

# **UK OFFICE**

## **July 2014 REPORT**

**Prepared by: Venessa Alexander**  
**UK Director**

### **Tour Operators**

#### **Expedia**

Met with Afsheen Qureshi at Expedia for an update on our recent co-op marketing activity as well as discussing future activities that Expedia will be running. Afsheen provided us with an annual overview for our area for 2014 YTD and advised us that during the UK promotion period that we partnered on back in January/February a total of 986 room nights were sold.

The Scandinavian campaign that ran in February/March saw a total of 301 room nights booked. Room nights booked YTD total 5,047 as of the end of June 2014. Afsheen also discussed future activity that Expedia will be looking at running and discussed an opportunity that will be running in late August but due to marketing funds for this fiscal having already been spent, we will be unable to participate. Advised Afsheen that our new fiscal year will start on October 1st. Expedia advised us that they are in the process of changing their UK website and that the new site launch is planned for the 4th August.

#### **Ocean Holidays**

A meeting was held with Lisa Barrington, Head of Business Development at Ocean Holidays.

Lisa showed us the set up at their head office in Romford, Essex and we had a chance to meet some of the team that work on both Ocean Florida and Winged Boots, a high end product for their affluent customers such as Premier League Football Players, Actors, and Actresses. Lisa gave us an overview of the company and also ran through the stats from our recent joint co-op marketing campaign that took place in May.

#### **USAirtours/Travel Planners**

Met with Linda Dixey, Product Manager at USAirtours (Trade Division) and Travel Planners (Direct Consumer Division). Linda showed us the new Travel Planners website that launches at the end of July and St. Pete/Clearwater features heavily within their Florida section with a wide range of area hotels that USAirtours/Travel Planners are contracting directly with.

Linda advised us that 2 years ago 90% of their business was booked through the trade and USAirtours but that since they have launched Travel Planners and promoting their holidays direct to the public, the split is now on an even keel. Linda discussed the February Destination of the Month Campaign that we participated in and advised that they would again be looking to run this campaign in 2015.

#### **Cosmos/Monarch**

A meeting was held with Kevin O'Regan, Marketing & Commercial Director and David Fraser, Florida Product Manager at Cosmos Monarch. Kevin gave us an overview on both Cosmos and Monarch brands and confirmed that Monarch's commitment to their Charter Flight to Sanford International Airport in Orlando will continue into the future. Monarch currently operate 2 flights per week from London Gatwick Airport and 2 flights per week from Manchester International Airport direct to Sanford and have over the past year increased this capacity from 30k to 33k seats. They currently utilise Hotelbeds as their main receptive

operator and feature a range of hotels throughout the county with the Sirata Beach Resort being their top selling hotel for 2014.

### **General Meetings and Events**

Visit Florida – Met with Colin Brodie & Sue Marshall from the UK office of Visit Florida. Discussed general updates on our area as well as our plans regarding the proposed St. Pete/Clearwater 2015 UK Advertising Campaign. Colin & Sue provided us with a general Florida update from a UK perspective and this year continues to see growth into Florida from the UK market in general. Colin advised that the final statistics from the recent joint campaigns that we participated in with both Virgin Holidays and British Airways Holidays will be with us soon and that the initial feedback from both tour operators was very positive.

Visit Florida/Virgin Holidays – Attended the recent Visit Florida/Virgin Holidays dinner that was held in Crawley at the beginning of July. The event took place at Prezzo, a local restaurant in the area and we had the chance to network with 20 new and old key personnel from the team at Virgin Holidays. We also had the opportunity to present an update to the team about new information on our area.

Funway Holidays – Training took place at their Bromley offices on July 4th. It was a trade show style training day where suppliers had the chance to give detailed training to the staff. A St Pete/Clearwater presentation was shown and we also provided the res staff with literature on our area. All the staff were very engaging and enthusiastic about the destination.

Visit Orlando – A meeting was held with Visit Orlando and work has already commenced on arranging an itinerary (sales calls/ trainings and a small client dinner) for our joint trip to Ireland in November 2014.

