



Business News

Travel Agents Book Holidays Through the Telly

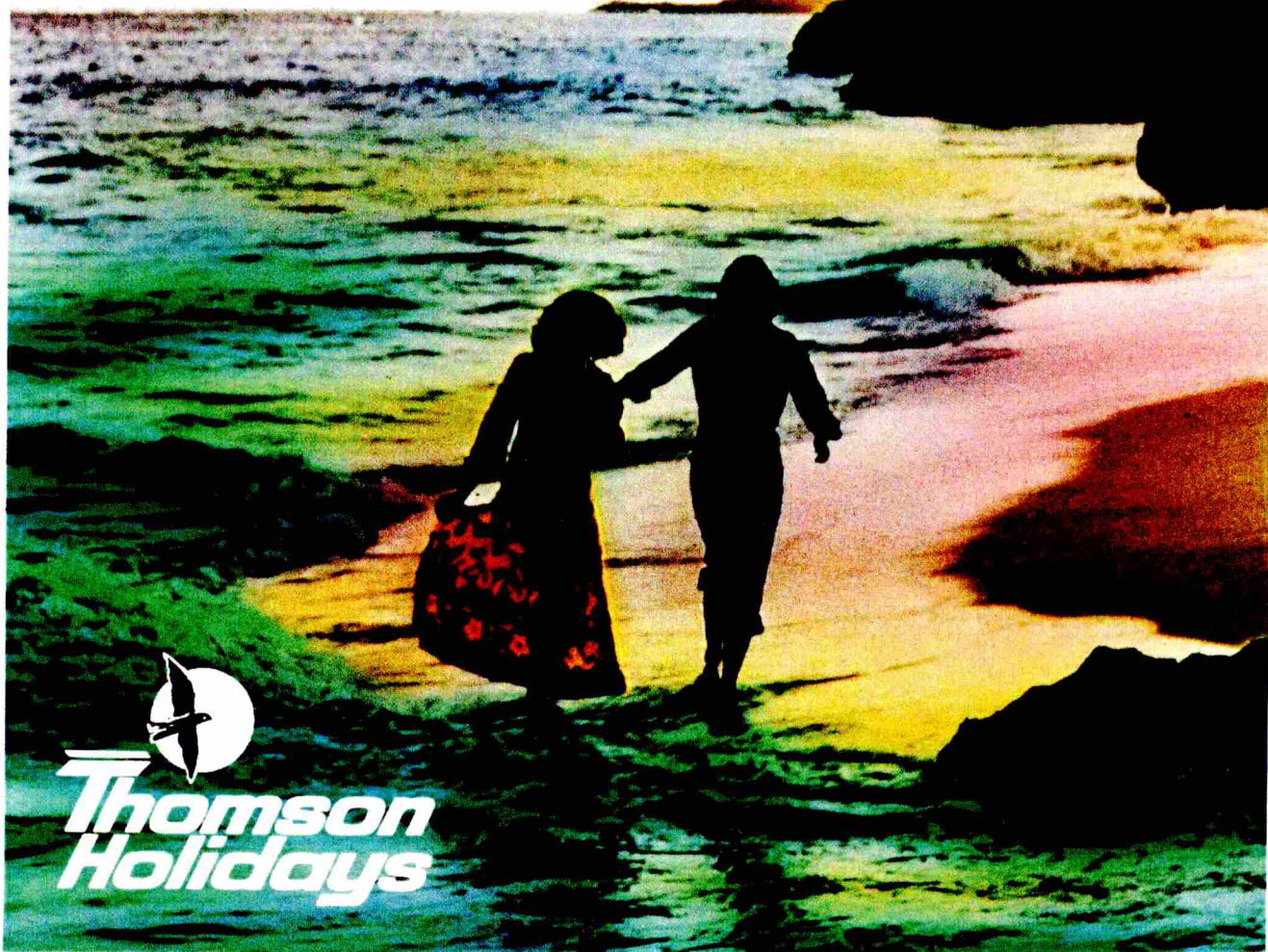
Clickety, click . . . 66 travel agents in Barnet, Basildon, Bedford, Bracknell, Colchester, Guildford, Harlow, Kingston, Reading and Slough are now tapping away at keyboards attached to the familiar colour telly and booking holidays directly from the TV screen with Thomson Holidays.

The new instant booking system, claimed as the world's first interactive system using the Viewdata technology in which this

country is reckoned to have a two-year world lead, enables the would-be holidaymaker as well as the travel agent to see what's currently available for particular holidays in the Thomson brochures right there on the telly screen. The agent can then take out options or make definite bookings on the spot.

"The majority of holidays that Thomson has for sale — and altogether the company, the UK leader and third in Europe, flies about a million passengers a year — can be booked using the system," said Colin Palmer, Thomson Holidays' commercial director. "Any holiday with a number in the company's holiday brochures can be booked in this way through the 66 agents with the system," he said.

The Viewdata system, supplied by Rediffusion Computers, has been dubbed CARS by Thomson. This stands for Computerised Agent Reservation Service and interposes a Rediffusion mini-computer, and an R800/70, between the TV screen and Thomson's major bookings computer system called



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ATTN M ALDRICH - MANAGING DIRECTOR
REDIFON COMPUTERS

CARS WENT LIVE FROM HARLOW AT 1015 TODAY.
RESPONSE FROM AGENTS AND CLIENTS EXCELLENT
MANY THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT.
PLEASE PASS MESSAGE ON TO YOUR TEAM.

