicago, said she gets queries from travelers who have never used an agent before after they find her through ASTA's Travel Agent Directory. They're usually fairly young, she said, between 28 and 40.

Dali charges service fees, and said that all her TravelSense.org leads are fine with that. She added that all these clients had done research online and, finding they needed a travel agent, had gone to TravelSense.org to find a reputable one.

Some said that they sent requests to several agencies, others chose her in part because of what she'd written about herself on her profile.


"Most have sent other business my way," she said. "Overall, it was great dealing with customers from these leads. They were all young professionals, very knowledgeable and informed." -- K.R.



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