

Travel agents can spot bargains

By the Editors of Consumer Reports

With the growing complexity of travel purchases — and the increasing importance of computer reservations systems — finding a competent agency is becoming more and more critical. Are agencies today meeting the needs of their clients?

According to a survey by the editors of Consumer Reports Travel Letter, readers of the monthly newsletter are in general reasonably satisfied with the agencies they use. For example, 85 percent of the 451 survey respondents believe that their agency is willing to search for the lowest airfares — the service they consider most important.

The readers judged knowledge and trip planning as important as purchase assistance. They expected their agency to have firsthand experience with the places they wanted to visit and with the airlines, cruises and tours they were considering. The readers also wanted access to a wide selection of brochures, guidebooks and videos. In general, the agencies

met a good proportion of these needs.

There are, however, a few key features that readers believe are not available through their travel agency.

Nearly 75 percent of those responding believe that it is important for their agency to have a reliable source of consolidator/bulk-fare tickets (international tickets priced below the airlines' lowest fares). But only 27 percent think that their agency has such a source.

And while 89 percent believe it's important that an agency be willing to follow up on complaints, only 50 percent think their own agency does so.

The CRTL readers also expect their agency to be unbiased. Some 86 percent do not want their agency to have financial incentives to book clients with specific travel suppliers, such as airlines, hotel chains, cruise lines and tour companies.

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