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As travel companies bypass the Middle Man, Small Business Travelers can absorb the benefits

The growing number of travel companies embracing direct booking methods as a cost-reducing measure could translate into less expensive travel for small businesses, reported the **American Small Business Travelers Alliance** (ASBTA).

*"We've been hearing a lot lately how airlines, car rental companies and other travel providers are looking to meta search engines as a less expensive distribution alternative to their standard sales outlets," said **Chet Gray**, ASBTA vice president of Sales and Marketing. "This could be good news for small business travelers who are not only looking online for the best prices on travel, but also tend to prefer direct booking."*

Although large companies have traditionally benefited by booking business travel through advantageous corporate agreements with travel agents, this type of arrangement is rarely the best choice – or even an option in some cases – for small businesses with only a handful of employees. As a result, the Internet has been a boon for small business travelers, who can manually scour the web for the lowest prices and book directly with travel providers.

ASBTA Survey: Meta Search Engines Favored

In fact, ASBTA's first online travel survey of current and prospective members, which was completed in June, indicated that 49 percent of respondents book their hotel accommodations on the hotel's web site, compared to just 31 percent who book via a travel search engine. Even more significant, only 15 percent of respondents book their hotel reservations with a travel agent. These preferences reflect just how well-suited the concept of meta search engines and their money saving possibilities are to small business travelers.

Meta search engines are similar to traditional travel search engines in that they provide consumers with a single location from which to search many travel providers' web sites for the lowest prices on travel. Unlike traditional engines, however, meta searches allow customers to book their travel directly on the travel providers' web sites, rather than through the travel search engine. By booking directly with the travel provider, customers can often avoid paying service fees, which are usually charged by travel search engines.

For the travel provider, the fees paid to a meta search engine for a completed sale are typically lower than those paid to a traditional search engine and substantially less than commissions paid to travel agents. **American Airlines** is just one recent example of how major travel providers are embracing meta search engines. Earlier this year, the airline agreed to allow Mobissimo to scan its web site for low fares and report the results to customers, who can then be transferred directly to American's site. American just struck a similar accord with Sidestep.

In addition to saving time and money by finding the best prices in one location and avoiding a service fee, customers can also benefit from this process by taking advantage of the guarantees offered by some travel providers' web sites. For instance, **Hyatt's Best Rate Guarantee** promises that if a customer finds a lower rate advertised rate at a Hyatt hotel than what is offered on Hyatt's web site, the company will match the rate and provide an additional 20 percent discount. American Airlines has a similar program, promising that if a flight found elsewhere on the Internet is lower than on American's web site, the airline will match the price and provide the customer with travel voucher on any future American, American Eagle or AmericanConnection carrier flight.

"Travel providers are certainly saving money by utilizing meta search engines, but small business travelers

can also benefit if they just know where and how to look," said **Gray**. "Fortunately, meta search engines are easily found and used, and nicely complement the inclinations of many small business travelers."

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