

travel

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Be a Smarter Business Traveler

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Control costs and curb headaches with these business trip tips from budget travel expert Mark Kahler.

By: MATT ALDERTON

Business travel is changing. Once a sales necessity, modern business travel is born more of luxury than of obligation. After all, small business owners no longer need to board a plane to close a deal. Thanks to videoconferencing, instant messaging and e-mail, they can virtually sign the dotted line from the comfort of their own office chair—or for that matter, a chair at the Starbucks down the street. And yet, businesspeople are still traveling.



Why? According to Mark Kahler, About.com's [Budget Travel Guide](#), it's all about face time. "Those who still travel are looking to make a personal impression," he says. "They're taking care of someone and making the client feel important. If they leave with that relationship enhanced, the trip is a success."

Enhancing client relationships, however, costs money. "The ability to [build long-distance relationships] involves being on time for appointments, finding the best places to dine, finding a hotel that can also be a sort of business headquarters away from home and having the flexibility to change schedules if necessary," Kahler says. "Unfortunately, some of those items involve added costs."

Still, business travel doesn't have to be a budget-breaker. To find out how to save money on the road, the ProNet Small Business Resource Center spoke with Kahler, who offered his tips for raising your travel IQ in order to control expenses on your next business trip.

ProNet: What should business travelers' be most concerned with when booking a trip?

Kahler: Flexibility is important, as is the ability to connect with the home base via e-mail, fax or videoconference. The traveler who has to spend time tracking down these services is at a disadvantage. Those who can find these things without paying for a five-star hotel reward their companies with more than a great trip—they save money in the process.

ProNet: How should business travelers define "savings"?

Kahler: It's much more than dollars. Those who stay 15 miles from their meeting site to save \$20 on a room are not really saving anything. The extra time and risks involved in staying so far away usually are not compensated with \$20 savings on a room rate. If it costs an extra \$30 per night to stay at a hotel with services you need, you might be saving money by not having to seek out those services in an unfamiliar place.

ProNet: Should business owners impose travel budgets on themselves and their employees?

Kahler: A budget is crucial, but it must be a realistic budget based on destination costs rather than an arbitrary per diem figure. Don't send someone to New York or San Francisco and expect them to get by on the same amount you give to someone visiting Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

With the Internet, you can know what the hotel, cab ride, parking fees and everything else will cost with a few clicks. If money is tight—and for most of us, it is—you can calculate to the dollar, euro or pound what a trip might cost before you leave.

Small businesses that must send people on the road should appoint someone to assume the role of "staff travel expert." Get that person familiar with airfares, car rentals, transportation passes and anything else you'll need to purchase on a regular basis. Then, let that expert make arrangements for everyone.

ProNet: What's the easiest way to save money on airfare?

Kahler: First, check the airline "special offer" pages and the budget airlines. Southwest, for example, usually has a "walk-up"—day of—fare that is significantly cheaper than its competitors. Be careful using sites like [Priceline](#) for flights, because you can get some very unpleasant schedules in exchange for your savings.

Saturday is one of the three cheapest days to fly, along with Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Thursdays follow closely. Mondays and Fridays are frequently more expensive. Book accordingly.

ProNet: What's the easiest way to save on hotels?

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Kahler: On hotels, sites like [Priceline](#) often work very well. This is a way to buy a three- or four-star room—and the services that come with it—at a one- or two-star price.

Another hotel suggestion, which will make innkeepers grimace: You can often negotiate with hotels on rates. If you'll be staying at a given hotel 10 nights in the next few months, that's 10 nights about which they no longer have to worry about an empty room. That should be worth a special rate if you pay in advance. It never hurts to ask. Hotels give breaks and "corporate rates" all the time, they just don't advertise the fact. If you can tell them it's between their property and another down the street for your 20 nights of business this quarter, they'll frequently offer some kind of discount.

ProNet: How do you recommend saving money on car rentals?

Kahler: On car rentals, it sometimes pays to book the smallest model at the lowest price, especially in places where they might not have a lot of sub-compact cars in stock. If they run out, they are required to upgrade you at the sub-compact price. Also, waive the insurance offered at the car rental counter if your personal auto insurance or your credit card covers you. Car rental coverage tends to be expensive. Always ask for a car with a full tank of gas, and be sure to return it full. That way, you're only paying for the gas you burn.

ProNet: Finally, what are some here-and-there tips for cutting the fat off of an expensive trip?

Kahler: One: It's not always possible to pack lightly for a business trip, but the less you lug, the more cost savings are possible. I see business travelers taking local mass transit to the airport all the time—but those travelers don't have three heavy bags in tow. They're carry-on travelers who know it might cost \$4.50 to take mass transit instead of paying a cab driver \$30.

Two: Hands off the mini-bar. You would think twice about paying \$8 for a package of peanuts on vacation, so why is a business trip any different? The same is true of \$20 in-room movies. Pack a good book or a DVD to watch on your laptop, instead.

Three: Fill up on a free breakfast if it is offered at your hotel. It might decrease the temptation to order an expensive lunch or dinner.

Finally: Many airfares still require staying Saturday night. Most business travelers want to be home on the weekends, but if you can structure a trip to take advantage of a much lower fare, it's worth consideration.

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