### **TRADE LIAISON**

- TUI Staff Incentive – As reported last month, the recent TUI staff incentive has now ended and we had the opportunity to present the winner with their prize of an iPad Mini.
- Conference call held with BVK re the February ad campaign and possible taglines.
- TUI Specialist – Continued sign off on our solo and the joint campaign with Visit Tampa. The USA Destination Guide has now been approved and will be distributed to their customer database in August.
- Extensive liaison with Rooster PR re the PR plan for July-December 2014.
- Premier Holidays – The joint campaign with Premier Holidays and SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment has recently ended and we are currently awaiting results.
- Stella Travel Services – The recent co-op marketing campaign has now ended and results are to follow in due course.
- Trailfinders – Finalised approval for the autumn edition of the ‘Trailfinder Magazine’ article.
- British Airways September FAM – Work continues on the forthcoming BA Holidays/Visit Tampa and St. Pete/Clearwater Fam Trip from the 4th – 9th September.

- Cosmos – Continued liaison with Cosmos re co-op. We have been advised that as well as the activity we have confirmed in September, Cosmos will also be running a mini social media campaign this month as an added value element to our partnership.
- American Holidays – A proposal from American Holidays as part of our joint partnership with Visit Tampa has now been received.
- Visit USA Ireland – Provided VUSA.IE with information on the Craft Beer Trail for inclusion in their next e-newsletter to both their trade and consumer database.
- Ocean Holidays – Training took place at their offices in Romford. 25 agents were shown the St Pete/Clearwater presentation and given literature on the area. It was a good opportunity to go in as Ocean Holidays has just taken on additional new res staff.
- American Holidays – Room night stats have been supplied by American Holidays. The total number of room nights for 2013 was 921. For 2014 the current year to date room night stats are 902 (as of 3rd July).
- Wacky Warehouse – Virgin Holidays has confirmed flights and accommodation for November with the winner of the Wacky Warehouse competition.
- American Sky – Room nights have been supplied. The total number of room nights for 2013 was 14 and for 2014 year to date is currently 468 (as of 30th June) which is a fantastic increase. We have also been informed that they have started to add a new range to the St Pete/Clearwater wedding programme.
- Sunway – The results for the end of May campaign have now been supplied. This activity was with the Sunday Independent, the Sunday Business Post and RTE.com. The results between May 20th and May 26th when the advertisements ran are as follows:
  - The total number of impressions was 222,146
  - The total click through for all ads was 503
  - The CTR was 0.23%
- TUI Top Sellers Dinner – We have had confirmation that the top sellers dinner that we had confirmed as part of our sales activity will be taking place in November 2014.
- Lands End – The promotion with Lands End finished at the end of June and results are as follows:
  - Total competition entries received were 7,288
  - Total opt in entries were 1,144
  - Total reach was 880,273 consumers
  - Total exposure equated to 1,169,542 with a cost per reach of £0.008

The competition winner was also drawn and their holiday has already been arranged for travel at the beginning of August 2014.

