

Agency extras

Agency extras, from arranging flights, insurance, hotels, excursions and providing phone cards, are often expected by clients as part of an agency's service. Some agencies have branched out to provide a comprehensive service in these areas and many have found it to be worth their while in terms of adding value to their business. JANE VERNON SMITH reports.

As dedicated specialists offering consultancy services for language travel, many agents pride themselves on the range of additional services they can offer clients over and above advice concerning their language programme. For most, extra services offered free-of-charge are seen as essential to the profile of their business. Meanwhile, agents hold differing views on the importance of additional paid-for services, with attitudes depending partly on the market in question as well as the nature of the individual business.

Since the advent of Internet booking and cheap flights, all-inclusive language travel packages, in which a student purchases the language programme together with all travel and insurance in one deal, have become less common. However, because of their convenience, such arrangements continue to thrive in certain quarters. According to Manager, Ana Maria Gonzalez Paquot, most of the clients of her agency, Enjoy Languages in Mexico, prefer to purchase their language programme as part of a package that includes the course itself, the flights, health insurance and international phone card. Indeed, she reports, in order to meet this demand, a travel agency was opened to complement the services of the original education agency.

At Interstudioviaggi in Milan, Italy, package deals are also popular. "We offer some ready-made packages, [including] the cost of the flight, as this is what our clients prefer," says spokesperson, Annette Duerdoth. "However, if someone has flight miles or prefers an airline company to the one we use, then we merely take off the cost of the flight. For long-haul flights, we never offer an all-inclusive package," she adds, "as there are so many flight options and prices."

Despite the increased ease with which students can make their own arrangements for flights and insurance, Jan Passoff of Russian agency, Star Travel, notes that it is still much easier for the client to buy everything in one place. Furthermore, given the high cost of language programmes themselves, any extra cost for a flight when purchased at the same time is not seen as significant. As a result, 98 per cent of clients purchase both travel tickets and insurance from this agency, when booking their programme.

A high proportion of clients – estimated at 70 per cent – also make use of the flight booking service

offered by World Study in Brazil. Here, they are not offered a package deal as such, but, according to spokesperson, Diego Costa, once they have decided on a programme, students are then offered other services, including insurance, flights, international phone card and also a tax-back service.

While some agencies focus solely on providing language programmes, most tend to offer a range of extra services. Brazilian agency, BICS, does not provide in-house travel services. However, "we offer a partnership with a five-star travel agency that guarantees our clients – most of them senior executives – bookings for the exact flight they want, day and time," says Ana Cecilia Ribas de Aguiar Poluhoff at the agency. BICS does not receive any commission on bookings made through the travel agency, but offers them as a service to clients. "Extra services make the whole difference in our selling approach. As a small, 'boutique' type of agency, every little detail counts," Poluhoff explains.

Elsewhere, many language consultancies are happy for students to arrange their own flights, while picking up some additional business providing extras such as travel/health insurance, hotel and excursion bookings, pre-departure language courses and phone cards. According to their own specialities, agencies offer different extras. For example, at Auriga Servizi in Italy, "our agency is made up not only of consultants, but also of some mother-tongue teachers, so our clients may apply for a short language course", which may be held either prior to departure or upon their return. "This is the only extra our clients have to pay [for], but they are very happy to do that, since they improve their confidence or their skills," says Marketing Manager, Gabriella Perfetti.

Included in the price

Although paid-for extras may often account for only a small part of a language consultant's business, the service offered to clients generally amounts to a great deal more than simply providing a booking service with information on different schools. "Throughout our selling process, lots of extra [information is] given – weather conditions, travelling options, car rental, airport hints, nice places to eat out, the best theatres, what to see, what not to miss, where not to go [and] the best time of year to go to certain places," relates Ana Cecilia Ribas de Aguiar Poluhoff of BICS in Brazil.

Meanwhile, pre-departure orientation sessions, to prepare students for the destination and culture they will be living in, are also included by some, including World Study and SIC Travel Agency in Brazil.

Similarly, at the Grad School in Colombia, the core business is placing students in study courses abroad – not primarily for language study, but graduate and undergraduate university programmes, for which language training may also be needed. Hence, says Director, Maria Cecilia Pineda, training for language tests, such as Toefl and Ielts, is made available as a chargeable extra, along with more commonly available extras, such as travel insurance, and free advice on how to obtain the cheapest travel ticket.

