

The future of the travel agent profession

 By [Olivier Hannaert](#)

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Digital has changed the face of travel, both making it easier for consumers to plan their own travel experiences and lowering the barriers of entry to the hospitality industry through apps such as Airbnb and Uber. The travel agent, the traditional middleman, has therefore been squeezed from both sides.



Image source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

This is not a new process and began with the earliest days of the Internet which enabled easy flight ticket searching and purchasing. The process has accelerated in recent years however, as more power has been placed directly into the hands of consumers through smartphone apps.

Many predicted that the traditional travel agent would be the second great casualty of digital progress, after the print industry. Instead, though, we are seeing a revival or evolution of the travel agents' role.

From agency to advisory

It's no longer enough to be able to connect travellers with cheaper tickets, the digital travel agent must provide advice and create an experience. Globally this is reflected in the American Society of Travel Agents decision to rename themselves the American Society of Travel Advisors. It's a subtle change in brand, but a profound change in outlook. Closer to home, our agents at Club Med Southern Africa are shifting gears to present themselves as Travel Experience Designers who are able to custom make a travel experience for holidaymakers and corporates.

More is required of the modern travel advisor - mastery of the destination, and the needs of the consumer. Advisors need to be able to design full travel experiences, utilising their expertise and controlling every part of the itinerary from doorstep, to regional airport, shuttle and especially the ultimate destination.

More, better insights

And, in order to match travellers with appropriate destinations, the advisor needs to understand their needs and reasons for travelling more than ever before. Millennial travellers are more socially aware, and concerned about the impact of their leisure - how is the local community affected?

To this end, the travel advisor needs a deeper understanding and insight into both sides of the supply/demand equation. In effect, they need to provide a concierge service, anticipating the traveller's needs and able to fulfil them at the right time, in the right place and at the right price.

One way for travel advisors to do this is through partnerships, connecting local customer insight with remote destination knowledge. As most advisors' customers are outbound, it makes sense to form partnerships with advisors in other destination markets.

Though the conversation above is premised on leisure travel, these trends are not limited to that market. MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions) remains the fastest growing sector and, just like the leisure market, requires travel advisor's expertise to design bleisure experiences that meet the more discerning customer's needs. Accommodating large groups of people with disparate needs has its own complexity, though the individual drivers are the same.

The clientele of today is looking for more than just beautiful destinations, they want transformative holidays that will allow them to bring home more than just memories. Travel advisors can and should play a big role in this regard.

Travel agent 2.0

One way that the changes in the industry can be visualised is by looking at the number of travel agents employed in the United States. From a high of 132,000 travel agents in 1990, pre-Internet, that number has dropped to 81,700 in 2018. That drop masks a more recent increase - the lowest number of travel agents working in the United States was recorded in 2014.

Ironically, it is digital that is providing the tools for travel advisors to consolidate insights, whether about the destination, or the travellers' needs. It is the internet that is connecting advisors in local markets to destination experts in remote markets. However, despite all that in a digital world, clients are looking for more opportunities to connect with human beings and be exposed to that personal touch along the travel sales journey.

The Internet let consumers take control of the information-gathering and purchasing phases of travel, but far from being the death knell many had predicted, it's proving to be the lifeblood of a new, vital travel advisory industry focussed on creating rich, bespoke travel experiences – with a human touch.

ABOUT OLIVIER HANNAERT

Olivier Hannaert is the MD of Club Med Southern Africa.

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