

零佣金不是世界末日

Zero commission is not end of world

本刊記者 Staff reporter

聯合航空一九九九年把旅行社的佣金由百分之九削減至百分之七，揭開了航空公司削減佣金的序幕。一如所料，那時旅行社群情洶湧，強烈抗議，但除此之外，要削減的終於按時間表被削減，而過了沒多久，業界的行規就變成了旅行社的佣金是百分之七，就這麼多而已。

自此之後有了一段平靜的日子，而這幾年間可說是「一切如常」，一方面旅行社習慣了從航空公司那裡收取調低了的新佣金，另一方面航空公司對於只少付百分之二佣金也似乎感到滿足。香港不是沒有人偶然討論服務費制度的。議會二零零二年時，甚至由美國請了一名專家來香港為會員主持研討會，教導他們向顧客提供服務後，怎樣收取服務費。可是，業者對這個新概念的反應並不熱烈。不久，安於現狀的習性成了主宰，一切回復正常——起碼暫時來說是這樣。

然後二零零八年來了，另一波削減佣金的風潮正等待著旅行社。到目前為止，阿聯酋航空、法國航空、荷蘭航空都已把佣金由百分之七減至百分之五，而德國漢莎航空、瑞士國際航空也已決定了由明年起加入削佣的行列。一如所料，旅行社群情洶湧，強烈抗議，但除此之外，要削減的還是按時間表被削減了。現在還不清楚的，是這次旅行社對於服務費制度這個「舊」概念會不會有較積極的反應。

無法逆轉的全球趨勢

正是在這樣的背景下，議會以票務旅行社面對的挑戰為主題，於二零零八年十一月二十五日假座名都酒樓舉辦了一次會員論壇。這次論壇大約有一百二十名業者參加，兩名講者分別講述了美國和歐洲的削佣大勢，以及新加坡的旅行社幾年前

The first shot of commission reduction was fired in 1999 when United Airlines cut its commission to travel agents from 9% to 7%. Not unexpectedly, there was a huge and vocal outcry from travel agents, but apart from that, what had been set to be cut was cut according to schedule, and it was not too long before it became industry practice that agency commission was 7%, and no more.

There was a lull since then and the intervening years may well be hailed as a period of “business as usual”, with the travel agents getting used to the new and lower level of commission from their principals, and the airlines appearing to be happy to pay merely 2% less in commission. There was occasional discussion about adoption of fee-based pricing in Hong Kong. **The TIC even flew an expert from the United States in 2002 to conduct a workshop for its members on how to charge their customers a service fee for the services provided. The response to this new concept was lukewarm.** And inertia soon reigned, and everything returned to normalcy, at least for the time being.

Then came 2008, and another spate of commission cuts was in store for travel agents. Up until now, Emirates Airline, Air France and KLM have already cut their agency commission from 7% to 5%, with Lufthansa German Airlines and Swiss International Air Lines soon to follow suit next year. Not unexpectedly, there has been a huge and vocal outcry from travel agents, but apart from that, what has been set to be cut is cut according to schedule. What has not yet been clear is whether the “old” concept of fee-based pricing would have a better reception from travel agents this time.

An irreversible global trend

It was against this background that the TIC held a Members’ Forum on 25 November 2008 at the Metropole Restaurant, with a theme on the challenges of ticketing agents. Two speakers were invited to speak to an assembly of about 120 traders on the general picture of commission cuts in the United States and Europe, and how Singapore’s travel agents managed to cope with a zero-commission environment several years ago.

The first speaker was Dr Law Cheung Kwok, an Independent Director of the TIC and Associate Director of the Aviation Policy and Research Center at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. While painting a dire picture of the

怎樣在零佣金的環境下求存。

第一名講者是羅祥國博士，他是議會的獨立理事，現任香港中文大學航空政策研究中心副主任。羅博士指出，二零零八年對全球航空業來說困難重重，估計虧損將超過六十億美元，因此世界各地的航空公司都汲汲於減低成本，而旅行社就難免成為開刀的對象。儘管如此，他卻設法使參加者安心，說即使佣金消失了，顧客也不一定會流失，因為根據一項二零零四年的調查，百分之九十的美國旅行社在向顧客收取服務費後，並沒有流失顧客。

雖然到目前為止，只有幾家航空公司已把佣金減至百分之五或已決定會那樣做，但羅博士告訴業者，他為了這次演講，與幾家航空公司的高級行政人員談過，他覺得那幾家航空公司全都希望削減佣金，只是大多數都沒有把希望付諸行動的計劃。不過，他提醒參加者，假如航空公司再削減佣金的話，就會一下子由百分之五減至零，而不會由百分之五先減至百分之三，然後再減至百分之一。

他提出的忠告很簡單直接，那就是旅行社要趁著還有時間，早早做好準備；另一方面，議會也要儘快使會員明白服務費制度是甚麼一回事，以及教育外遊旅客，使他們瞭解向旅行社繳付費用的必要，因為根據外國的經驗，要旅行社和旅客適應服務費制度，一般都需要一至兩年才成。

新加坡能， 香港為甚麼不能？

在亞太區內，香港是最後經歷這個全球持續削佣趨勢的地方；與此相反，新加坡則首當其衝，而且一開始就是

global aviation industry for 2008 with an estimated loss of over US\$6 billion, hence a desperate need for airlines around the globe to slash costs with travel agents as easy targets, he reassured the audience that **zero commission did not necessarily mean loss of customers as revealed in a 2004 study that 90% of American travel agents did not experience customer loss after charging their customers service fees.**

Although only a handful of airlines have thus far reduced agency commission to 5% or have decided to do so pretty soon, Dr Law told the traders that when he talked to the senior executives of several airlines in preparation for the speech, he got the feeling that *all* of them wished to cut commission but *most* of them did not have any plan to put their wish into practice. He warned that if there were to be any further cut, it would be from 5% straight to nought, rather than from 5% to 3% and then to 1%.