Another more unusual service is the "tax back service" offered by World Study, a department created, as Costa explains, to help the agency's students once they have returned from their overseas studies.

Hotel booking services are offered by some agencies, including Russian Star Travel and Brazilian SIC Travel Agency. At SIC, Rodrigo Pereira comments that his agency is keen for clients to purchase as many of its additional services as possible, since this enables his staff to help out the student in all situations. Star Travel, meanwhile, aims to provide a full range of additional services with the aim of filling any gaps in the service offered by the chosen language school. In addition, he points out that these are, "sometimes better than schools provide, and it is [an] extra sale for us." Normally, Star Travel will make hotel or hostel bookings in circumstances where the school is unable to provide the type of accommodation the student is seeking. Similarly, says Passoff, it sometimes arranges transfers, or trains to the student's destination, where the student does not wish to avail him/herself of a transfer provided by the school.

Marco Travaglia, Director of BTS, a telecommunications provider with offices in Italy, the UK and Spain, says that students

At Italian agency, Auriga Servizi, students who are embarking on their first overseas study experience are able to speak on the phone or meet with other clients who have previously attended the same school or homestay. Additionally, says Marketing Manager, Gabriella Perfetti, "a couple of days before departure, our clients phone their family from our office without paying." She adds that continuous contact is maintained with agency clients once they are overseas. "When our clients are abroad, we phone them once a week in order to know if everything is ok, or if there are any matters to solve soon. In addition, if their money runs out, we get in touch with their relatives or close friends in order to get money to send abroad to the school or the family."

One of the most popular free services offered by Auriga Servizi, however, is familiarisation with the kind of

grading tests that students are likely to encounter on the first day of their language programme. At Swedish agency, LanGo Language Travel, students may also benefit from help with making grant applications to the Swedish CSN (Swedish National Board of Student Aid), which makes awards to Swedish students on language courses lasting a minimum of 13 weeks. Meanwhile, assistance with the visa process is a welcome free service offered by many agencies, including Enjoy Languages in Mexico, whose Manager, Ana Maria Gonzalez Paquot, comments, "I think that this is a very interesting issue, since, for the students, this is a very difficult step."

As Perfetti points out, "the above services are not profitable for us and they have to be considered as incentives, which are very important, because if our clients are satisfied they send us [more] clients."

often expect their agencies to offer extra services such as phone cards. "All international students have a need for affordable and reliable telecommunication tools, both fixed and mobile," he says. "The agency students trust to purchase an often expensive study abroad package is seen more and more as a one-stop-shop as [they believe the agency] knows their needs."

Even those agencies where extras are limited tend to offer health/travel insurance and they normally receive commission on their sales.

"The insurance we sell is from Axa insurance group, and it is both health and travel insurance, with more than eight different kinds of cover," notes Poluhoff of BICS. Insurance has a very good take-up at the Grad School, where, says Pineda, most clients purchase

it from them. At LanGo Language Travel in Sweden, student insurance is the only extra on offer, and is taken up by around 20 per cent of clients. According to spokesperson, Johan Siggesson, to offer other extras would, at present, represent "much hassle for little profits". However, at the same time he acknowledges the importance of this additional service. "The fact that we offer an insurance shows that we take an extra interest in our clients," he explains.

The value of additional services to the client is undisputed. However, it seems that different extras make varying contributions to the overall profitability of the agency's own business. In terms of the percentage of overall sales accounted for by extras, Siggesson puts the figure as low as five per cent, while, for Interstudiaviaggi, Duerdoth estimates a figure of around 30 per cent. But how profitable are these extra services? For Perfetti, the language tuition offered in addition to selling language travel programmes contributes positively in financial terms. "For our part, these extras are very profitable, so we encourage our clients to book a course when booking their stay abroad, in such a way that they are offered a good price," she says.

For many others, however, the contribution is quantified more in terms of added value. "We do take commission, or it is paid to us by the provider, but, on the other hand, this commission is less than we earn on language courses," comments Passoff, who adds that extra services are very important in terms of being able to offer something additional to the client. Duerdoth agrees. "I think the add-ons are an important service to offer. It shows we have thought about every eventuality, and gives a more professional service," she concludes. ●

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