

# Online action

The Internet now plays a major role in business, and most language travel agencies have a strong web presence. Competition from purely web-based agencies is leading many traditional operators to add Internet booking and payment facilities to their existing web-based information service. JANE VERNON SMITH reports on this growing trend.

Many agencies have been providing online booking facilities for at least a decade, and in that time the numbers using the service have grown steadily. In Sweden, SI Språkresor estimates that around 60 per cent of its students now book online, with another 30 per cent applying by phone and most of the remainder by post. Only a small number now book in person at their office, according to head student advisor, Sofia Henningsson.

The US-based National Registration Center for Study Abroad (NRCSA) started taking online bookings in September 2000, and today, reports Stephen Wittig, approximately 85 per cent of clients book online. It is a similar story at the Amerispan agency. Founded in the USA in 1993, its first website went live in 1996. "But we still required people to print and fax or mail their applications," recalls Director of Marketing, John Slocum. Then, in 1998, the company began accepting online bookings via credit card. Today, says Slocum, more than 75 per cent book online.

Some among their number are happy to book without any prior communication between themselves and the agency. Figures quoted vary between five per cent of online applications in the case of SI Språkresor, to something below 15 per cent in the case of Amerispan, while in the case of the purely online company, GoLearnTo, 95 per cent book without any prior interaction with the agency. "This," explains Spokesperson, Vanessa Lenssen, "is largely due to the fact that we have comprehensive information online, in an easy-to-use format, with an easy-to-navigate booking engine."

It may be that the ease of online booking attracts clients who are shy of personal contact, or time-poor, and in that way may actually expand the market. However, despite the many advantages of online provision, some in the industry still retain doubts about whether the service to clients can be as good as that which is offered in person. Jasmine Bian of Mandarin House language schools in China is one who believes in the value of face-to-face contact. "We would prefer [to] work with agents who deliver face-to-face service to their clients," she comments.

"They are seeing the students eye-to-eye; problems

or situations are [dealt with] in person." Certainly some agencies like to retain an office presence – even if many of their clients live too far away to be able to visit in person. As Henningsson explains, "We have clients from all over Sweden, so it's only a few who we meet in person – maybe five per cent. But I still think it's good to have a place where students can meet us in person. It gives a more professional impression. Even if the students book online," she adds, "they want to know that there are 'real persons' that they can contact if something happens and they need help."

On the other hand, "While face-to-face contact with our clients is nice, we do not see it as a disadvantage not to have [this] with most of our clients," stresses Wittig. This is not to say that the personal touch is not valued. Far from it. Regardless of whether or not they have office premises open to the public, many agencies that operate online are keen to stress the continuing desirability of communication between themselves and their clients. For Henningsson, phone conversations and email communication represent an important element in the agency's service to their clients. "Communication is still key," agrees Slocum. "The average participant communicates with our office three-to-four times prior to booking."

It is often because of concerns about reduced client contact that some agencies have held back from 100 per cent commitment to online systems.

At Korea-based

agency, Uhak.com, for example, online booking was made available approximately 10 years ago. However, the company has not actively promoted it until recently, resulting in an average online uptake of less than 10 per cent, according to the company's regional manager for the USA and Canada, Julia Hong. "We feel initial communication with students is crucial for understanding their needs and finding the right school fit," she explains. However, having acquired the patent for a comprehensive support system for study abroad information and processing, the company is now eager to build its online business. "We are quite positive that the growth of our online business through use of our new patented system will be well worth the wait," comments Hong.

Even some purely online agencies have proved cautious about committing to a wholly online booking system. Currently, Worlds Best Language Schools.com corresponds with clients, and builds a rapport, via email. Then, once the options have been discussed and worked through, it offers to send an application form [to a partner school]. As Spokesperson, Warwick White, explains, "[Clients] often don't know all the possible choices, so we can help them

work out what is best for them. If we accepted a booking with no correspondence," he adds, "then we haven't provided a good service to our client."

He explains that his company's view is that the system used is better than just having an online booking form, and automatically receiving an online booking from a partially informed client. White notes that, although that his company does not currently use an online booking system, it intends to begin doing so by the end of this year. "We see it as a benefit, although we are worried [that] for some clients it may lose the personal touch. We don't want to become just an online booking factory," he emphasises, "but want to always be in personal touch with our clients."

Online payment is often regarded as a logical accompaniment to online booking, and with it, very often an online order discount. In the broader commercial context, consumer discounts for online purchasing feature

widely, and have, indeed, come to be expected. However, use of this particular incentive would

appear to be less popular in the language travel context, where, as noted above, rather more interaction generally takes place between the company and the client prior to purchase than is the case elsewhere. At GoLearnto, such discounting is felt to be unnecessary. "We are offering a good online service, good quality schools, and courses which people are prepared to pay for," comments Lenssen, "and discounts only serve to devalue the service when you are a pure online agency."

