



9 signs of a bad travel agent

Tribune Media Services

As a rule, most travel agents are well-trained, competent professionals who work hard for you.

But there are exceptions to every rule. Take Kathleen Rossano of East Brunswick, New Jersey, who was recently sentenced to a 10-year prison term for stealing more than \$75,000 from her travel agency. Prosecutors had charged her with offering luxury vacations to her friends, taking cash payments, billing the expenses to her agency's credit card and then pocketing the money.

It was the fourth time she'd been convicted of taking money from former employers.

A month later, her former agency, Cruise Value Center, collapsed without paying the cruise lines what they were owed and leaving customers in the lurch. One of the clients recently contacted me in a panic after her cruise line demanded an additional payment of \$2,544 for her vacation because the cruise line had been stiffed by the agency.

While the odds of running across another Rossano are remote, they still exist. The Federal Trade Commission recorded 14,903 complaints in the travel and timeshare category in 2007 -- nearly twice as many as a year before.

How can you tell if your agent is trouble? Here are a nine signs:

1. Demands you pay in cash

Reputable agencies accept credit cards, and you'd be well advised to use plastic when you make a travel purchase. Why? Because the card protects you if something goes wrong -- say, your airline goes bankrupt or your hotel burns to the ground. Or even if your agent runs off with the money without paying for your trip.

"I've never heard of a legitimate travel agent only accepting cash," says Stacy Small, president of Brentwood, Calif.-based Elite Travel International. "This would immediately

set off a red flag." (That isn't to say you should never consider a wire transfer, she adds. Some overseas travel companies offer a 3 percent to 4 percent discount for cash purchases, but even then, Small recommends using a credit card.)

2. Acts funny when you bring up commissions

Travel agents make money in two ways: by charging a booking fee or by taking a commission from a travel company. If you ask about an agent's compensation, a travel adviser who is on the up-and-up should be willing to openly discuss bonuses, so-called "overrides" and other forms of commission.

Responses such as "What I'm making is none of your business" are a sign of trouble. In fact, it may mean the agent is trying to sell you a vacation that isn't in your best interests.

"My pet peeve is to see an agent push a client into a cruise or tour that may not suit the client, but doing it anyhow because one, it's easy, and two, they get a better commission," says Patricia Dwight, owner of Adventure Travel, an agency in Summerville, South Carolina.

Travel agents want to be considered "professionals" in the same way we do real estate agents or financial advisers. Yet the commissions and compensations of those professionals are clearly disclosed. Why not those of agents?

3. Has no certifications

Although there's no accrediting agency for American agents that's comparable to, say, a bar association, there are groups that suggest your travel professional means business. Having an International Airlines Travel Agent Network (IATAN) card is a sign your agent is for real. Other organizations that may signal a seriousness of purpose include membership in the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) or a certificate from The Travel Institute, which accredits agents based on their expertise.

Although no one requires these certifications, my rule is: the more paperwork, the merrier. For example, the top 1 percent of travel agents in the country belongs to an invitation-only network called Virtuoso. "It reduces complexities, uses network members for exclusive relationships, and opens up access to many luxury experiences," says Pamela Hurley Moser, whose agency is a Virtuoso member.

4. Adds a booking fee to your bill after you've decided to buy a vacation

An agent on the up-and-up will disclose all fees, surcharges and extras before you make a booking decision -- not afterward. Agents who tell you, "Oh, by the way -- there's a

"\$50 booking fee" are being less than upfront with you. And who knows what else they're not telling you?

"It's important to have everything in writing, so there is a paper trail to follow, and being upfront always," says Cindy Harris, an agent with Travel 'N Dive Adventures, which specializes in diving, snorkeling and fishing destinations. Harris says a good agent treats clients like friends -- "with courtesy, honesty and respect."

5. Doesn't know a thing about where you're going

If your travel adviser has never heard of the destination you'd like to visit, that may not be a good sign. If it's a well-known place ("Orlando? Where's that?"), you might want to slowly back away toward the exit. "

The most important quality in a good agent is destination knowledge, and the ability to match the perfect vacation with each and every client," says Chet McDoniel, owner of Off to Neverland Travel, which specializes in Disney destinations. "The ability to listen and custom tailor each and every itinerary is crucial to being of service to my clients."

6. Has a Better Business Bureau rap sheet

Check out the Better Business Bureau site to see if your travel agency is listed. If it is, the BBB will give it a letter grade. "When we evaluate a company we look at their complaint record -- including the number of complaints, severity of complaints and whether or not the company tried to respond to the complaint -- as well as licensing and government action," says Alison Preszler-Southwick, a spokeswoman for Council of Better Business Bureaus. What if it isn't on the site? It might be listed under another name (try a search by address) or you might be looking in the wrong region. The BBB has 4 million reliability reports on North American businesses in its database, so if your agency has been in business for a while, there's probably a record.

7. Is impossible to reach

If your travel agent disappears after making a sale, that's not a good sign.

"A travel agent should be able to be contacted," says Marcy Lannon, a manager for Meridian Travel in Dania Beach, Florida. "That does not mean that they have to be on call 24/7, but I think that it does mean you should be able to contact them during their business hours and you should expect replies in a timely manner."

The worst agents never call back after booking a trip, never follow up to make sure you had a good vacation, and are never reachable when something goes wrong. You're better off buying a trip online, directly through an airline, hotel or tour operator.

8. Doesn't listen

A competent agent takes the time to listen to what you want, and then makes recommendations based on your needs. In fact, good travel agents don't consider themselves agents at all, but "specialists in a destination or travel type," says John Peters, the chief executive of Tripology.com, a network of 9,000 travel agents. "They can get you information that can't be found on the Web. They listen more than they speak and then wow you with the perfect trip."

9. Other warning signs

Here are a few other things you don't want to hear your travel agent say: "I became a part-time travel agent because I love taking free trips." ("Many people wake up in the morning and say 'I love to travel ... think I'll be a travel agent'," says veteran cruise agent and blogger Sharon Emerson.)

Another potential sign of trouble: "I bought my agency certification online for only a few hundred bucks -- and you can too!" Those so-called "card mills" are problematic. But that's a topic for another column.

And finally, "No need to read the insurance policy, it'll cover you." The commissions on travel insurance policies are exceptionally generous, and a bad agent will try to push a policy that may not fully cover your trip.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. But if you're curious about your agent, it's a good start.