

How to evolve into a 21st century travel agent

By [Cari Coetzee](#)

25 Apr 2017

"We've all read that the travel agent is dead," said Natalia Rosa, director of the promotions division at Big Ambitions who is responsible for ASATA communications, speaking at World Travel Market Africa 2017. This statement was met with many a nod from the audience. The truth is, travel agents aren't dead, they are transforming into 21st century travel agents.



Natalia Rosa

The problem, according to Rosa, is that the traditional travel agent's (TA) business model is unsustainable. The travel agent landscape has changed significantly by a whole host of emerging travel trends that are constantly reshaping how travel agents need to do business - including the sharing economy, social media, millennial travellers, the use of mobile, and personalisation.

“ Travel agents' survival depends on their ability and willingness to evolve. ”

Delivering true value

The focus should be on the **true value** travel agents deliver their customers. Through mobile technology and new travel platforms, travellers are more than capable of booking their own accommodation and flights and, therefore, they are seldom willing to pay a TA to do so. The Association of Southern African Travel Agents (ASATA) conducted an internal study which was based on conversations with leisure travellers, corporate travellers, and corporate procurement managers and looked at "how travel agents should evolve so that

they remain relevant and so that they are not in competition with the internet", said Rosa.

The study indicates that the true value of a TA now lies somewhere else and found that the customer must well and truly be at the heart of the TA's business - TAs should have a thorough understanding of customers' needs, context, and circumstances, as well as add value to the entire leisure journey (not just facilitate transactions).

According to Rosa, corporate travellers see a TA's real value in their on-the-ground knowledge, their expertise on what's happening at the destination - anyone can seat themselves on a plane, but not everyone knows if you're flying to Murtala Muhammed International Airport, you might want to sit in the front, because if you're not first off the aircraft, you're going to sit at the airport for an hour and a half to get through customs, as Rosa explained it.

Rosa offers nine recommendations for leisure and travel agents:

1. Change your value proposition: "Technology will change the role of the travel management company from transactor to a true manager of transactions." Through factors such as online booking platforms, travellers finding inspiration online via social media, and customers refusing to pay for a service they feel they can do themselves, the transactional booking value has been made redundant. Travel agents must identify services that customers are willing to pay a premium for and justify the value of the service they can deliver.

2. Become more customer-centric: "You cannot serve two masters: you either serve the client or your agenda, and the latter alienates the former." To address negative perceptions about the industry, TAs must focus on services relevant to

meeting the customer's priorities and needs. The value of the TA has shifted from the booking event to the journey - travel is personal and so travel agents must achieve a balance between catering for the customer's personal preferences and corporate business goals.

Business travel can be stressful and demanding. The goal should be to identify the main pain points in the journey, pre-empt travel issues, keep the customer informed, reduce uncertainty and, in doing so, make travel as painless and pleasant as possible. It's all about personalisation - through being in constant contact with the customer, sharing expertise and personal recommendations, knowing the customer's personal preferences, and enabling personal control of itineraries, TAs can enable a personal experience. They can further prove their true value through meeting the customer's priority needs including cost saving, business efficiencies, travel-related management info, travel policy guidance, compliance, and safety and security.



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3. Build strong relationships based on trust and credibility: Corporate travel managers and travellers want to be understood and they want travel agents to help them with their business or have a great experience. Differentiate your service proposition by getting to know the traveller - get to know their likes and dislikes, and create unique travel experiences based on their personal interests and preferences.

You must be transparent, willing to go the extra mile and be an expert. "Your credibility relies on your ability to apply travel knowledge, experience, expertise and relationships with suppliers to consistently meet their customers' expectations and add value," said Rosa.

4. Become a specialist: Customers won't pay for a travel order taker. Take time to specialise - the knowledge they can gain from you must be more than they can get from the internet.

5. Invest in education and motivating employees to become true consultants: Due to the technical nature (only) of their qualifications, inadequate skills training, lack of travel experience and a lack of real world or virtual travel exposure, travel consultants are perceived to be ill-equipped to be true travel advisors. Corporates need a team of "highly qualified customer service consultants" who would be available to help them with their travel needs and requirements.

6. Manage supplier relationships: Carefully balance value proposition to customers with value to and from suppliers and reframe relationships to find reciprocal economic benefits. Agents must add differentiated and demonstrable value to supplier product and use credible suppliers; suppliers must ensure TAs know the products they are selling and give access to better info.

7: Change remuneration model: TAs must charge for services rendered and value added to customers. Corporates don't expect to receive professional services for free and will pay as long as they are charged a reasonable, fair and transparent

price.

8. Embrace technology-led innovation: Innovative technology disrupts practices no longer adding value to your business and enables options that do. Adopt an omni-channel strategy that delivers a personalised, 24/7 service experience from the start of the travel process to the end.

9. Employ courageous, visionary leaders: Travel leaders must champion change to survive and compete effectively in an increasingly changing landscape. Create a vision for a sustainable travel agency focused on meeting priority needs of customers and use this vision to motivate for change and create a future that employees can be passionate about.

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