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INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT | Getting there

To area travel agents, their field is soaring

By ROBERT COLE
The Kansas City Star

When Judi Chaitman thinks upscale leisure travel, she often thinks Hawaii.

Chaitman, a travel specialist with Leawood-based **Great Getaways**, has made nearly 40 trips to the islands during her career. She was married there, as was her son.

She regularly books client holidays to Mexico, the Caribbean and Paris, and she will spend 10 days this month in Rome visiting with luxury hotel executives and reservation managers. But Hawaii is her specialty, and her passion.

Chaitman said more than half of her clients come from outside Greater Kansas City. Many travelers e-mail her when they see her name listed on travel Web sites and on Conde Nast Traveler's annual ranking of the top 100 travel agents in the world.

Passion and knowledge are basic fare for travel agents. Industry changes have forced them to specialize and to develop strong relationships with clients and vendors.

Airlines have cut agency commissions, and the Internet, rife with tips and bargains, is fierce competition.

Agency consolidation is common. **Executive Travel** was acquired on July 1 by **Short's**



MCCLATCHY TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Beaches in Hawaii, such as this one on Kauai, are among the attractions travel agents direct their clients to.

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Travel Management, which previously acquired **Passport Travel** in Kansas City.

Yet many industry insiders are optimistic. Annual sales by U.S. agents total between \$120 billion and \$130 billion, according to the **American Society of Travel Agents**.

Agents still sell nearly 90 percent of all cruises, more than half of all airline tickets, and more than 80 percent of all tours and packages.

Strong bonds are equally important for agents and travel managers working with corporate travelers.

"It's a partnership more than ever before," said Rosanne Green, corporate travel manager for Short's in Overland Park. "We have to make sure they know they're important to us."

Executives are more price conscious of their travel expenses, Green said. Short is able to combine its travel knowledge with information that's available on the Internet to steer clients toward quality arrangements, she said.

Chaitman said travelers want an agent who can handle the complexities of arranging destination weddings, honeymoons and multigenerational trips.

"When it involves different hotels, different currency and sightseeing outside the country, they want someone with experience," she said.

Chaitman normally doesn't meet her clients face to face. But her forte is the excitement she can share for Hawaii, a favorite she first visited in 1970.

"It's a beautiful destination," she said. "Each island has its own personality, and there's something for everyone."

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