

The ADVOCATE.

Survey: More travelers booking last-minute trips

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Procrastination may be the thief of time, but about 27 percent of travelers believe it is good for their wallets, according to a survey by Norwalk-based Priceline.com.

Those Last-Minute Charlies assume they get better deals by waiting as long as they can to book their flights and hotels, the online travel agency found.

But Brian Ek, vice president of communications at Priceline, was surprised to find that personal finance often takes a back seat to business for folks planning a hurry-up vacation. The survey revealed that 30 percent of consumers have trouble booking trips more than seven days in advance - they are too busy to make the plans.

Another 30 percent said they would vacation four to seven nights on a spur-of-the-moment whim, while 13 percent procrastinated over travel plans because of financial strain.

The survey ties in with Priceline's PriceBreakers program, which features select deals for those looking to make their getaway on the fly. Ek, general manager for the program, said Priceline consumers can make same-day travel arrangements not only for flights, but for hotel rooms and rental cars as well.

Interest in same-day arrangements has been growing and the company has responded by adding flexibility and later deadlines in its reservation system, he said.

"Though the same-day service has been available for a few years, time deadlines for hotels have moved. For hotel same-day you used to need to do it by 6 p.m., now it's 11 p.m.," Ek said.

Fifty-nine percent of those responding to the survey would reserve hotel rooms on short notice, Ek said.

David Lewis, chief executive officer of OperationsInc, a human resources consultancy in Stamford, thinks that playing "the wait-and-see game" has increased

due to the demands of life and the pressures in the workplace.

"I think it's a positive and negative vicious cycle. In this day and age, we have Priceline, Orbitz and Travelocity to take away some of the stress for people. It used to be you had to book four months from now to take advantage of availability and price," Lewis said.

Now that travel providers are making more instant arrangements possible, time-challenged consumers are taking advantage of them, he said.

"As long as there's a convenience factor of last-minute deals that are reasonable to book a week or a few days before, I see this feeding the phenomena," Lewis said.

In his business, Lewis sees companies burdening a smaller staff to do more and not hiring to fill open positions, which makes it difficult for employees to arrange for time off.

"You can go to the boss now and ask the boss for a week off in July, but they might say, 'We'll have to see.' The impact is much greater today than it was six years ago," Lewis said.

Ek said that Priceline will do more surveys like this one, which went out to 25,000 potential travelers. They are a "good opportunity to test the temperature of its consumers," Ek said, providing a way for the company to gauge the needs of the customers and guidance on how to meet those needs.

"Next we're looking at the rental car industry. We're looking at gasoline prices and will it affect your rental car choices. We'll ask what would you want to pay for a hybrid car if there was a green option available. We want to see if you would put your dollar where your philosophy is," Ek said.

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