**ENQUIRIES:**

Telephone/website enquiries for information and/or literature

53

## **MARKET INTELLIGENCE:**

01 July 2014 – Source Travel Daily

### **TUI merger on the cards**

**TUI AG and UK subsidiary TUI Travel have announced plans to merge following years of speculation.** The two companies said the deal would allow them to create ‘the world’s number one integrated leisure tourism business’ with savings of around GBP36 million a year and the chance to improve occupancies at its hotels. A statement from the two also mentioned the opportunity to grow its holiday experiences, hotels and cruises and enhance its digital platforms to increase customer numbers. In the 2012/13 financial year the mainstream business saw revenue of GBP13, 426m excluding inbound services and EBITDA of GBP706m. The online accommodation businesses and specialist brands would operate separately, while it could sell off the Hapag-Lloyd brand. TUI AG’s largest shareholder Alexey Mordashov has indicated support for the merger, with discussions ongoing. “I am pleased with the recent business development of both companies. The combination will serve to improve the tourism business model and help drive future business growth for the benefit of both shareholder groups,” he said. A statement from the two said “there can be no certainty that an offer will be made or as to the terms of any offer” although it also detailed who would be on the board. Under the merged company the supervisory board will grow from 16 to 20 members with an equal split between the two and between employees to shareholder. Professor Klaus Mangold and Michael Hodgkinson would be co-vice chairman with Frank Jakobi, with Peter Long and Friedrich Jousen as joint chief executives until February 2016. It is expected that Long will become chairman of the board after this with Jousen as sole CEO. Other members of the board would include Johan Lundgren as deputy group CEO mainstream; William Waggott as CEO of online accommodation and the specialist and activity sector, as well as Horst Baier as group CFO and Sebastian Ebel responsible for all group platforms and processes including hotels, cruises and IT.

01 July 2014 – Source Visit USA Newsletter

### **Brand USA MegaFam to ride again**

This summer’s Brand USA MegaFam, which spanned 21 states and was attended by 100 agents from across the UK and Ireland, has been hailed a ‘Mega Success’. Agents qualified by completing two specialist modules on the Brand USA agent training programme as well as selling flights: those participating agents booked over 12,000 flights to and within the USA, a significant increase from 2013’s tally of 5,500 flights. Taking place from May 15-22, the seven themed and simultaneous itineraries consisted of: West Coast Wonders (California, Nevada, Arizona), Desert Dreams (Illinois, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico), Meet the Mountains (Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota), Natural Northeast (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York State), Capital Coast Adventures (District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia), Southern Charms (North Carolina, Georgia, South Carolina) and Fantastic Florida. The finale saw all 100 agents descend on America’s live music capital, Austin, Texas, where they enjoyed a gala dinner, a series of creative presentations from each group, a live performance from folk-rock icons the Gypsy Kings and more live music at a rooftop cocktail bar, before exploring the city. Brand USA is already planning the fourth instalment of the MegaFam in 2015, with partners British Airways and American Airlines re-pledging their support. “Hosting the MegaFam and working with a large number of states and locations to create inspiring itineraries provides great value for our participating buyer and supplier stakeholders,” commented Christopher Thompson, Brand USA President & CEO. “The event itself is growing and we are grateful to our partners, American Airlines and British Airways, for their continued support.” Chris Rankin, Head of Consumer Sales for UK

and Ireland at British Airways added: “Combined with the positive feedback and booking activity from agents this year, it was an easy decision to commit to 2015. The USA is an incredibly important market for us and there is no better way to drive genuine enthusiasm for this vast country, and all it has to offer, than this fantastic fam programme.”

01 July 2014 – Source Visit USA Newsletter

**Florida’s beaches are virtually untouched**

Florida enthusiasts can now ‘stroll’ the beaches of the Sunshine State without even leaving the UK. Locations that range from popular Miami Beach to lesser-known sanctuaries such as Cayo Costa can be enjoyed ‘virtually’ since VISIT FLORIDA launched its ‘beachfinder’. The online tool allows travellers to tune their preferences in four ranges of ‘beach personalities’. Options include ‘Action-packed’, ‘Secluded’, and ‘Somewhere Inbetween’. The Florida Beach Finder will then deliver visual choices which allow the user to walk the beaches through immersive Street View imagery in Google Maps. VISIT FLORIDA and Google collaborated on a four-month mission to photograph Florida’s beaches and the result is hundreds of miles of sand, sky and shorelines– all in 360-degree panorama. “For potential visitors, it’s an opportunity to dig their virtual toes into any of Florida’s beaches – and find their dream beach before they come,” said Susannah Costello, VISIT FLORIDA Vice President, Global Brand.

