

# At Your Service

As a concierge for corporate travelers, Sue Hagen takes the stress out of traveling.

**With horror stories abounding about** travelers getting stuck for hours on planes idling at the gate or on the runway, three executives from a small Minneapolis-based technology firm were relieved that, when faced with a one-hour delay, the pilot let passengers disembark. The trio went to a restaurant on the concourse to grab a bite. Forty minutes later, when they went back to the gate, the plane was already gone; the pilot had gotten a quicker than expected clearance, and the men didn't hear the

reboarding announcements. Their briefcases were gone too, still in the overhead compartments.

They didn't panic. They called their corporate travel concierge, Sue Hagen, president of Avant-Garde Personalized Travel, LLC. After they considered the options she outlined, Hagen quickly booked a corporate jet for them, and they flew to New York without mishap, about \$8,000 lighter but relieved they'd be able to make a critical meeting. Hagen also arranged for them to pick

up the briefcases, which she had tracked as they were taken off the commercial flight and put in a keyed storage area at La Guardia Airport.

In a world of either mega-agencies that book billions in business travel a year, or self-booking sites like Travelocity, Expedia, and Orbitz, Hagen is a rarity: a corporate travel agent who specializes in intensive, comprehensive service exclusively for small companies. Her client list is modest—a dozen companies, ranging from sole proprietors to a firm with 30 frequent fliers. Staying small means that she knows the itinerary of each traveler well, and she also knows everyone's travel history—what kinds of trips they usu-

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ally take, what their preferences and peeves are. She treats her clients the way she'd like to be treated—like a CEO, with a cast of minions running interference at the slightest glimmer of a hitch.

Hitches are all too common for road warriors these days, as aircraft are flying full, flight delays and cancellations are nearing all-time highs, lost luggage rates are skyrocketing, and slow-moving lines at security checkpoints mean that road warriors who cut it close may miss their flights. Amid the chaos and uncertainty, Hagen, whose background includes stints as a trade show organizer and a customer service agent for Northwest Airlines, takes over, advising and taking action when the inevitable happens. She even mans the 24-hour service hotline herself. The only thing she outsources is the back-office aspect of her business, which she launched in 2004.

The concierge service isn't restricted to dramas in

ing may have ended sooner than expected, and you'd like to get on an earlier flight," she says. "I can do it for you in a fraction of the time you could, even if you had easy access to the Internet. Or your meeting may have run late and you'd really like to know that your flight is delayed, so you don't have to stress getting to the airport. You'll know about the extra time from a text message I've sent."

What price personalized attention? Surprisingly, it may cost less than using a traditional or online agent. Even though Hagen charges a \$300-\$500 monthly retainer for each traveler, pricing is all-inclusive. Industry standards charge for every piece, and changes, of the transaction (\$30-\$60 average each transaction. "You're only charged once, not every time you make a change, which is where the little guy gets slammed. Companies are spending thousands of dollars just on fees, because every time something on a trip gets altered, a travel agent will

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progress. Hagen will advise on developing corporate travel programs, helping clients establish the policies that mix value with comfort and productivity. When she builds a traveler's itinerary, she works hard to get not only the best fares but the most convenient flights, the fewest (or shortest) layovers, and the most comfortable aircraft. She spends triple the amount of time a traditional agent does on reservations—15 to 45 minutes—and typically presents three options. Once bookings are made, she'll monitor seat availability for upgrades (something too tedious and frustrating for most travelers to do on their own), and will handle converting frequency points to fares, hotel rooms, and rental car days, a function few traditional travel agents will touch.

Once a business trip is underway, the next phase of her service kicks in: as troubleshooter. She monitors weather where her clients are traveling from and to, and checks on mechanical and other kinds of delays. If something changes (a gate, a departure time), she'll send a text message or will call the traveler. After a quick consultation, she'll take the appropriate action, often a rebooking. Meantime, she'll keep other affected suppliers—hotel, chauffeured transportation, car rental firm—apprised as well. "There's nothing worse than a long delay in the air to arrive at the car rental counter to be told that your car was given away because you didn't show up when you said you would," she explains.

Not all changes are irksome, she adds, and in some cases she can give the road warrior welcome news. "Your meet-

charge \$30-\$60." Companies can also save if Hagen finds that a fare or room rate has gone down after a booking was made. "If the fare bought yesterday went down 35 percent in price today, I'll rebook the lower fare if the traveler approves," she says. And the client receives all of the savings! "Essentially, we're continually monitoring price changes for arbitraging opportunities," she says.

Even with the retainer, Hagen says her prices still come out 10 percent lower than a travel agency or booking engine—and that's before the concierge-style service. For those travelers who actually like booking their own travel, she does offer a customized online booking tool for them to use. (Still, she's amazed that a consultant who bills \$500 an hour will spend an hour looking to save \$50 on a flight.) The monthly retainer also extends to business travelers taking leisure trips, and to all members of the traveler's family. "It's one way a small company can add value to their employees," she says. She'll advise on everything from destination selection to how to travel with young children. For one corporate client, a veterinarian and entrepreneur, she even arranged a tour of Minnesota dairy farms (and tickets to a few baseball games) for a group of Japanese dairy farmers.

Her clients are vocal about her skill, lauding her for her attention to detail and her uncanny ability to get them out of scrapes. "A business trip is tough enough on its own. You shouldn't have to worry about being your own travel agent, too," she says.

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