

How to Choose a Tour Operator or Travel Agency

You're a group leader and eager to build greater community among your church, synagogue or religious organization. What can you do?

In my column from the last issue, we learned that group travel is one of the best ways to build community. With that in mind, let's say you're now ready to put together a trip. What's the first step?

It all begins with selecting a tour operator or travel agency. In other words, find a company that specializes in group travel that can help put your trip ideas into action.

How important is this step? Extremely important. Time, money and memories are three precious "commodities," so it is essential that you choose a company that maximizes each of these.

With regard to time, choose a tour operator or travel agency that will maximize your time before, during and after the trip. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to pick a company that offers "one-stop-shopping." These organizations take care of all the details of your trip, ranging from planning your trip to producing flyers to taking all the phone calls and financial transactions, as well as taking care of all the logistics and operations during and after the journey.

As for money, it goes without saying that you should look for a tour operator or travel agency that will maximize your members' dollars. In other words, pick a company that will provide the best value for the price you've chosen.

How can you measure this? There are several indicators: First, does the company have a reputation for outstanding customer service? Second, is the company known for first-rate travel packages? Third, how does the number and quality of inclusions stack up against that of the competition?

If you can adequately answer these questions, you're on the right track to choosing a company that will maximize your dollars. And always remember the old adage "If it sounds too good true true, it probably is."

Last, what's the best way to choose a tour operator or travel agency that will provide you with the greatest benefit of all—memories?

Look at an operator's track record. How long has it been in business? What is its reputation? What do past and current clients have to say about it?

As history is often a strong indicator of things to come, do your homework and find out what kind of memories the company typically provides on other group vacation packages. Once you learn this, you'll be ready to make your choice.

So with the above said, what are the key "checkpoints" in choosing any tour operator or travel agency? In a nutshell, here they are:

- Company reputation
- Years in business
- Variety of travel packages and destinations
- Trip price levels
- Compensation (e.g., free travel and/or commissions)
- Financial security
- Advertising/selling services (e.g., produces flyers, etc.)
- Professional services from beginning to end
- Personal contacts/relationships at company