02 July 2014 – Source Travel Daily

**Norwegian flights ‘open up US’ to budget conscious traveller**

**US tourism boards have welcomed Norwegian Air’s new low-cost flights from Gatwick to the USA for opening up the country to more budget-conscious markets.** The carrier launched services from Gatwick to Los Angeles yesterday and will today commence flights to New York, followed by Fort Lauderdale tomorrow. Francine Sheridan, director Europe and Middle East at the Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board told Travel Daily: “With the arrival of Norwegian into Los Angeles International Airport we are delighted to welcome another carrier from the UK into the city and the new Tom Bradley International Terminal at LAX. In addition to the daily flights from Heathrow, London Gatwick as another departure point from London will provide UK travellers with even more reason and opportunity to visit Los Angeles and help us achieve our annual visitation goal of 50 million international and domestic visitors by 2020.” Fred Dixon, president and CEO of NYC & Company told us: “Norwegian’s new flights from London Gatwick provide a further boost to the connectivity between the UK and New York City, particularly in terms of a convenient and budget-friendly option for those living in London and the southeast. The summer is one of the most affordable times of year to visit New York City, with favourable hotel rates and a range of free activities and entertainment across the five boroughs, so we hope travellers will be encouraged to take advantage of Norwegian’s fares and book their trip to New York City this season.” Cheerleaders performed at Gatwick’s South Terminal yesterday to welcome the flights, with a press conference taking place in the terminal later today along with tours of one of its Dreamliner, which is operating the three routes. Gatwick CEO Stewart Wingate said: “A low-cost carrier flying to the Big Apple for a small price shows how fast aviation is changing and highlights one of a series of future trends that will have a huge bearing on the UK’s runways debate. Bjørn Kjos, CEO of Norwegian added: “At Norwegian, we believe that everyone should be able to afford to fly. In order to compete in the global airline industry you need to adapt to changes and keep a constant focus on cost. Norwegian has a low-cost model, meaning a lean administration, brand new and fuel efficient aircraft and efficient operations. We fly direct routes with high passenger demand and choose centrally located airports such as Gatwick that share our mindset.”

09 July 2014 – Source TTG Digital

**‘This isn’t good for the latest market’: concerns grow over US’s electronics clampdown**

Fears are growing that snaking queues and negative newspaper coverage could depress the latest market in the wake of new airport security measures. Following new intelligence about a terrorist threat, the US government is asking passengers in certain countries, including the UK, to prove that their electronic devices work <<http://www.ttgdigital.com/news/charge-your-phone-if-you-wish-to-bring-it-onboard-us-issues-new-security-rules/4692011.article>> if they wish to take them onboard. The move has largely impacted Manchester and Heathrow airports, while some airlines such as British Airways are currently giving passengers the opportunity to rebook on to a later flight with their electronic equipment charged up. Alan Bowen, legal adviser to the Association of Atol Companies, flew from Manchester airport on Sunday and described the security checks there as a “complete shambles”. He added: “There were no flights departing to the US for several hours, but because it’s an airport that has flights to US airports, every passenger was being checked. “This isn’t going to do any good for the latest market - if people keep seeing these images of long queues, people may well decide to just take a ferry instead or holiday in the UK. “The school holidays start next Saturday - there could be a lot of people missing flights.” Travel by Design owner Kristina Hulme agreed Manchester airport was a problem, but said there had been issues prior to the new security changes, adding that one of her customers recently took two hours to clear security. She said: “I’m all for safety and security but we’ve got to mean it. All these companies must be geared up to these situations. They are going to occur and they must have contingency plans for when they occur.” Meanwhile, Worldwide Dream Villas senior reservations consultant Julie Doran said negative coverage in the press could prove to be a problem. It comes after the Daily Mail’s front page last Thursday ran “Holiday chaos looms in air terror alert”. “People will see these pictures of lots of people queuing, and they’ll get worried,” she said. “When papers such as the Mail are using such dramatic headlines it could definitely put people off. “I had a friend travelling to Orlando on Tuesday, and it only took her 25 minutes to pass through security at Manchester airport, but these stories don’t get reported on - there needs to be more responsible reporting, because it can have such a negative impact on some industries.” A Manchester airport spokesman denied any recent problems were as a result of the new US security requirements, adding: “July is a busy month for the airport. “Our security officers are on hand to give advice about the security alert around US flights and we ask that passengers work with us so we can get people to their gate on time.”

