

The Best of the Best

Agencies share their best practices through ASTA/Hyatt partnership

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Recognizing that it is crucial for agents to be able to effectively compete on price with online travel sites such as Expedia, Orbitz and Travelocity, Alexandria, VA – based MacNair Travel created a program that uses every available and emerging distribution channel to find the lowest available fare for every one of its customers on every transaction.

Last month, MacNair received the ASTA / Hyatt Best Practices award in the technology, operations and selling categories for the development of its GoAwayDeals process. At first glance, the Go-AwayDeals program sounds daunting, and perhaps impossible. Given the myriad Web sites and technological tools that promise to find

the “lowest available fare,” it seems that agents would have to spend hours or days searching for the best price for clients each time they made a reservation. But President and CEO Michael MacNair explains that knowing where to search is as important as conducting the search itself. Says MacNair: “The process of finding the lowest available fare has become a major challenge for retailers. In many instances, an

agency’s customers are better at finding Web fares than the agency, but there is no reason why an agency can’t do this and do it better than anyone else. I am in this business to provide the best possible service to my clients and this includes finding the lowest available fare.”

The GoAwayDeals process works on the principle that all agents have the tools to find the

of minutes (between three and seven for a basic reservation; although the time can be longer for a more complex reservations) this global search delivers to the customer the best possible value for their trip using all of MacNair’s channels.

KEY TO THE PROCESS

The key to making the process work, says Jason Kaufman, head of MacNair’s technology training, is ensuring that each search is calculated and tailored to meet the needs of each client. For example, during a tour of the agency’s office conducted by Travel Agent last month, within three minutes Muge Karsli, an international travel consultant with Mac-Nair, found a fare from

Washington-Dulles to Cairo for half the price listed through the GDS. Karsli checked prices on Sabre and Orbitz before finding the best fare through an agent-only consolidator Web Site. “I almost always check Orbitz because they often do have the lowest fares,” says Karsli, who has been an agent for nearly 20 years. She explains that, apart from finding the lowest fare, Orbitz is also a good tool because it lists multiple airport



Pictured at the Best Practices Award lunch last months are (from left), Rob Sarmiento, representing Hyatt Hotels; Michael MacNair of MacNair Travel Management; and Kathy Sudeikis, representing ASTA.

lowest available fare that meets the specific needs of their clients. The search for the lowest fare may include a variety of combinations, including Web fares, tour operators fares, consolidator fares, international rate desk calculated fares, published fares, negotiated fares that may be applicable to an individual customer account, negotiated fares that are unique to MacNair Travel and fares secured through the agency’s relationship with American Express. In a matter

options and creative routings that agents and the GDSs would not otherwise consider.

Similarly, on the domestic side, a travel consultant with MacNair was able to find a \$600 fare for a client traveling from Washington to Los Angeles, with less than seven days advance purchase and no Saturday night stay. The fare included roundtrip air and a two night hotel stay through United Vacations. The price was less than half that quoted in Sabre, and it included a cancellation waiver option for only \$64.00.

But knowing when to check Orbitz or United Vacations, or any other site for that matter, is where the GoAwayDeals process comes in, says Kaufman. For instance, he explains that MacNair's agents know that Orbitz is a useful site for trips originating in the U.S., but not

outside the country. "If you don't know where to search you can waste a lot of time, and that translates into lost revenue," says Kaufman.

Each of MacNair's travel consultants is trained on a quarterly basis and is updated on emerging Web sites and technologies that could be added to the GoAwayDeals process. "We try to enforce the idea that the tools, not the philosophy, have changed," says Kaufman.

By showing their clients that they are the one-stop source for searching for - and booking - the lowest available fare, MacNair has cemented its client relationships and shielded itself from the competitive threat of the Internet. At the same time, MacNair has demonstrated to clients that trying to find the best value on their own

is counterproductive, because the agents can do more in a few minutes than the customer can accomplish in hours of frustrating research.

Agents interested in developing a similar program to GoAwayDeals can view the details of the program on the members-only section of ASTA's Web site (www.astanet.com). ASTA, in conjunction with Hyatt Hotels Corp., created the Best Practices program as an opportunity to recognize travel agencies for innovative business processes and give other retailers a chance to learn from those efforts.