

Study: Biz air shoppers better off with agents (4/17/2002)

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Travelers at large corporations are wasting their time trying to beat a travel agent's lowest fare quote for a particular flight, according to a study conducted by Topaz International.

While researching fares generated by corporate travel agencies vs. fares for the same flight on Internet sites, Topaz found that fares offered by travel agents averaged \$170 less per ticket.

The average agency-quoted fare was \$459, while the average Internet fare was \$629.

Topaz, a company that audits travel agencies to determine that its corporate customers are being offered the lowest fare, said it found lower fares on Internet sites 7% of the time.

"We're finding that the combination of the agency's preferred-supplier agreements and the company's negotiated agreements usually is sufficient to beat the lowest price on the Internet," said Valerie Estep, president of Topaz.

Between 15 and 20 companies, all customers of Topaz, were subjects in the study. All companies had at least one negotiated deal with an airline, Estep said.

Topaz swept reservation queues at travel management firms every hour, comparing fares with those offered on the Internet for the same flight. Sites searched in the study included Travelocity, Expedia, Orbitz, Cheap Tickets and airline Web sites.

Results of the study would have been different had Topaz searched for fares on different flights, admitted Estep.

However, Estep said Topaz's customers were more interested in an "apples-to-apples" approach.