09 July 2014 – Source TTG Digital

**New luxury agency homes in on concierge-style market**

A former leisure and business travel broker with DialAFlight has struck out on his own to set up a new high-end travel agency aiming to offer concierge-based service and specialising in business and first-class flights. Managing director John Stephenson is launching YourTravel Group this month under Global Travel Group membership and will split his business into three arms - YourLuxury, YourCorporate and YourBusiness&First. Stephenson said the business was the result of a year’s planning and is starting out from an office in Sheerness in Kent with a former DialAFlight colleague, Sam Cassem, who will be sales director, along with a sales consultant. Stephenson has spent most of his travel career with DialAFlight in Maidstone, specialising in business and first-class bookings. “I enjoyed working with the bigger-budget clients, helping them create dream trips, so I think we know the kind of service these high-end customers are looking for,” he said. “We want to offer them concierge-type service they would expect from someone like Quintessentially, but without the big membership fee.” The 28-year-old got the idea for setting up on his own following a five-

hour travel consultation with one client at his home. The client loved the service and suggested Stephenson go it alone - with his backing. However, this later fell through, but Stephenson continued to set up with Global Travel Group because of the support it offered his original concept for YourTravel. "Even when the original backer had to pull out, and I wasn't sure what would happen as I didn't think I would be able to secure the same level of start-up funding, Global stuck with us and encouraged us to make it work," he said. Stephenson's colleague Cassem heard the news about the backer dropping out and remortgaged his house to help start the business. Stephenson plans to have a team of six within the first year. "We want to get ourselves known as a new luxury agent focused on service," he added. "Our aim is to create real special occasion holidays - from fireworks with wedding proposals to dream trips in sports cars. We want to let clients go wild with their imagination - whatever they want, we're going to make it happen. You have to have that point of difference." The company's website launches this month and YourTravel is also planning to launch an app.

09 July 2014 – Source TTG Digital

### **Trailfinders celebrates record results with 74% profit hike**

Trailfinders has heralded the end of the recession by announcing record annual results. Operating profit rose 74% to £20.4m, while turnover hit £566.2m, an increase of 7%. The company, which has a network of 26 travel centres across the UK, organises tailor-made trips across the world. "These robust figures indicate that the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis have now passed, however the recovery continues to be volatile, with the market requiring constant stimulus by way of keen tactical pricing, which continues to pressurise margins," the directors said in their review of the business. "The directors maintain a sense of guarded optimism for future trading conditions." According to results recently published at Companies House for the year ending February 28, 2014, Trailfinders Limited paid out dividends of £2.5m during the year. Former SAS officer Mike Gooley started the company in 1970 with four members of staff. Gooley remains the owner of the parent company Trailfinders Group Limited and serves as chairman.

10 July 2014 – Source Travel Daily

### **Virgin Holidays opens Dover store**

Virgin Holidays has opened its newest store in Tesco Extra at White Cliffs Park, Dover. The addition is the company's third opening in Kent following others in Canterbury and Broadstairs. In a recent customer survey those in the south east told the firm their perfect break would be to the Caribbean or Florida.

10 July 2014 – Source TTG Digital

### **Thomas Cook launches latest marketing campaign**

Thomas Cook is hoping to drive the lates market with the launch of a new campaign starting on July 11. The "We Love..." campaign will target different markets using emotive language to show off the various late deals available. Starting with "We Love... Families", the campaign will show that holidays for a family of four throughout July and August will lead in at £899, as well as free inflight kids meals and kids clubs included in selected hotels for new bookings made between July 11 and 25. The campaign will be run across both the operator's website and high street shops and uses emotional imagery to catch the customer's eye. Thomas Cook UK and Ireland product and yield director Uli Sperl said: "The main priority for parents travelling with us is to spend quality time together while enjoying a great and affordable holiday abroad. "We Love..." will bring the wide range of great holiday experiences customers can still book this summer to life, whether that be visitors to our

website or our retail stores.” The “We Love...” campaign is set to continue over the remainder of the summer season with a focus on the many types of holiday experiences the company specialise in.

