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## PENDULUM SWINGING TOWARD SERVICE

OP-ED BY OVATION TRAVEL GROUP CHAIRMAN AND CEO PAUL METSELAAR

I was going to kick-start this article with some examples of over-the-top service requests my company has received lately, in order to illustrate my point that the demand for service is alive and well in today's travel industry. The more I thought about it, however, the more I realized that it's not the crazy, one-off requests we receive that will best illustrate my point; it's the service requirements of our everyday travelers—people who are forced to juggle their busy, ever-changing travel schedules within the guidelines of corporate travel policies that tend to focus predominantly on cost savings.

What we've come to realize in servicing these travelers is that they still very much desire and appreciate receiving high-touch service. Corporate travel managers are looking to strike a balance between the budget they are working within and the best possible service they can attain. At my company, for instance, our clients' appreciation of high-touch services led us to create a program designed to ensure at least 15 percent of all transactions are given some sort of value-added bonus. Now consider this: In 2006, we provided our clients over \$25 million in value-added bonuses (things like upgrades, hotel amenities, wait-list clearance and concierge services). That number leads me to believe the demand for service is alive and well—and from what I see in the growth of service offerings available to travelers today, versus five or even 10 years ago, that demand is soaring to new heights.

The pervasive idea in the industry today seems to be that high-touch service is on the outs, being replaced by the online booking model. In my opinion, the mega agencies have become, in many ways, indistinguishable from the low-touch online booking agencies. Call centers have become factories; agents have become robots. They have forgotten what brought them to the dance: high-touch service. It is an unfortunate turn of events in our business, one that I would personally like to see change.

However, the pendulum, as they say, is swinging back, as more business travel managers and travelers recognize the advantages of working with a travel management company that can provide not just some, but all of the services important to them. For example, while many of the RFPs I have seen in the past year have focused on online booking tools, adoption and technology, for the most part the offerings in those areas don't vary greatly from agency to agency. Online agencies, megas and large established agencies all provide the same, best-available technologies and are practiced in increasing online adoption for their clients. However, the one area in which an agency can expect to stand out in this crowd is in service, an area that is experiencing a renaissance as the economy continues to heal from industry restructuring and the aftereffects of Sept. 11.

Looking back to 1995, when the airlines first introduced commission caps, the death of the travel industry was predicted. For a while, it looked like that just might be the case. Small mom and pop travel agencies were hit the hardest, sometimes losing nearly 50 percent of revenue. This was just the first bump in the road for the travel management industry.

The next upheaval came with the 9/11 attacks. Not only a human tragedy, Sept. 11 was also an economic catastrophe, causing disruption and devastation in many industries, with travel possibly hit the hardest. Airlines went bankrupt, people lost jobs and many travelers were simply afraid to travel. Over the past four years, terror threats have been one of the leading external disruptions to the travel industry, behind only rising gas prices and SARS.

Internally, there has also been significant change, primarily in the form of online booking. While ostensibly providing a low-cost option for travelers, online booking has also led to an overall decrease in the availability and quality of service in the industry. In fact, service has been conspicuously missing.

Online booking can be an affordable and convenient option for people with uncomplicated agendas, although even the most straightforward agenda can hit a snag—flights get canceled, hotels overbook. Travel is an art, not a science. This is quite evident to those who travel frequently. Some business travelers can be on the road for more than 300 days out of the year and for them the smallest hassle can make a big difference.

For these road warriors, proof that service-oriented business travel is alive and thriving can also be seen in all the new amenities being added by hotels and airlines. Hotels are going above and beyond, sometimes to the nearly outrageous, to service their clients' needs. From meditation rooms and club floors to aroma-themed conferences, they are meeting the high service demands of today's clients. Airlines are adding true lie-flat seats on international business class flights. The competitive edge is being defined by quality, not quantity, of service. In that vein, helicopter companies are now offering eight-minute trips to and from New York City area airports. Verified Identity Pass is beginning to get registered travelers through airport security faster and more conveniently than ever before.

In short, high-touch service in the travel industry is nowhere near gone. Just the opposite, demand for service continues to grow. New life has been breathed in, the pendulum is swinging back and service-oriented travel management is here, backed by popular demand, to stay and flourish.