And his recommendations were quite straightforward: **travel agents should get prepared for that eventuality while they still had time, and the TIC should begin as quickly as possible to equip its members with knowledge of a fee-based pricing regime and to educate the travelling public on the need to pay for the services provided by travel agents** as it generally took one to two years for travel agents and travellers to adapt to it if foreign experiences were any guide.



(左至右) 議會票務委員會召集人譚光舜先生、葉成美博士、羅祥國博士、議會主席何栢靈先生。
(left to right) Mr Tommy Tam, Convenor of the TIC Ticketing Committee, Dr Robin Yap, Dr Law Cheung Kwok and Mr Ronnie Ho, Chairman of the TIC.

最嚴酷的削佣模式：新加坡航空早在二零零零年就一刀把所有旅行社佣金給砍掉了。

第二名講者葉成美博士現在是歐洲主要組團商Insight Vacations的亞洲總監，曾經擔任新加坡全國旅行社協會(新加坡旅協)副會長。與新航磋商，要求它協助旅行社在零佣金的環境下，順順利利由航空公司的代理商轉型為旅客的旅遊顧問的，正是這個新加坡旅協。

葉博士說，新航同意向旅行社支付文件費，為期兩年，以減輕旅行社在轉型期間碰到的困難。與此同時，新加坡旅協為了幫助會員旅行社適應新環境，還發出服務費指引；不過，這些指引後來被新加坡競爭委員會視為反競爭行為，必須撤回。

旅行社以往為顧客免費提供服務，但現在卻要收費，這對於準備不足的旅行社來說，可謂難乎其難。有鑒於此，新加坡旅協與新航磋商，要求對方出資開辦培訓課程，使旅行社職員學習收取服務費的技巧。當然，要求顧客付出服務費是一回事，但顧客是否願意付出又是另一回事。因此，新加坡旅協還用上一大筆宣傳費去教育旅客，使他們明白旅行社現在擺脫了航空公司一貫的束縛，可以提供中立的旅遊意見和服務，因此有需要付出費用給旅行社。

葉博士認為，航空公司雖然很想少付旅行社佣金從而減少分銷成本，但它們並沒有向消費者售賣機票的專門知識，因此它們仍然需要旅行社。航空公司或許不再支付任何佣金，但旅行社宣傳、推銷它們的機票，它們就會繼續支付推銷費、獎勵費等款項給旅行社。

在零佣金的環境下，旅行社的規模並不重要；小型旅行社因為能提供更貼近顧客需要的服務，因此有更大機會比規模較大的對手做得出色。當然，要做到這地步培訓是首要條件，因為旅行社要證明服務費是物有所值的，而且要變得更注重顧客的需要。

葉博士這個新加坡旅遊老手為香港業者提供了許多訊息，其中叫人最放心的，或許是這個吧：沒有旅行社只因為零佣金而倒閉。✈

If Singapore can, why can't Hong Kong?

In contrast to Hong Kong, which is the last place in the region to undergo this global trend of successive commission reductions, Singapore is the first place to bear the brunt of commission cuts and the cruellest form at that: agency commission was completely hacked away by Singapore Airlines at one stroke as early as 2000.

The second speaker Dr Robin Yap was currently Regional Director Asia of Europe's leading tour operator, Insight Vacations, and had been Deputy President of the National Association of Travel Agents Singapore (NATAS), a trade association of travel agents taking on the duties of negotiating with the national carrier to help its member agents to smoothly transform from the agents of airlines into the consultants of travellers in a zero-commission environment.

According to Dr Yap, Singapore Airlines agreed to pay travel agents a documentation fee for a period of two years to help them smooth over difficulties during the transitional period. Meanwhile, in a bid to assist its member agents in adjusting to the new environment, NATAS introduced guidelines on service fees, which were later found by the Competition Commission of Singapore to be anti-competitive and had to be shelved.

Realising that it would be next to impossible for ill-prepared travel agents to ask their customers to pay for services previously provided for free, NATAS also negotiated with Singapore Airlines for funding of training programmes for agency staff on how to charge service fees. Whereas asking for a service fee was one thing, whether the customer was willing to pay it was quite another. That was why **NATAS had spent much advertising money on educating the travelling public as to why there was a need to pay for independent advice and services provided by travel agents, which were now free from the traditional shackles of airlines.**

Despite their eagerness to reduce distribution costs by paying less agency commission, commented Dr Yap, the airlines simply did not have the expertise to sell air tickets to consumers, and therefore they still needed travel agents. **They might no longer pay any commission, but they would continue to pay something like marketing fees or incentive fees to travel agents for promoting and selling their tickets.**

In a zero-commission environment, size did not matter, and **small agents stood a greater chance of outshining their bigger rivals because they could provide more personalised service for their customers. But of course training was a prerequisite, for travel agents would have to justify their service fees and become more customer-focused.**

Among all the messages given by the Singaporean travel veteran to his local counterparts, the most reassuring message was perhaps this one: **No travel agents had gone bust just because of zero commission.** ✈