

Client satisfaction

As GILLIAN EVANS finds out from students around the world, agency clients use both websites and face-to-face consulting to find out about study abroad options, and they expect much more than just brochure information. They want a quality information and late-booking service with 24-hour contact possibilities.

Language travel agents can be assured that they still have a clear role to play in the industry, despite the increased Internet booking options available. But they still need to remain competitive and provide a comprehensive, quality service to guarantee satisfied students and a good return of business via word-of-mouth recommendation.

Talking to a range of students who used agencies, it is clear that a website can be important in attracting students in the first place. Many students, such as 27-year-old Weiwan from China, visit an agency's website before going there in person. 'There were six agencies licensed in my home town,' he says. '[The one I used] was established 10 years ago and has a good reputation.' Weiwan went to the agency after comparing their website with that of other agencies because 'face to face they could offer me much more information'.

As well as being able to offer a personal consultancy service, students also acknowledged that agencies can be convenient for making late bookings. Twenty-year-old Noelia from Spain said she decided to use an agency because it was the 'easiest and fastest way'. 'They only had two days to organise it all because I told them too late', she says. Polish student, Iwona, had booked a previous language course via the Internet, but she booked her second trip through an agency because she had just one week to arrange it.

Other students generally used an agency because they felt it offered them more security in finding a quality school, and, like Alexei, aged 20, from Russia, they wanted to be guided through the wide range of choices available. 'I had no idea where exactly I wanted to go and what the differences between the schools were,' he says.

Of most concern to students was the level of detailed knowledge the agency had of their chosen school and its location. Twenty-seven-year-old Claudia, from Brazil, was grateful for information about the lifestyle in Australia and the attractions of the area. Fabienne, aged 20, from Switzerland said that she had intended to take a course in Florida until her agent advised against it. 'The agent said I should go to California and not to Florida because during these months, it's very humid [in Florida].'

Generally, students were satisfied with the level of advice given to them about language courses, but the most criticism from students

was to do with a lack of detail about schools and locations. Francesca from Venezuela said that she would not use the same agency again because 'they don't have enough knowledge about life in London'. She continues, '[The agency] should provide more information about the accommodation system - residence and homestay - and also give a clear idea about the cost of living in London, [which] is more expensive than the forecast given.'

'[My agency] didn't really know [details] like if there is a kitchen or laundry [in the residence],' complains 18-year-old Marta from Spain. 'I think it would be very useful if we were given more details about the place.' Two other students mentioned that they thought their schools would be closer to the city centre and they would have appreciated more information about their locations. Other details that some students felt were lacking or inaccurate were the proportion of students at the school from their own country - this was usually higher than expected - and the average age of students on their courses.

The vast majority of agencies relied solely on school brochures to give their clients an impression of the school. Only two students had been shown a video of the school and its location before going overseas, and only three had been able to talk to past students. '[I] would have appreciated seeing [pictures or a video of the school],' commented 16-year-old Ana from Spain. 'I was only given the street name.'

Although school or location videos are not always available, many agents include pictures on their website, which students find useful. Brazilian student, Celio, gave his agency's website a nine-out-of-10 rating. 'You can see some pictures and some students give their opinions about the courses,' he says. Of her agency's website, Fabienne adds, 'The prices were [on it] - that's very important.'

Although less than half of the 36 students interviewed by *Language Travel Magazine* were given a 24-hour contact number by their agency, this was generally thought of as something most should have offered. A British student, who did not have an emergency number, says, 'The agency could have had someone working on Sunday as I missed my connecting flight and couldn't inform the school or the host family about my delay.'

Quick responses were also important to students. Emmanuelle from France, aged 32,



Agency client trends

- 35 per cent of the students who took part in our survey had decided to use an agency because it had been recommended to them by a friend, relative or teacher
- 49 per cent of students used the agency website
- 41 per cent of students had booked a language course through an agent before
- 73 per cent of students would book their course through a language travel agent again
- Of these, 74 per cent said they would book through the same agent
- 76 per cent of students had booked their flight through the language travel agency
- 41 per cent of students had been supplied with a 24-hour telephone number by the agency in an event of an emergency
- 16 per cent of students had been contacted by their agency while overseas

complained, '[The agency is] a small company and there are many customers. I think they can't pay attention to everyone [and] sometimes they didn't answer my emails.' Alin, aged 24, from Germany, added that he would not use the same agency again because he did not get the details of his host family in sufficient time before his course started.

The key for agents is to provide an efficient service that includes information about all aspects of a study abroad experience. Then every agency client may be as satisfied with the service as Ana, 23, from Colombia, who says, 'I can't say anything bad about [my] agency.'

The students who took part in this survey were studying at: Australian Pacific College in Australia; BWS Germalingua in Germany; International Center for American English in the USA; Study Group in the UK, Australia and USA