

TRAVEL AGENT

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The Hub Club

Thanks to TravelHub, travel agents can find strength in numbers while navigating cyberspace

By Karen Anderson

When Marlton, N.J.-based TravelHub was conceived five years ago, the Internet had not become the pervasive force that it is today, yet company founders Gary Bilbao and Miguel Castaneda had the foresight to see that this burgeoning technology could help drive small businesses. At the time the two were working for Worldspan, installing and integrating the CRSs, and providing technical consulting to travel agents.

"Back then travel agencies were just [beginning to] ask [what the Internet was] and how they could develop a Web page," recalls Bilbao.

Lost in Space. In 1995 the Internet was relatively primitive, with Web sites little more than pages and pages of information posted on the Internet. Bilbao and Castaneda began developing Web sites for their travel agent clients, but it wasn't enough for the retailers to have a site floating aimlessly in

the expanse of cyberspace, Bilbao says—people needed to find it.

"There wasn't a real search engine [telling users] what the travel agencies did best," Bilbao says. "We needed to have a Web site to drive business to the agency Web pages."

That's where TravelHub comes in. TravelHub is an online portal [www.travelhub.com] where consumers can find a travel agency based on its specialization, and where agencies can post their best specials. Agencies can obtain a free listing for their specials on the site after providing proof of certification. The service includes a five-word description of the special, plus the agency's name, address and phone number. It also includes an e-mail booking form through which potential customers can send information. TravelHub asks that listed agencies respond to inquiries within 24 hours.

For a \$50 fee, travel agencies can buy a listing in TravelHub's *HubClub* newsletter, a daily compilation of special offers that is sent by e-mail to organizations ranging from Fortune 500 companies to colleges, and approximately 30,000 individuals. According to Bilbao, "That [newsletter] is probably the hottest feature available from TravelHub."

TravelHub also provides a Web-design and hosting service for travel agencies. It provides a platform through which customers are matched with agencies. If an agency is interested in participating but does not have an Internet site, TravelHub

will create a four-page site that features an online request form for customer inquiries. TravelHub charges \$400 for setup costs and the first month's maintenance, then \$20 per month for maintenance. An additional \$20 per month entitles the agency to two special listings.

Private Labels. In addition, through their sites, agents can offer specially packaged tours from Israel Plus and Central Holidays. (TravelHub created the Web sites for the New Jersey-based operators.) Under an arrangement with the operators, TravelHub agencies can sell packages as their own "private-label" tours.

"Having a private label was a no-brainer for agents," Bilbao says. Because there is no link to the tour operator, agents do not have to worry about customers booking direct.

TravelHub also offers the Tour Finder tool, a search engine for the agency Web site that allows potential customers to seek out particular tours based on a key word, and the Discount Airfares Network (DAN), a search engine that pores over the air fares offered by more than 500 consolidators. Tour Finder and DAN are optional features provided on

the agency Web site at an additional cost.

In addition to being an online travel mall for consumers, the site is meant to be an online community for retailers. Travel agencies listed on TravelHub can send one another wholesale promotions, engage in group discussions and contact hundreds of online agencies.

Unbiased Info. When TravelHub was launched, it had only three travel agency members. Today it represents approximately 1,000 travel agencies and receives nearly 330,000 consumer hits each month. But with all the travel sites taking up cyberspace,



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Fast Facts

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what makes TravelHub stand out from the crowd? Bilbao believes TravelHub is one of the only nonbiased sources of travel information online. Because it does not sell travel, and just connects consumers with travel agents that do, he says it can provide non-partisan information.

Of course, Bilbao may be a bit partial, but he's not the only one who believes that TravelHub is a great way to find a travel agent. CMP Media's *NetGuide* has named TravelHub the top Web site to perform such a search. "There are several sites that serve as directories to travel agents," reads the *NetGuide* review, "but none function as well as TravelHub....TravelHub allows travelers to choose from categories of travel agents such as air-fare only, family, cruises and singles. Browse through the results to find an agency that suits your purpose or is located nearby."

Agent-Friendly Site. It's not a coincidence that the site is so agent-friendly. Although TravelHub was the brainchild of Bilbao and Castaneda, Bilbao says it's the travel agencies that turned the site into what it is today by providing insight into what does and doesn't work in terms of selling travel and how the portal can be improved. "The travel agents structured TravelHub," Bilbao says. "They really are the bosses."

One of these "bosses" is Howard Rossman, president of East Brunswick, N.J.-based Travel Reservations, who became involved with TravelHub two years ago. "I was a reluctant [technical] virgin," he says. "I was on the off-ramp of the technical highway."

Success Story. After studying numerous articles about how travel agencies are using



Consumer users of TravelHub can find an agency to meet their needs.



TravelHub designed the above site for a New Jersey agent.

the Internet, Rossman asked Bilbao to help build his Web site, and it wasn't long before he was cruising in the fast lane of the information superhighway.

"TravelHub designed a Web site that

makes me look like American Express," Rossman boasts.

Rossman's Web site [www.travelreservations.com] is backed by the Worldspan CRS, and customers can also send an e-mail inquiry through the site. The bread and butter of Rossman's business, however, is selling tour packages. With TravelHub's help, Rossman's site is linked to those of Apple Vacations, Globus and Cosmos, and Central Holidays.

Since he took his business online, Rossman has attracted clients in Chicago; Portland, Ore.; and San Francisco, and has even received inquiries from overseas. He admits that no matter how much he looks like American Express, he won't see the revenue that agency does, but with additional sales of \$200,000 since he joined TravelHub, he says it's enough to make him a believer. "They know the business, and I make money with them," Rossman says of Bilbao and Castaneda.

True Believer. Another satisfied TravelHub retailer is Rochelle Yates of Yates Travel in New York, which was one of the first travel agencies recruited to TravelHub. The agency has been advertising on the site for four years, and it launched its own Internet site [www.yatestravel.com] a few months ago.

Says Yates: "They've always been cooperative, and they're very professional. They give you support via e-mail or telephone, and the prices are very reasonable."

As does Rossman, Yates says that her travel agency business has transcended geographic boundaries since she made the decision to join TravelHub. "I've had clients from all over the world because of them," she says.