

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL BOOKING AGENTS

What is a professional booking agent? What does he do for hunters and fishermen? Is there any advantage to your using one? Is there any downside with using one? What should you look for in an agent? Who pays the agent? These are just a few of the many questions I have heard over the years.

I am a full time professional booking agent. Let me start by telling you what happened not 15 minutes ago, as this is written. I had a client heading off to a part of the world that I knew was a bad area in terms of civil unrest. The client has booked many hunts through me, but an old acquaintance he knew had invited him along on a hunt that clearly was a “bargain”. Multiple species at well below market prices. The outfitter had a solid reputation and the client just mentioned the hunt to me in passing. I was troubled by its location, and contacted another outfitter in that region. What I learned scared the pants off me! A news blackout had been asserted so no one was hearing about the violence and civil unrest. A local landowner had been hauled away 3 weeks ago- and never again heard from. Various business persons in jail, and only by paying bribes was anyone able to keep track of whether they were alive or dead. Needless to say, my client got an instant e-mail, with a strong warning not to go and definitely not to take his 16-year-old son either!

This was an unusual situation, but it graphically illustrates how building a relationship with a professional booking agent can pay off big time. Other reasons may be less apparent. Right now I can see dozens of hunts posted on our bulletin boards, all of which are specially discounted. Yesterday we booked a client on a mountain goat hunt in British Columbia- at a savings of \$3,000US! Was he happy he called us? You betcha!! A full time hunting consultant typically spends 40 to 60 hours a week, every week working on hunts. That is what you want, someone devoted to this business, full time. Full time roughly translates to about 2,500 hours a year spent inspecting trips, looking for good trips, working out the details on hundreds of trips, reviewing tips and leads from clients and friends, talking with people and reading thousands of written pages per year on various hunts. Clearly, a sportsman cannot afford to devote that much time and effort into locating good hunts and good fishing trips. The full time agent does this checking and research and searching for you. A good agent literally eats and sleeps hunting and fishing. For example, I read almost every periodical published- every month and have done so for over 40 years, plus countless books! It follows that a good and experienced booking agent can then help steer you toward the better hunts or fishing trips, all within your budget framework. He can help you with specific information and tips on any trip you might be contemplating. He will often be aware of little quirks that no one else will tell you about! He can offer you a variety of trip choices, after weeding out those outfitters he feels do not produce well. He is able to make recommendations for the best areas for quality trophies of a given species, from mammals, to fish to birds. This is where a good booking agent shines. In today’s frantic paced world, TIME is the major commodity we all are lacking in our personal lives. Time for family, time for friends, time to pursue your sporting interests. Finding a quality outfitter takes precious time away from family and business. Too often, you simply hear of a trip, decide to do it, and off you go. Deep down you know you should have looked around, you know you should have asked more questions, you know you should have done more research-but time won’t allow you that luxury. It can take you 4 or 5 phone calls just to get the most basic information into your hands, never mind all the nuances and little known facts and details. You can find thousands of hunting and fishing trips on the internet-all showing pictures of their biggest animals or fish, all telling you why they are the best bet. Now multiply that times hundreds and thousands of outfitters offering the same species in dozens of different locations, and you realize how daunting your task is. Sure, your buddy Johnny had a good trip- got a great animal. But did Johnny tell you he got the only trophy in camp? Did he tell you he had the only decent guide? Did he tell you it was the only animal he saw and did he know that the next group after him left early after 3 days of frustration?

Imagine then, that instead of dealing with this, you simply make a SINGLE phone call to a clearinghouse of information, the professional booking agent. They have tens of thousands of hours invested into trying to find the better trips. Realize that “Sam” the outfitter --- can only sell you the trip he personally has and does -- and realize that he is trying to earn a living, needs you to book, and worries that you may try elsewhere. Sam is mighty tempted to do and say whatever it takes to get your check!! He knows the outfitter next door, Bill- has a far better area and a far better hunt- but Sam is never gonna tell you about Bill!!! The booking agent does not have to sell you Sam’s trip, because he has Harry, Wally, Bill



and Paul offering the same or better trips, and for hopefully less money! So no need to put the hard sell on you as Sam had to do. And we agents depend on your returning to us year after year, so we want to keep you happy if possible.

