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SETTING STRATEGY | Far-reaching changes affect travel industry

Agencies endure turbulence

Terrorist attacks, commission changes and the Internet have forced new strategies.

By SU BACON
Special to The Star

Tourists, families, executives and entrepreneurs still leave hometowns behind to see the sights, seek adventure, enjoy a vacation or conduct business.

Travel hasn't changed. But the travel industry has.

In the last decade or so, travel agencies have been hit hard by three far-reaching changes: The commission paid to them by airlines went away; travel was disrupted by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001; and the Internet put travel information and arrangements directly in the hands of computer-savvy consumers.

In any industry, change is inevitable.

"Conditions will change, and a business, like a good navigator, will chart and change course to be in the best position to arrive at a destination," said Robert Kolich, business consultant at the **Small Business Development Center** at **Johnson County Community College**.



JILL TOYOSHIBA | The Kansas City Star

Company mascot Kan-Du the gorilla helps David LeCompte and Short's Travel Management adapt to an evolving market.

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Losing the airline commission had “the most significant impact on the industry,” said Mike McGarry, vice president of marketing and public relations for **Short’s Travel Management** in Overland Park. “It caused us to rethink the way we ran our business.”

Short’s and other agencies were forced to analyze their cost of doing research and delivering tickets and determine what that service was worth. They began shifting the fee formerly paid by the airlines to the customer.

“This totally reversed the revenue stream from the airline to the traveler,” McGarry said.

The terrorist attacks of 2001 and the rising popularity of Internet travel sites also delivered a one-two punch to travel agencies. Some folded. Other agencies merged, found ways to cut costs or carved out a niche — and survived.

“Be prepared to see the future,” Kolich said. “The business you were in last year is not necessarily the business you should be in next year.”

In response to changes in the industry, Short’s began using technology to solve problems for corporate clients, said David LeCompte, president and CEO.

The company developed software and found ways to use the Internet to help companies authorize and track travel-related expenses, to manage events from registration through departure and to save money by tracking unused tickets.

Founded in 1946, Short’s Travel Management has been evolving and growing for 60 years and now averages \$177 million in travel-related sales every year.

Denise Canon of **Travel Concepts Inc.** in Lenexa celebrated her company’s 10th anniversary in April.

She responded to industry challenges by specializing in romance travel.

“We focus on couples planning honeymoons, anniversary celebrations or destination weddings,” she said.

Canon uses her expertise and experience to customize a romantic rendezvous for her clients.

For example, she can help couples enjoy their getaway by recommending places she has been, advising them on cultural idiosyncrasies, describing the ambiance available at different resorts and including local activities available such as parasailing or snorkeling.

She provides the personal service travelers can’t get from their computer and a Web site.

“People like to be taken care of,” she said.

Mastering change

1. Be aware.

What conditions are changing around you?

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2. Prepare.

Get ready to address the threats or opportunities.

3. Act.

Respond with new ways to ward off threats or take advantage of opportunities.

4. Adapt.

Reinvent your business and how it serves customers.

Source: Robert Kolich, business consultant



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