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# Cheap air tickets take off in popularity

By Julie Hawrishok

**OTTAWA — Travel agents are worried that their industry might not be around much longer.**

It's not a matter of the economic climate or people staying close to home, but the sudden emergence and growing success of discount travel Web sites that has them worried.

Online ticket brokers are offering discounted airfare, accommodations, car rentals and everything a person needs for a relaxing getaway. The sites are rising in popularity, much to the chagrin of travel agents.

"We hate it," says Elaine Donaldson, owner of Pathfinder Travel in Comox, B.C. "As a travel agent, we're offering professional information and we're giving the customer all sorts of extra support and information. The Web sites are just booking agents that offer no support."

Globetrotters, on the other hand, like these discount Web sites. Tara Currie is a student who loves to travel.

"I travel at least four or five times a year," she says. "I live in Ontario but the majority of my family still lives in the



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**Travel agents are more aggressive in promoting low fares they say match what's on the web**

Maritimes, so I travel home at least twice a year.”

## Saving on line

Last year, Currie attended university in Australia and found time to travel the country without depleting her bank account.

“I’ve found very good deals by booking online,” she says. “My friends and I managed to visit all the major cities in Australia during the time we spent there and we almost always booked our tickets online. For one trip I took to Perth, I saved almost \$200 by booking online. The airline was having a seat sale and you saved even more if you booked online. It seems like almost all the major airlines have incentives for booking online, so I’ll definitely book online again in the future.”

Canadian airlines WestJet and Air Canada offer small incentives for those who wish to book trips directly from their sites, though the discounts are minimal.

Both are offering a \$5 discount on return flights booked online.

Donaldson is concerned that online ticket brokers may undermine her industry.

“As people become more comfortable with it, they’ll go back and use it more. It’s absolutely a big threat to travel agents,” she says.

## Pressure to change

The consumer switch from travel agents to online brokers has been felt in the industry for a few years.

“I’ve owned this agency for 18 years,” Donaldson says, “And for 15 year, I made pretty good money. But in the past few years, we’ve had to change our direction. These sites have really changed our industry a lot.”

Donaldson says that the agencies have to tack on a few extra dollars to the price of each ticket, as the airlines cut out the commission and middleman charges. She says prices for tickets purchased through her agency for national flights are very competitive with web rates though the travel agency can usually offer prices on international tickets.

Many of the travel Web sites, such as Travelocity.com and Expedia.com offer special deals for airfare and accommodation. Currie says this is a very beneficial aspect to the site.

“We would always try and book our hostel beds online if that option was available,” she says. “There is nothing worse than arriving in a new city only to find out that all the hotels or hostels are booked and having to walk all over the city with your luggage trying to find a place to sleep. It was so great stepping out of the plane and knowing that we had a place to stay and put our luggage. It gave us so much more time to travel around the city and have fun!”

Currie admits she does appreciate the human interaction involved in using travel

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agents.

“If you have a question, they can do their best to answer it and that’s important. Also, travel agents can explain the weird methods that different airlines have in coming up with their prices and that’s helpful,” she says.

### **A role for agents**

Donaldson hopes people will recognize the importance of agents.

“We’re humans, we can respond. We can assure you that your flight is reserved and if there’s a problem, you can call us. Some people use these sites as a tool, she says, to get prices and then check with their travel agents.

“Sometimes we can match the prices, sometimes we can’t, but people are usually okay with it either way.”

Currie is planning on traveling to Europe this summer. She says she may use an agent, though “when it comes to convenience, there’s nothing than can beat booking online.”

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