11 July 2014 – Source TTG Digital

### **Heathrow sees record passenger numbers in June**

Heathrow airport saw a record 6.6 million passengers in June - the most it has ever seen in that month. The airport’s rolling 12-month passenger figure has exceeded 73 million, with growth being driven by Asia, South America and China. Passenger numbers to Turkey were up 7.5%, Mexico up 6.2% and China up 5.7%. Average passenger numbers per aircraft were broadly static at 164.5. June also saw the opening of Terminal 2, which is not yet operating at full capacity. Heathrow chief executive John Holland Kaye, who was appointed in May, said: “My ambition is to take Heathrow from being one of the best airports in Europe to one of the best in the world and to connect all of Britain to global growth, and to do it sustainably, by expanding Heathrow.” Heathrow Airport Limited also owns Southampton, Glasgow and Aberdeen airports. During June, traffic at Southampton rose 4.2% to 176,000, Glasgow increased passenger numbers by 2.5% to 793,000 and Aberdeen saw the biggest increase, 9%, to 343,000.

14 July 2014 – Source TTG Digital

### **Norwegian announces €1.6 billion order for two new ships**

Norwegian Cruise Line has announced a €1.6 billion agreement for two new cruise ships for delivery in the second quarter 2018 and the fourth quarter 2019. In a statement the line said it had reached an agreement with Meyer Werft in Germany to build two new Breakaway-Plus class cruise ships. Each ship will be 164,600 gross tonnes and include 4,200 passenger berths. “Norwegian Breakaway and Norwegian Getaway have proven themselves as industry game-changers and are extremely popular with our guests,” said Kevin Sheehan, Norwegian Cruise Line’s chief executive officer. “It was only natural that we build on their success with this new ship order that further solidifies our long-term growth strategy.”

16 July 2014 – Source TTG Digital

### **Virgin Atlantic to introduce new regional flights**

Virgin Atlantic is to expand its offering to holidaymakers in Scotland and Northern Ireland with the addition of two new seasonal routes next year. During June and July 2015 it will fly between Belfast and Orlando and between September and October it will offer flights between Glasgow and Las Vegas. This is the first time Virgin Atlantic has launched a route from Belfast International Airport or operated out of Northern Ireland. A seasonal service exists from Glasgow to Orlando but this will be the first time Sir Richard Branson’s airline will fly directly from Scotland to Las Vegas. Craig Kreeger, chief executive of Virgin Atlantic said: “I am delighted we are able to offer customers in Northern Ireland and Scotland the opportunity to travel on Virgin Atlantic to two of our most popular leisure destinations next summer. “It’s incredibly important to us to offer customers from all across the UK access to our long haul network during peak travel periods – and now even more people can enjoy the Virgin Atlantic renowned customer experience as they travel on their holidays.” Both of these routes will form part of the carrier’s joint venture with Delta Air Lines <http://www.ttgdigital.com/news/air-travel/smooth-start-for-deltas-terminal-3-move/4691009.article> , with the US carrier offering the service for sale under the codeshare agreement. Customers will be able to use Delta’s services out of each airport to connect onwards in the US, such as from Orlando to Dallas, Texas and from Las Vegas to Seattle. A Boeing 747-400 aircraft will operate these seasonal services on a weekly basis, flying on

Thursdays. The aircraft flying to both US destinations will be configured with 14 Upper Class seats, 66 Premium Economy seats and 375 seats in Economy.

