

Travel Agents

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) - For Christine Riccelli and Andy Ball, a vacation is never more than a mouse click away.

The Des Moines couple are among the growing number of U.S. travelers who book their trips on the Internet _ a few clicks to get their airline seats, a few more to reserve their hotel room. In a matter of minutes, their arrangements are made, all at their convenience, without picking up a telephone.

"Andy and I don't even have a travel agent," Riccelli said. "I'm not sure of the last time we used a travel agent."

Not what travel agents want to hear, but it's a reality they have to face. With so many travel options now available on the Web and with airlines paying smaller and smaller commissions, travel agencies must change to keep up _ or face the possibility of going out of business.

Many agents have lost the battle and closed. From 1996 through the end of last year, the number of travel agencies fell 4.5 percent, according to figures from the Airlines Reporting Corp., a ticket distribution service for airlines.

But those in the travel industry insist there are many more successes than failures because agencies know how to adapt.

"I think you'll find we're chameleons," said Kathy Sudeikis of All About Travel in Mission, Kan., and secretary of the American Society of Travel Agents. "We've always adjusted.

"ASTA started as the American Association of Steamship Agents. So we have a legacy of moving and changing with the times."

Though travel agents still handle most bookings, the Internet is becoming a formidable force. The Travel Industry Association of America estimates that \$4.7 billion worth of travel will be booked online this year, and that figure is expected to jump to \$8.9 billion in 2002.

Travel agents, according to ASTA, booked \$130 billion worth of travel last year and still write 80 percent of all airline tickets and book 98 percent of all cruises.

To keep that business, travel agents are being challenged to offer more than what customers get on the Web.

ASTA is helping members move away from selling point-to-point airline tickets to selling entire vacation packages that include air, hotel and tours, saving clients time and, hopefully, money.

Sudeikis' agency can provide satellite phones to clients who are changing locations frequently so they can always be reached at one number. It also can set a traveler up with a hand-held unit the agency can beep if it receives word of a last-minute change by an airline.

"Travel agents were the very first automated entity in business. We've been on the computer for 20 years," Sudeikis said. "So it's not a big stretch for us to go into the next generation."

Many agents are specializing, whether it's cruises or school band trips. Or scuba diving.

"One of our agents specializes in diving and has found a wonderful niche," said Doris Green of Nina Travel in Miami Shores, Fla. "If he gets requests for anything else, he just turns it over to the office."

All About Travel has an agent who specializes in Disney properties.

"If people are interested in that, they can talk to somebody who eats, sleeps and talks Disney," Sudeikis said.

Rather than shun the Internet as a threat, many agencies have embraced it. More than half of ASTA's members have Web sites and 90 percent have e-mail, association president Joe Galloway said.

Diana Lynn Rau is one who operates in cyberspace. Working in Fraser, Colo., she was booking a trip to Nepal for a group in Alaska, communicating with her clients through e-mail.

"I've worked with people in Germany and other places internationally," Rau said. "That's where the Web and Net has broken down all sorts of borders. We need to take advantage of that."

Riccelli and Ball also take advantage of technology _ and without paying a fee to have their tickets written.

"If you're starting from scratch, it can be daunting and a waste of time," said Riccelli, who uses Travelocity for airline tickets and the Hotel Reservation Network to book rooms.

"Once you get it and know which sites are easy to use, then it's quick and efficient," she said.

Riccelli and Ball are experienced travelers who average four trips a year, often to Europe or the Caribbean. She is a former newspaper travel editor; he belonged to United's 100,000-mile club when he traveled for business.

Not all travelers are so savvy. Agents say that's where they come in.

They tell stories of frustrated customers clicking two or three times and ending up with that many tickets when they just wanted one, then running to the agency for help. Sorry, they're told, no can do. Neither can agents make changes in tickets booked online.

ASTA tries to address that with its slogan: "Without a travel agent, you're on your own."

"The way we look at it is we're saving them time," said Nancy Chavannes, who operates Travel Services Unlimited in downtown Des Moines. "We can search all the airlines for the lowest price as opposed to them calling each airline. We do feel we're providing a service."

Many agents belong to consortiums that provide 24-hour service, seven days of week. So if a client is bumped from a flight in Lusaka, Zambia, for example, they can call someone for immediate help regardless of the time of day.

Lois Anne Naylor, travel editor for Mature Outlook magazine, feels that service always will be needed.

"Travel is a very valuable, expensive commodity," he said. "If you have only a couple of weeks of vacation a year and if you blow it, it's going to be next year before you can try again. What we're selling is still perfectly valuable and people are willing to pay for it."