Normally, a good agent will first find out what your interests are. Maybe African plains game this year, maybe an American elk next year and maybe a Red stag down the road. All those wishes get logged into a computer, and if a great trip comes along, you get a call or more likely, an email! Or you may want to go on a multiple specie horseback wilderness hunt. A good agent will ask you to talk to him realistically about your horsemanship; your physical conditioning; your trophy size expectations; and importantly your budget. While our fictitious outfitter "Sam" might gloss over some of these things, the booking agent can steer you away from Sam and into something more suitable for you. After all, in most cases he has multiple hunts of that type available to choose from. You may find out you cannot afford either the time or money required, once you factor in air flights, licenses, trophy transport etc. So we may suggest a less expensive alternative; or suggest that we put you on our cancellation list for a possible future bargain; or we may suggest putting down a small deposit now and locking in some dates two years down the road so you can save the funds. You can readily see how different this approach is from "Sam's". A trip will be tailored to fit your needs, rather than tailoring you to make you fit into Sam's trip!

Now please realize that using a good professional full time booking agent is not a guarantee of success! The best agent there is cannot predict the dozens of variables that can affect any given trip. He can place you the very finest outfitter in the world- but the weather may be awful; the prime guide may take ill; a crucial piece of equipment may fail; the game or fish may for unknown reasons vacate their normal haunts; the guide may have taken to drinking due to his divorce -- the list is endless. But booking your trip through a professional certainly ups your odds dramatically. While the agent cannot possibly control exactly what happens on your particular trip, he does know what that outfitters overall record is. The best of outfitters can fail to get you your trophy, but always remember that the agent is working to stack opportunity in your favor- and finding you the better opportunities is what we do. Hopefully you will always enjoy your experience and the adventure, and it is important not to equate a trophy or the size of the trophy -- with enjoying the experience. Try to go with the mental attitude that you will have fun no matter what- and over the years you will realize that such an attitude will give you years of enjoyment! You are living freely; you are in the great outdoors; you are doing physical tasks and you are seeing new sights, making new friends and acquiring expertise and experience. I have seen the sun rise over Outer Mongolian mountains; I have watched giant Artic char jump in

wild Siberian Rivers; I have discussed black holes in the solar system with fellow bow hunters around a Colorado campfire on a starry night; I have seen the dancing Northern Lights above the Artic Circle- these are important, and I encourage everyone to relish these things. Success is in the doing, not in the hanging of the trophy on the wall. We all crave success; just don't let it cloud your enjoyment of the experience.

Oh yes- I saved the best until last-the agent's services are FREE to you! We get paid a commission from the outfitter you book with, and you pay the same trip price (and sometimes less) regardless of whether you book direct or use an agent! But if we want you back again and again, we need to give you solid advice. In return, -respect your agent and be as loyal to him as he is to you. If friends want to do your trip-send them back to the agent. He trusts you. He took care of you. He is trying to make a living and on the modest commissions he earns he depends on your referring friends and clients to him again and again. Going around him is to condemn him to ultimate failure. Yes, you can have your buddies call the outfitter direct, but is that the ethical way to thank the agent for all the time he put into finding you the right trip? You may need his services again. He trusted you with the outfitters information, now don't use it against him.

Much of hunting is about ethics- so do the ethical thing. Send your friends to the agent to book the trip. Build a relationship-over the years it will pay big dividends. Make yourself a frequent caller, a well known and well respected client-and the agent will return your kindness over and over in the form of phone calls on hot opportunities and discounts, and perhaps invitations to join the agent on a particularly interesting trip. A smart hunter of fisherman realizes that a good relationship here can pay big dividends for many years! And for heaven's sake- a good agent should always have cancellations and bargains and hot new things around! Get on his cancellation list- you can save hundreds of dollars if not thousands of dollars!

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