Destinations urged to start ‘dialogue’ with travel agents

Tourism destinations in the UK are missing an opportunity to work more closely with the travel trade.

Caroline Brown, commercial director of Shearings Holidays, and also chairman of Abta’s UK Leisure and Tourism Group, stressed the need for destination management organisations (DMOs) and the trade to support each other more. Travel agents and tour operators are the “easy pieces around the edge of the jigsaw”, she suggested, but need destinations to provide the “colourful, middle pieces of the puzzle”.

“Don’t presume we know what’s going on in your destinations. Tell us about festivals, events, anything unique that can be done in your destinations, so agents can sell the experience, not the commodity,” she told DMO representatives.

Agents have a unique relationship with their clients, and often have extensive databases from which destinations can benefit, she added. Destinations should get “the dialogue going” with agents in their own towns and cities too, even if those agents are unlikely to sell attractions and accommodation on their own doorstep. “The travel agent in Lincoln might not sell Lincoln cathedral, but perhaps that agency can sell forex to inbound visitors,” she suggested. “Travel agencies are local businesses too; work together as part of the tourism infrastructure.”

Brown also described it as a “matter of social conscience” for agents to sell domestic tourism. “Selling UK holidays helps keep attractions and hotels open 52 weeks of the year,” she explained.

AIR TRAVEL

Hiking aviation taxes will not ‘dissuade the majority from flying’

Increasing aviation tax would have only limited success in reducing the amount of air travel, delegates at RTD8 heard.

Professor Kevin Anderson of the Tyndall Centre, University of Manchester, said the travellers who take most flights are also the least price-conscious. “The holidaymaker flying to Benidorm once a year for their summer holiday isn’t the driver – it’s the much more wealthy, flying much more often. And people like that are inelastic to price,” he explained.

“I would put the tax on anyway, but I don’t think the majority would be dissuaded by it. So we have to find alternative mechanisms to reduce air travel. Price would only be one, relatively small component.”

Anderson spoke in response to a suggestion by Justin Francis, managing director of responsibletravel.com, that higher taxes might be the only way to make people “start flying less, now”.

“Travel companies with an international element would have to get smaller [to achieve that]; the tourism industry is not going to volunteer to do that,” Francis argued.

THOMSON TAKES ACTION ON EMISSIONS

Making small adjustments to its itineraries has helped Thomson Cruises cut carbon emissions and save money.

Paul Britton, the cruise line’s marine operations manager, described how he has used his itinerary-planning expertise since taking up the position in 2011 to save the company “millions on fuel and other costs.”
ISSUES SUCH as low-paid staff in hotels could be improved if customers were willing to pay more, according to Thomas Cook.

Andy Cooper, director of government and external affairs, said that customers were so price-sensitive that other parts of the supply chain suffered.

“If customers were willing to pay more for their holiday we wouldn’t have this issue of low wages. I would deny that it’s tour operators screwing over hoteliers,” he claimed.

The number of customers that donate £2 to Thomas Cook’s children’s charity is also likely to plummet when a new EU directive takes effect in June, Cooper said.

It will prohibit companies from charging consumers for extra items through an “opt-out” mechanism; instead they will have to “opt in”. Cook expects the change to have “quite a big impact” on the number of holidaymakers who still choose to donate.

“We can’t really add £2 on to the price of the holiday and then make a corporate donation. It’s not a simple equation, because of VAT, and would be more like £5,” said Cooper.

“We’d also need a mechanism to take it off, if the customer decided not to donate, so it’s messy.”

Thomson Cruises marine operations manager Paul Britton agreed that price-sensitivity created a challenge for charitable giving:

“If we add £2 on to our price, and Cook doesn’t, then the customer is going to book with Thomas Cook instead of us. The fact that this is a small-margin business is a huge constraint.”

Spending one hour longer at one particular Mediterranean port had reduced carbon dioxide by two tonnes on one week-long cruise, he said. Other tweaks, such as visiting Agadir only fortnightly instead of weekly, contributed to a saving of 1,800 tonnes of carbon and £400,000 for one ship across a six-month season in the Med.

“When I first developed the new spreadsheets to help me make these calculations, it was about cost savings at first, but then I added in the carbon box and could see the difference it made,” he said.

Asking the ships’ engineers to start up the engines only half an hour before leaving port, instead of two hours ahead, is another measure that has proven successful.