KIND REGARDS

COLIN PALMER
COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR - THOMSON HOLIDAYS

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bookings computer system called TRACS (Thomson Reservation and Administration Control System).

TRACS is based on a large scale IBM 370/158 computer system and the Redifusion mini acts as a 'Gateway' in accessing the full bookings' files. It does this, in the jargon of the industry, in 'real-time'.

Result: immediate access, instant display in glorious technicolour and a major advance in overcoming the frustrations that can arise for agent and prospective customer alike when the agent can't get through to Thomson over the 'phone. "It will certainly help to improve service to our agents, especially at the launch of a new brochure and peak booking periods, when we have always found it difficult to cope with the deluge of 'phone calls. This lets them book direct. The cost, at around £400 a year for the equipment, is low and there is no risk," said Palmer.

"It also improves the clients' perception of the agent," he said, which was a point confirmed by initial users after the first few days of operation. Martin Austin and Tony Tansley, managers respectively of Ellerman Travel's and Lunn Poly's Harlow branches, agreed that a major benefit was that the client "can actually see things are happening, rather than standing by as a one-sided 'phone conversation takes place."

"They can see that we're trying," said Austin.

"People like it and we get quite a little group standing around watching," said Leslie Walker, assistant manager of Harlow Travel. "It's great. When we see someone with a Thomson brochure, it's a battle to serve them," she added.

A typical booking 'conversation', including ten different screen displays on the telly, can be accomplished in about 90 seconds, according to Palmer. The agent signs on with his or her ABTA number and a password and is then put into direct touch with TRACS. He selects the function he wishes to perform — for example, whether he wishes to request an option or definite booking, convert an option or display a booking — and the system responds with the information. It will show plane seats and hotel rooms available and basic costs of the holiday and date requested. In addition, it will display any changes to the brochure information. The agent will shortly also use the system to display alternative holidays if the first choice holiday is fully booked. The holiday is then either reserved or booked through the telly, or the agent signs off from the system.

As well as the standard alpha/numeric keyboard attached to the Viewdata TV, small printers can be added so that the satisfied customer can take away full details of the holiday he or she has just booked.

Thomson has deliberately kept the system simple in its initial 'live' form. There is a maximum of six passengers per booking through CARS and there are limitations in the sense that the

agent cannot use the system for cancellations, amendments, extensions of expiry dates and so on. Nonetheless, it does cover the whole of the Thomson's numbered holiday catalogue and lends itself to extension in due course as TRACS itself is a well established, developed and powerful sales and management tool.

The Harlow agents were the first to go 'live' with the system. Agents in the other towns were added daily according to a carefully planned programme. CARS will run for a six months' operational trial and Thomson will then decide whether to extend it and offer the service nationwide to a larger number of the 4500 ABTA members.

The whole exercise has been planned from the outset like a meticulous military operation. The Thomson development and support team, proud of the company's record in implementing computerised systems, is leaving nothing to chance. A high level of training and support has been put into the scheme and the Thomson regional offices involved have set up CARS 'help desks'. Progress through the trial period is being closely monitored and results in the test towns will be compared with those of other agents operating normally in control towns.

"We're treating this as a learning exercise," said Palmer, stressing the experimental nature of the project. At the same time, he made it clear that he believes that the system has major implications for Thomson and the whole travel agency business.

"For the agent who uses Viewdata creatively, there are enormous benefits to be derived as it undoubtedly contributes to a more professional service to the public," he said. "This is not just a functional way of booking a holiday: it is a new way of doing business."

"In the same way that the Viewdata system is another improvement in Thomson's trading relations with its agents, it could also be used by the go-ahead agent to enhance his operations in the eyes of the all-important customer and generate more business," Palmer said.

Thomson Holidays' Technology Working Party started to investigate ways of using emerging technologies to link Thomson more closely to retail travel agents in the High Street towards the end of 1979. In September last year, the team concluded that private Viewdata offered a speedy and cost effective solution, though it has not closed its mind to other options. In December last year, the team approached agents in the selected test areas and only seven of the 73 agents approached declined to join the trials. Agent training started in February and the system went into operation with the first real customers in Harlow on March 2nd.

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ATTN COLIN PALMER - COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR THOMSON HOLIDAYS

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TELEX.

VERY PLEASED TO LEARN THAT YOUR AGENTS AND CUSTOMERS
ARE HAPPY WITH VIEWDATA, THE NEW COMMUNICATIONS METHOD,
CONGRATULATIONS TO YOU AND YOUR TEAM.
FOR THE HISTORY BOOKS, WE RECORD THAT AT 10.15AM.
ON THE 2ND MARCH 1981, AT HARLOW, ENGLAND, THE WORLD'S
FIRST INTEGRATED, REAL-TIME VIEWDATA GATEWAY SYSTEM
WAS COMMISSIONED BY THOMSON HOLIDAYS USING A
REDIFON VIEWDATA PLUS COMPUTER SYSTEM.

WELL DONE

MIKE ALDRICH
MANAGING DIRECTOR
REDIFON COMPUTERS

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