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## Speedy response

One ancillary benefit to emerge from the growth of web business is enhanced speed of booking confirmation for clients. Although online booking does not necessarily in itself speed up the process of confirmation, the ease of instant communication does increase the pressure on schools to be able to respond more quickly to potential students than in the past. According to Katherine Allin of International House in France, booking confirmation of courses "has to take place within 24 hours." She adds that "online booking has improved the speed of this process and clients expect a faster and more efficient service when they book a course." This is especially the case, as Margret Fortmann of Spanish language school, Escuela Montalbán highlights, for language destinations with low-cost flight connections.

Most agents, too, appear to have gauged 24 hours as a reasonable response time. However, as Stephen Wittig of US agency, NRCSA, points out, some programmes take longer than this to confirm. For Claudio Cesarano of Swiss agency, globo-study Sprachreisen, speed is one of the most important issues. For this reason, his own company's policy is to confirm within 24 hours. However, he notes that the time it typically takes for schools to confirm a reservation to the agency varies considerably from one to another. At World's Best Language Schools.com, an online agency, spokesperson Warwick White notes that in order to adhere to fast confirmation times, his agency has been forced to "drop" one school. "They were a good school, but they took too long to confirm, which upset clients," he adds.

However, speed of confirmation is generally not a problem, he underlines, since the agency has an

agreement with most of its school partners allowing it to confirm bookings without prior checking of availability, except where the school has notified that a course is getting really busy and may become full. "Normally, we confirm the same weekday, ie within 24 hours [on] weekdays, although we say 48 hours, unless it is the busy period or a specific course with pre-requirements."

For Vanessa Lenssen of online agency, GoLearnTo, only instant confirmation of a course booking is good enough. "This is increasingly important in a society that demands instant gratification. If you have to wait for confirmation, most people will think twice before booking online. You don't have to wait to book a hotel or airline seat," she points out, "so why wait to book a language course? The industry sector needs to find ways to meet the increasingly demanding needs of consumers," she underlines.

One agency that does, however, offer an online booking discount is [www.languagecourse.net](http://www.languagecourse.net). At this website, students can obtain a five per cent discount off the published course fees of their chosen school. Language schools themselves, although unaffected financially, have mixed views about the practice. Katherine Allin of International House, Nice, in France is unconcerned: "I understand it can create problems with other agencies, but, to be honest, it does not concern me," she says. Bernhardt Freidl, Director of the language school, Horizonte, in Germany, concurs: "We do not support this system, but, on the other hand, we do not hinder them from doing it." However, Bian of Mandarin House is less happy. "We try not to work with this type of agent," she states.

As the nature of a language travel programme is very different from a standard retail purchase, instant online payment (with or without discount) is not critical to the success of online booking, and not all agencies offer it. Instead, online clients at SI Språkresor may pay by credit card by providing their details on the online application form – a system which, says Henningsson, works very well.

### *"Instant online payment is not critical to the success of online booking and not all agencies offer it"*

There are a number of reasons why some agencies that provide online booking in fact hold back from offering online payment. As Lenssen explains, set-up is very straightforward, but involves obtaining a merchant service and an online payment processing service. Merchant services are provided by banks, which charge a rate relative to the risk and the volume of online payments being processed. A further fee is charged for payment processing.

According to Lenssen, it can be tough to get a merchant service with a bank, and those that can't get a merchant number or a good rate can use either PayPal credit card services or WorldPay. However, she warns, "Their fees are high, and when you do get higher volumes over time, you won't easily be able to transfer to a bank, as you can't take your payment history with you." She continues, "Whatever you choose, you still need to integrate a payment solution online, picking up accommodation and any extras as well. Most processing systems have one you can use, or you can build your own." Not all systems are as flexible as may be desirable – for example, can clients search for their outstanding balance and print invoices? – so it is worth looking carefully at all the options.

The same caveat applies to online booking systems. Set-up can be expensive, but costs and systems vary considerably. "We have

spent a few hundred thousand Swiss Francs on this, and are still spending," reveals Claudio Cesarano, Managing Director of Swiss agency, globo-study Sprachreisen. "Yes, there are cheaper, and, yes, there are more expensive options. We have the system which is covering our specific needs, and developed for us," he affirms.

Amerispan's system was also custom-designed for their precise needs. As Slocum explains, "We have several platforms, [which] verify and process the credit card transaction automatically. The first model is less automated, and we use [this] for some of our more customisable/complicated products. The second is what we call the automated application, which calculates dates [and] costs and is somewhat idiot-proof." He explains that the automated version is also set up to automatically add all the information to the reservation system. "Neither is...too expensive to set up," he says, "but the automated version requires a large amount of time or man hours, because so many dates and prices need to be entered to make sure that the automated application works... We did it that way because we wanted to continue to market our programmes the same way we have in years past." He adds, "Most of our competitors have you selecting a destination, type of course, number of weeks, lodging type, etc. That seems nice, but we prefer being able to easily show comparative prices."

At GoLearnTo, which operates entirely online, Lenssen comments, "I firmly believe you can't skimp on these things. There are cheaper options, which most agencies have, such as email booking forms, but this is not a long-term strategy. It is," she adds, "a significant investment if you develop full end-to-end booking functionality, but, with over 40 per cent of all travel transactions online and growing, it's the only way to go." ●

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