17 July 2014 – Source TTG Digital

### **The high street is alive and well – and face-to-face still rules**

*TTG's* survey of 850 agents revealed plenty of reasons to be cheerful, despite doom and gloom in the mainstream press. Sophie Griffiths reports. For the past few years, UK newspapers have often included stories depicting the death of the high street. The British public has been told time and again how out-of-town shopping centres are taking away vital business from local shops. The government has also recognised the worrying decline of town centres, bringing in Mary Portas <<http://www.ttgdigital.com/queen-of-shops-to-review-future-of-high-street/4679016.article>> in 2011 to try and tackle the issue. However, research commissioned by *TTG* taken from face-to-face interviews with travel agents has revealed there is still notable optimism for high street travel agents, with anecdotal evidence suggesting footfall in agency shops is actually on the rise - proof, if you needed it, that the high street is far from dead. Last month, *TTG* commissioned research agency Field Market Solutions to conduct surveys with 850 high street travel agents, three-quarters of which comprised Thomas Cook and Tui, with independents making up the rest. A number of questions were asked to gauge the opinions of the trade on current market conditions, whether the format in which they take bookings had changed in the past five years and what they considered the biggest threat to their business to be. There is no denying that the market remains tough, but there was also a feeling of positivity. Some 58% of those interviewed said they had seen a higher footfall year-on-year, with only 5% reporting that they had seen a drop since last year. Agents also noted that it had been “an extremely busy January” and that they had had to “work hard to meet demand”, although the researchers found that there had been a slight reduction in footfall during the second quarter and at the beginning of the World Cup <<http://www.ttgdigital.com/news/they-think-its-all-over-agents-hope-the-world-cup-will-be-soon/4691724.article>> . This finding was supported by Andy Stark, managing director of the Global Travel Group. “Our members took a lot of bookings in January and February. It really spiked, then it drifted off a bit and picked up again around May,” he said. “I’ve been to three travel agencies in the past seven days and the customer chairs have been full. People are shopping - particularly these three weeks before the schools break up. “Without a doubt, footfall is up - I’m physically seeing it. It could be because there’s a much better feeling about the economy. People are more confident with regards to the economy and the winter was a long one.” Despite the positivity, however, agents did admit that the number of vacant premises on their high street had increased in the past five years, with 77% stating that they had experienced a rise in general shop closures. Figures from the British Retail Consortium backed up this feeling, with UK vacancy rates standing at 11% in January 2014, compared with 10.3% in January 2012. However, the majority of agents who said another travel agency had closed in their town also reported a rise in business in their own store. Stark agreed that agents should see any vacancies opening up in their town as a potential business prospect: “It’s an opportunity. The vacancy rates haven’t stopped our members from opening up and moving to larger premises,” he said. Face-to-face bookings Agents were also questioned about the main ways in which they take bookings, and a full 88% said the main method was still face-to-face - with just 10% citing the phone and 2% citing email. Surprisingly, no agents cited the web as the main tool. Agents were asked whether this had changed compared with five years ago, but the results were largely similar. Some 94% of agents said face-to-face bookings were the chief way to take a booking five years ago - little difference compared with the 88% who said the same today. Around 6% said they had taken more bookings by phone five years ago. Elsewhere, agents were asked what they felt was the biggest threat to

their business. The most significant risk was online discounting by operators, as well as customers comparing prices, with 63% of agents citing this as their biggest concern. Many agents reported that customers searched for holidays and prices online, then came into the store expecting staff to match prices. They said clients were increasingly shopping around using the internet. Respondents admitted that when the online discounting was too low, they had to “let the booking go”. Second among their concerns (24%) was undercutting by other agents, with respondents conceding that one of their biggest gripes was when customers “played off” one agent against another. Challenges of operating in a high street environment - such as car parking costs, business rates and rent increases - were seen as the major threat by only a small number of agents. Just 7% said car parking was the biggest risk to their business; 4% cited business rates; and 2% said rent hikes. Other feedback from agents suggested there was a trend in customers having lower budgets than in the past. Despite negative reports in the press, and the fact that agents are having to work hard for bookings, the rise in footfall and steady numbers favouring face-to-face bookings suggests there remains a promising future.